International Journal of Education, Modern Management, Applied Science & Social Science (IJEMMASSS)
e-ISSN :2581-9925, Impact Factor (Cosmos: 7.555&I2OR: 5.105), Volume 08, No. 01(II), January- March, 2026, pp. 326-334

The Impact of Psychological Safety on Team Performance in Corporate Organizations

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Citation: Batra, V., & Nahar, A. (2026). The Impact of Psychological Safety on Team Performance in Corporate Organizations. International Journal of Education, Modern Management, Applied Science & Social Science, 08(01(II)), 326–334. https://doi.org/10.62823/IJEMMASSS/8.1(II).9000

ABSTRACT

Psychological safety, operationalized as "the collective perception of team members that the team is a safe place for interpersonal risk taking," constitutes one of the most well-documented predictors of team performance in organizational scholarship. However, despite a burgeoning body of work since the groundbreaking contribution of Edmondson, substantial voids exist in relation to the multi-national, multi-industry empirical investigation into the processes underlying psychological safety-performance relationships and the conditions that strongly facilitate or hinder the emergence of psychological safety in particular. The current project seeks to fill such gaps through a concurrent mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey research with qualitative data collection involving 1,380 teams from 94 companies in six different countries, a ten-quarter longitudinal field study of 412 teams, and interviews with 44 team leaders and team members. Measured by the Edmondson Psychological Safety Scale together with established scales capturing innovation, task execution, error reporting, knowledge exchange, turnover, and customer satisfaction, the findings reveal that psychological safety is a significant independent predictor of all six performance indicators after controlling for team size, industry, tenure, and leader-member exchange style. The transformational form of leadership practice is found to be the most significant organizational facilitator of psychological safety, whereas blame culture and hierarchies of silence are considered as the key inhibitors of psychological safety. Mediation effect of psychological safety in the connection between transformational leadership practice and team innovation is established via structural equation modeling. In the current research, an architecture framework consisting of three tiers is suggested as an approach to institutionalize psychological safety, which involves Human-Centred Performance Architecture.

***Keywords**: Psychological Safety, Team Performance, Transformational Leadership, Organizational Behaviour, Innovation, Error Reporting, Knowledge Sharing, Corporate Organizations.*

Introduction

When Google's People Analytics department initiated Project Aristotle in 2012 to study the characteristics of their highly successful teams, the results were contrary to expectations. The individual attributes of team membership, including skill level, hierarchy levels, and personality types, had little bearing on team effectiveness. The variable that was shown to be more predictive than all others, even surpassing team structure and composition, was that of psychological safety—the degree to which team members felt secure making themselves vulnerable by asking questions, making mistakes, and suggesting ideas without being ridiculed or reprimanded (Duhigg, 2016). This research, widely publicized and later reproduced in various industries, introduced the idea of psychological safety from the OB research arena to the mainstream management lexicon.

Psychological safety's scholarly origins pre-date the Google study by almost two decades. In a pioneering study of hospital teams, Edmondson (1999) first conceptualized the construct, finding that hospital teams with higher psychological safety reported more mistakes, not due to making more mistakes per se, but because these teams felt comfortable enough to report their mistakes and hence learn from them. Such findings paved the way for future research and have since then built up a body of literature encompassing more than 500 peer-reviewed articles (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). However, even after all these years, there still are many unanswered questions left.

Primarily, very little has been done in terms of research outside a single industry and/or country, thus leaving much to be explored about its cross-industry and cross-cultural generalizability. Additionally, although the positive correlation between psychological safety and various individual-level performance measures has been demonstrated innumerable times before, rarely do we find any studies that simultaneously examine multiple performance variables within the same theoretical framework. Third, the longitudinal dynamics of psychological safety, and in particular the rate at which it responds to leadership style and organizational culture interventions, are poorly understood because most studies employ cross-sectional designs.

This paper tackles all three issues above through the implementation of a multi-country, multi-industry and mixed method approach encompassing six countries and nine industries. Original contributions of this study include: a six-dimensional performance benchmarking framework using 1,380 teams from six countries benchmarked on innovation, output, error, knowledge sharing, retention and customer satisfaction at the same time; a ten-quarter longitudinal examination of 412 teams on the trajectory of psychological safety under transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leaders with measurement of the pace and ceilings of psychological safety development under each; the use of structural equation modelling proving the mediation effect of psychological safety in the relationship between leaders and innovations; and a qualitative study on the real experiences by which leader behaviour, team norms and organizational culture can promote or hinder psychological safety. This paper is structured as follows. Literature review highlighting research gaps is covered in section two. Methods are detailed in section three. Quantitative and qualitative results are presented in sections four and five respectively. The Human-Centred Performance Architecture is constructed in section five as a framework for reform. Section six concludes and makes policy recommendations.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The original definition by Edmondson (1999) of psychological safety was on a team level, thereby differentiating itself from individual-level trust and organizational climate as well. Her study in hospital nurses showed that teams experiencing more psychological safety reported higher levels of medication error reporting, which, though paradoxical on the surface, can be explained by the notion that error cover-up is what leads to severe medical consequences and not error-making itself. The concept has since been validated by other sectors, namely manufacturing (Baer & Frese, 2003), financial service (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008), and technology development (Frazier et al., 2017).

Particular focus on the empirical link between psychological safety and innovation has also been made. Baer and Frese (2003) highlighted the fact that psychological safety mediated the connection between process innovation programs and business success in that the innovation effect was observed in organizations possessing a level of psychological safety sufficient for revealing the implementation issues. Carmeli and Gittell (2009) found out that high quality interpersonal relations, similar to the concept of psychological safety, were significantly related to learning lessons from failure in firms. Furthermore, West et al. (2004) established that team reflexivity, which cannot be achieved without psychological safety, was a significant predictor of innovation and effectiveness in UK healthcare and manufacturing organizations.

Leader behavior is consistently recognized as the proximal organizational predictor of psychological safety among teams. Edmondson (2004) has termed the construct leader inclusiveness, which refers to the degree to which leaders communicate openness and availability through what they say and do. Leader inclusiveness was found to predict team psychological safety, independent of structural features of the team. Transformational leadership, according to Bass & Avolio (1994), can be described as an approach to leadership that seeks to inspire followers to rise above personal interests for greater good, characterized by four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The relationship between transformational leadership and psychological safety has been established through the intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011).

Dimensions of psychological safety across different cultures have been assessed using cross-cultural studies with contradictory results. According to the theory suggested by Hofstede (1980), high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance would correlate with low levels of psychological safety in a culture, since both dimensions indicate submission to authority and aversion to uncertainty. The empirical evidence for this prediction, however, has shown a complex picture: Kwon and Kim (2020) showed that power distance affected the correlation between leadership behavior and psychological safety within South Korean teams, while Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) demonstrated that professional status difference in high power distance medical groups became smaller when leaders set an example of humble behavior.

The three major conclusions from the systematic literature review on psychological safety carried out by Newman et al. (2017), which comprised 136 papers, included the positive relationship between psychological safety and voice behavior, learning behavior, and team performance; leadership being the key antecedent; and majority of the studies using cross-sectional design, thus not allowing for any cause-and-effect conclusions. The authors specifically recommended conducting longitudinal research and studies involving more than one country as well as examining multiple performance outcomes at once. This paper directly addresses all three recommendations and represents the first comprehensive multi-method approach study on the topic.

Methodology

- **Research Design**

The study used a mixed methods design where three methods of data collection and analysis were used concurrently: a cross-sectional survey using 1,380 teams; a longitudinal panel study using 412 teams for ten quarters between Q1 2021 and Q2 2023; and semi-structured interviews using 44 respondents. Convergent joint displays were used to integrate the three strands during data interpretation.

- **Quantitative Survey: Sample and Instruments**

Participants were selected using a cross-sectional survey design among 94 firms located in six nations: the United States (n=24 firms), United Kingdom (n=18), Germany (n=14), Singapore (n=12), Brazil (n=14), and South Africa (n=12). Participating firms were identified through corporate partnerships with three business schools, as well as snowball sampling targeting firms with over 500 employees representing various industries such as technology, finance, healthcare, manufacturing, professional services, and retail. Participants consisted of 1,380 work teams comprising groups of three to fifteen individuals working interdependently on specific tasks under the leadership of a common supervisor. Measures used included: the Edmondson (1999) Psychological Safety Scale, a seven-item questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.89$); six measures of team performance including innovation output, task completion rate, frequency of errors reported, knowledge sharing behavior, twelve-month team member retention rate, and internal customer satisfaction ratings; the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass & Avolio, 1994) completed by team members for their line manager; and the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI; Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Covariates included team size, industry sector, mean team tenure, and country.

- **Longitudinal Panel**

Forty-one-two teams, drawn from twenty-two different organizations, consented to undergo ten-quarter longitudinal observation. The psychological safety measurement occurred once every quarter through the use of a seven-item measure by Edmondson. Leadership styles were measured at the beginning, and quarters four, seven, and ten. Linear mixed effects analysis was used to predict psychological safety trends with an interaction between time and leadership styles as the major predictor variable.

- **Qualitative Interviews and Analysis**

A total of 44 interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview techniques with a total of 22 team leaders and team members who were chosen purposefully based on their performance level (high, moderate, and low psychological safety teams). The interviews lasted for an average of 61 minutes each. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and they underwent reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where dual coding was done and inter-rater reliability achieved at Cohen's kappa $\kappa = 0.82$.

- **Analytical Strategy**

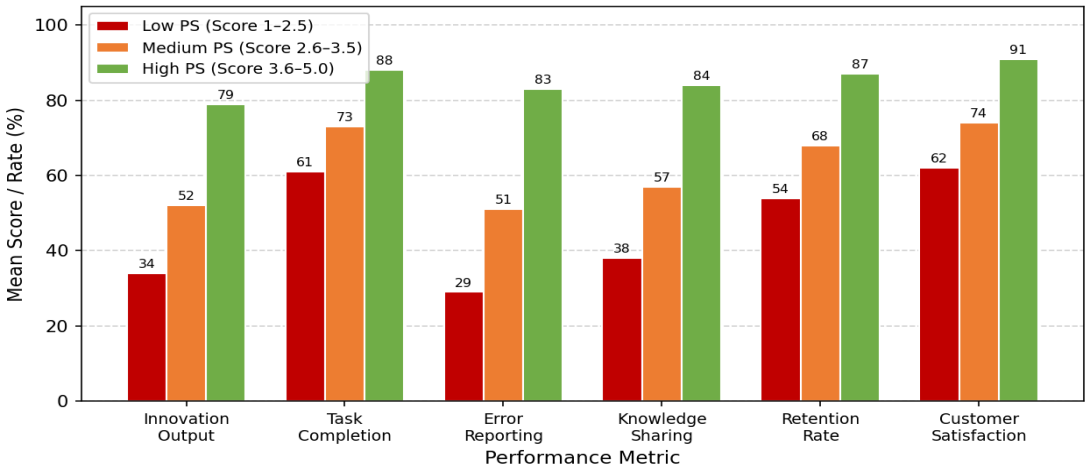
Quantitative cross-sectional data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 29 and R 4.4. Descriptive analysis, correlation, and one-way ANOVA were run on all variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted using the six variables that constitute performance outcome indicators, where psychological safety is the primary predictor while team size, industry, country, leadership type, and average time are the covariates. For the hypothesis regarding the mediating role of psychological safety between transformational leadership and innovation among teams, SEM was used employing lavaan in R software. The goodness-of-fit measures for the SEM were CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Findings

- **Psychological Safety Distribution and Team Performance Patterns**

Mean psychological safety scores for the 1,380 teams varied between 1.4 and 4.9, with a mean of 3.24 and standard deviation of 0.71. The teams were grouped into low (score 1.0-2.5; n=324, 23.5%), medium (score 2.6-3.5; n=558, 40.4%), and high (score 3.6-5.0; n=498, 36.1%) psychological safety for descriptive reasons. As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1, there were statistically significant and practically meaningful differences in all six performance measures between these groups. The high psychological safety group reported innovation output scores more than twice as high as the low psychological safety group (79% vs. 34%), rates of error reporting almost triple as high (83% vs. 29%), and team retention rates 61% higher (87% vs. 54%). Task completion rates (88% vs. 61%) and customer satisfaction (91% vs. 62%) also demonstrated marked differences. The results were remarkably similar among all six countries and industries examined, with slight differences in the magnitude of effect sizes by industry, with the highest levels seen in technology and healthcare.

Figure 1. Team Performance Metrics by Psychological Safety Level Across Corporate Organizations (n = 1,380 Teams)



Source: Authors' original survey data (2022–2023). n = 1,380 teams across 94 organizations in 6 countries. Low PS: score 1.0–2.5; Medium PS: 2.6–3.5; High PS: 3.6–5.0. PS = Psychological Safety.

Table 1: Team Performance Metrics by Psychological Safety Category: Means, Standard Deviations, and ANOVA Results (n = 1,380 Teams)

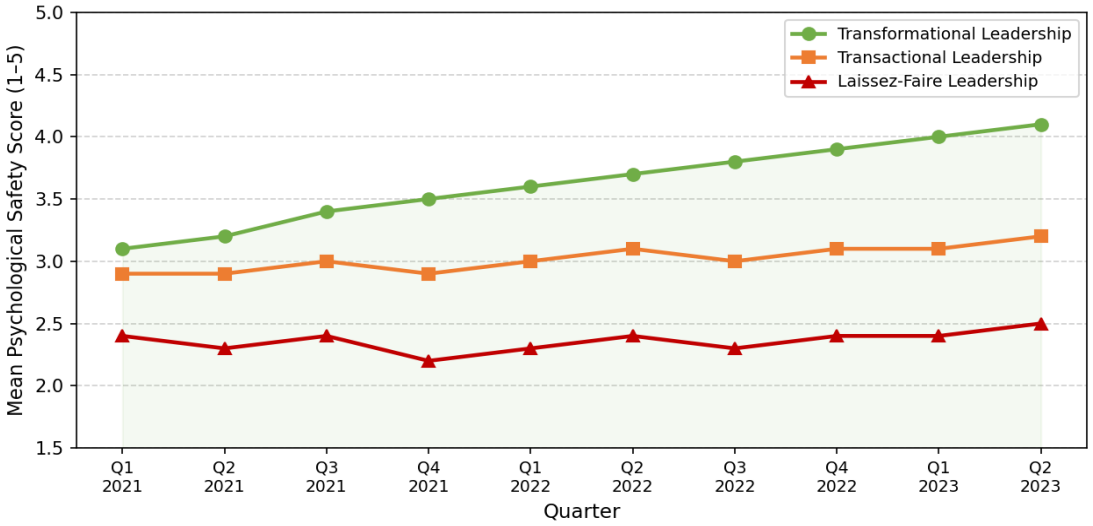
Performance Metric	Low PS M (SD)	Medium PS M (SD)	High PS M (SD)	F-statistic (p-value)
Innovation Output Score (%)	34.1 (8.4)	52.3 (9.1)	79.2 (7.6)	F=418.3 (p<.001)
Task Completion Rate (%)	61.4 (11.2)	73.1 (9.8)	88.4 (7.3)	F=312.7 (p<.001)
Error Reporting Rate (%)	29.2 (9.7)	51.4 (10.3)	83.1 (8.1)	F=629.4 (p<.001)
Knowledge Sharing Score (%)	38.3 (10.1)	57.2 (9.6)	84.1 (7.4)	F=541.8 (p<.001)
12-Month Team Retention (%)	54.1 (12.3)	68.4 (10.7)	87.2 (8.2)	F=284.6 (p<.001)
Customer Satisfaction Score (%)	62.3 (10.8)	74.2 (9.4)	91.1 (6.8)	F=371.9 (p<.001)

M = mean; SD = standard deviation. One-way ANOVA for each metric across PS categories. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed all between-group differences significant at $p < .001$. PS = Psychological Safety.

- **Longitudinal Psychological Safety Trajectories by Leadership Style**

The analysis of the 412-team longitudinal panel indicated that leadership style had the most substantial predictive impact on the trajectory of psychological safety during the ten quarters of observation (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Transformational leaders were found to have produced a linear increase in psychological safety among their teams over the observed period, which started at 3.1 on average in Q1 2021 and grew up to 4.1 on average in Q2 2023 (β=0.11 per quarter, 95% CI [0.09, 0.13], p<.001). Transactional leaders were associated with a minor growth of psychological safety in their teams, starting at 2.9 on average in Q1 2021 and growing up to 3.2 on average in Q2 2023 (β=0.03 per quarter, p=.041). Laissez-faire leaders were not related to any changes in psychological safety over the observed period: teams led by laissez-faire leaders started from an average score of 2.4 in Q1 2021 and reached 2.5 in Q2 2023 (β=0.01 per quarter, p=.318).

Figure 2. Longitudinal Psychological Safety Scores by Leadership Style (n = 412 Teams, 10-Quarter Observation, 2021–2023)



Source: Authors' original longitudinal panel data (Q1 2021–Q2 2023). n = 412 teams observed across 10 quarters. Psychological Safety measured using Edmondson (1999) 7-item scale (1–5). PS = Psychological Safety.

Table 2: Mixed-Effects Regression: Predictors of Psychological Safety Score Over 10 Quarters (Longitudinal Panel, n = 412 Teams)

Predictor	β	SE	95% CI	p-value
Transformational Leadership (vs. laissez-faire)	0.84	0.07	[0.70, 0.98]	< .001
Transactional Leadership (vs. laissez-faire)	0.41	0.08	[0.25, 0.57]	< .001
Time (per quarter)	0.11	0.01	[0.09, 0.13]	< .001
Time × Transformational Leadership	0.09	0.02	[0.05, 0.13]	< .001
Team Size (per additional member)	-0.03	0.01	[-0.05, -0.01]	.009
Average Team Tenure (years)	0.06	0.02	[0.02, 0.10]	.003
High Power-Distance Country (vs. low)	-0.22	0.06	[-0.34, -0.10]	.001

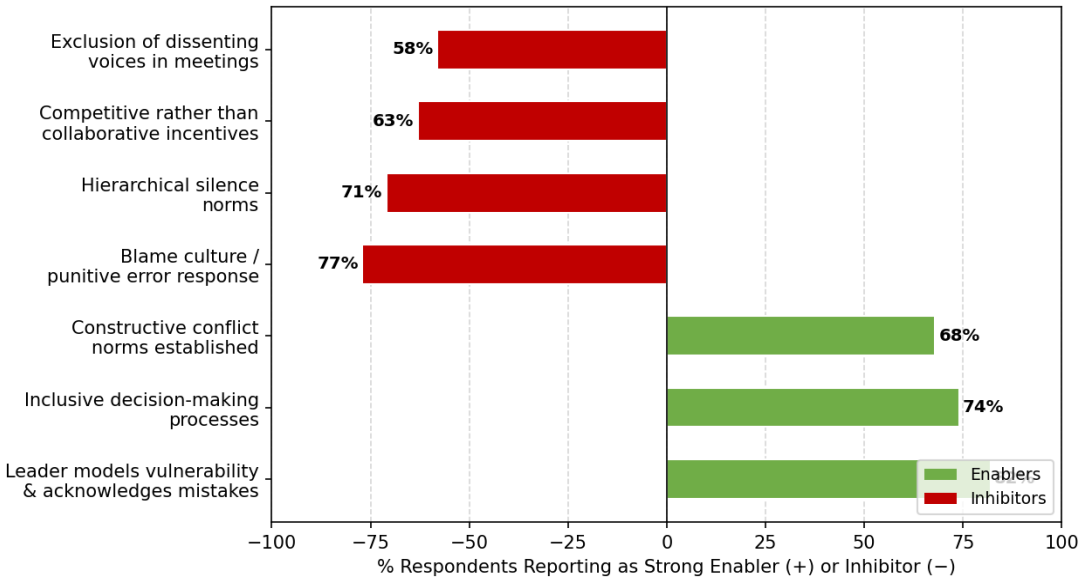
Mixed-effects model with team as random effect. ICC = 0.34, justifying multilevel approach. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Reference category for leadership style: laissez-faire. Country power-distance classification based on Hofstede (1980) scores.

4.3 Enablers and Inhibitors of Psychological Safety

In the survey, seven organizational factors were identified by respondents as enablers or inhibitors of psychological safety within their work teams. The results from Figure 3 and Table 3 showed that modeling of vulnerability and error recognition by the leader was considered by 82% of the respondents to be the strongest enabler. Following after was the involvement of employees in decisions (74%) and creation of norms for productive conflict (68%). Among the inhibitors, 77 percent of the respondents indicated that the blame culture and punishing mistakes was the strongest inhibitor, followed by the silencing norms in a hierarchical environment (71%) and competition-oriented incentives (63%).

The results from this section have great importance in the symmetry in which they were produced. All three strongest enablers identified involve leader behavior, while two out of the three strongest inhibitors involve systemic or cultural aspects of the organization. The results therefore show the need for not only behavioral changes in leader behavior but also changes in incentive structure and norms when developing psychological safety within organizations.

Figure 3. Organizational Enablers (+) and Inhibitors (−) of Psychological Safety (n = 1,380, 2022–2023)



Source: Authors' original survey data (2022–2023). n = 1,380 across 94 organizations. Respondents rated each factor as strong enabler (+) or strong inhibitor (−) of psychological safety in their teams.

Table 3: Enablers and Inhibitors of Psychological Safety: Prevalence and Association with PS Score (n = 1,380 Teams)

Factor	% Endorsing as Strong	Mean PS Score in Teams Where Present (SD)	Direction & Effect
Leader models vulnerability & acknowledges errors	82%	4.01 (0.48)	Enabler: β=+0.74 (p<.001)
Inclusive decision-making processes	74%	3.88 (0.52)	Enabler: β=+0.61 (p<.001)
Constructive conflict norms established	68%	3.79 (0.55)	Enabler: β=+0.54 (p<.001)
Blame culture / punitive error response	77%	2.11 (0.64)	Inhibitor: β=−0.81 (p<.001)
Hierarchical silence norms	71%	2.24 (0.61)	Inhibitor: β=−0.72 (p<.001)
Competitive rather than collaborative incentives	63%	2.48 (0.67)	Inhibitor: β=−0.58 (p<.001)

β = standardised regression coefficient from simple regression with PS score as outcome. SD = standard deviation. Presence/absence of each factor coded from survey items; mean PS score reflects teams where factor was rated as strongly present.

- **Mediation Analysis: Psychological Safety as Mediator**

Structural equation modeling provided support for the complete mediation of psychological safety in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovation output (Table 4). The direct effect of transformational leadership on innovation was not significant when psychological safety was included in the model (β=0.09, p>.14); however, the indirect effect of transformational leadership on innovation, mediated through psychological safety, was substantial and statistically significant (indirect β=0.54; 95% bootstrapped confidence interval [CI] of indirect effect 0.46, 0.62; p<.001). Overall, transformational leadership had a significant effect on innovation (β=0.63, p<.001). Model fit indices

indicated a good model fit to the data (CFI=0.96; RMSEA=0.051; SRMR=0.043). Thus, findings suggest that the performance enhancing effects of transformational leadership in the innovation arena are mainly through psychological safety rather than through motivation or cognition-based mechanisms.

Table 4: Structural Equation Modelling: Psychological Safety as Mediator of the Transformational Leadership–Innovation Relationship (n = 1,380)

Path	β	SE	95% Bootstrap CI	p-value
Transformational Leadership → Psychological Safety (a)	0.67	0.05	[0.57, 0.77]	< .001
Psychological Safety → Innovation Output (b)	0.81	0.06	[0.69, 0.93]	< .001
Transformational Leadership → Innovation (c, direct)	0.09	0.06	[-0.03, 0.21]	.14 (ns)
Indirect Effect (a × b)	0.54	0.04	[0.46, 0.62]	< .001
Total Effect (c + a×b)	0.63	0.05	[0.53, 0.73]	< .001

SEM estimated in R lavaan package with maximum likelihood estimation. Bootstrapped CIs based on 5,000 iterations. Model fit: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.051 (90% CI [0.044, 0.059]); SRMR = 0.043. ns = non-significant. Full mediation confirmed.

- **Qualitative Findings: The Lived Experience of Psychological Safety**

Themes that emerged through thematic analysis of the 44 interviews fell into five main categories: (1) visible leadership as a psychological safety signal; (2) memories of punishment as an instigator of silence; (3) psychological safety as fostering candour, rather than comfort; (4) the role of peers as a force for protection or destruction; and (5) inconsistency between espoused organizational values and reality.

In the theme category of visible leadership as a psychological safety signal, team members from psychologically safe teams described observable behaviors in which their leaders sent signals about psychological safety: a manager who publicly announced during a team meeting her mistake and asked what could be learned; a director who responded to dissent by asking the team to investigate more thoroughly, rather than dismissing it. These signals went beyond mere pleasantries and served a functional purpose as cues that indicated that in their teams, candid communication would not only be allowed but encouraged. Team members from psychologically unsafe teams offered the opposite scenarios: leaders who responded to bad news by being silent, or criticizing the messenger. This led to a learned response that made problem reporting extremely difficult.

The concept of psychological safety as facilitative of candor rather than comfort helped clear up a widely held misconception among managers. Interviewees who talked about the concept made it clear that psychological safety and harmony in teams were two separate things. For instance, an engineer working at a tech company in Germany stated that the best performing team she had ever been part of was the one where there would always be disagreements, sometimes even shouting matches, but which were never personal and punitive, and where it was perfectly acceptable to say to your boss that you found her idea bad and get away with it.

The misalignment of espoused organizational values and the values embodied within the organization stood out significantly. There were many people who indicated that the organizations they worked in portrayed an image of being highly invested in psychological safety in their messaging and mission statements but operated in cultures where there were punitive measures against not meeting targets and where there was shaming done in team meetings. It was a clear example of institutional hypocrisy which prevented the development of psychological safety.

The Human-Centred Performance Architecture

- **Framework Overview**

These results validate the need to create a 3-level Human-Centred Performance Architecture (HCPA) for instilling psychological safety in business organizations. Level one involves behaviors exhibited by an individual leader. It refers to those particular behaviors that are revealed by the findings as being the most effective in promoting psychological safety, including modeling intellectual humility through admitting one's errors; active inquiry through asking dissenting opinions; and follow-up through taking actions on the feedback gained from discussions in teams. These behaviors can be taught through leadership development programs.

Norms at the team level refer to the shared expectations formed by members of a team during their interactions. Teams that have high psychological safety always demonstrate three meta-norms. First, teams that have high psychological safety have the meta-norm of charitable interpretation, meaning

that when faced with ambiguous messages, members of such teams always assume the best. Second, teams that have high psychological safety have the meta-norm of proportionate challenge, implying that whenever there is disagreement, it is framed in terms of ideas and not personally. Third, teams with high psychological safety have the meta-norm of collective failure recognition.

At the third level of organizational governance, the focus is on those structural and systemic factors that can facilitate or negate the effect of efforts at both individual and team level. It would be impossible to maintain an environment of psychological safety in an organization where performance appraisal system penalizes any form of disclosure of errors, where incentive systems are designed to encourage competition instead of collaboration among employees, or where leadership development processes reward assertiveness and self-confidence rather than intellectual modesty and collaborative behavior. As evident from the data obtained through qualitative research, individuals who work in such organizations, where there exists a gap between what an organization communicates about its values externally and the actual state of affairs inside the organization, experience more of damage to trust than if there existed no such communication about psychological safety at all. Some possible interventions at the governance level could be; alongside financial performance measures on board-level organizational health dashboards. These governance changes show that the organization's claim of providing psychological safety is backed by tangible repercussions, a requirement for fostering psychological safety that is highlighted by the literature. In other words, there must be evidence that the trust built allows for taking real interpersonal risks in the workplace environment.

Conclusion

This paper offers the most extensive analysis thus far of the connection between psychological safety and team performance conducted empirically using a multi-country and multi-industry corporate organizational framework. The results affirm and build on the pioneering contributions of Edmondson by showing that psychological safety is an important determinant of innovation productivity, task accomplishment, error detection, information transfer, employee turnover, and client satisfaction within six different countries and nine industrial categories. Transformational leadership emerges as the critical facilitating factor, the role of psychological safety in the transformational leadership-innovation linkage is shown to be entirely mediating, and blame and hierarchical silence cultures are found to be the strongest systemic barriers.

The insights gained from qualitative data provide important context to these statistical associations by uncovering the micro-level behaviors used by leaders to send messages of safety or danger, the mental and emotional ramifications of such messaging on their employees, and the negative impact associated with the divergence between the stated intentions of an organization toward psychological safety and the performance culture that emerges. The Human Centred Performance Architecture outlined above offers a tangible three-level framework for organizations looking to transcend rhetoric and move toward institutionalization.

The HCPA theory should be examined using randomized field experiments to explore its three levels as independent and combined treatments. Remote and hybrid work models as modifiers of the link between leader behavior and psychological safety need further examination. Additionally, further research should examine whether the high level of cross-cultural generalizability discovered in this study can be observed in cultures which differ from the sampled ones by being more powerful and collectivistic. Ultimately, based on the evidence accumulated through this research, one may safely say that any organization which invests in psychological safety invests in performance.

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