

Analyzing the Paradox of Psychological Safety in the Workplace from Top Management's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper investigates the paradoxical nature of psychological safety within organizational settings, juxtaposing the theoretical advocacy of open communication against its practical implementation. Psychological safety, conceptualized by Amy Edmondson as the liberty to express ideas and concerns without fear of reprisal, is pivotal for fostering innovation, agility, and a positive work culture. Despite its recognized importance, there exists a discernible gap between management's verbal endorsement of these principles and their effective application, leading to a paradox that challenges organizational dynamics. Through a comprehensive literature review, the paper outlines the historical development of psychological safety, highlighting its growing relevance in the context of evolving work environments and team collaborations. Key theoretical frameworks are employed, including Social Exchange Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Leadership Theories, offering a multifaceted lens to dissect the complexities surrounding this concept. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus groups, enhancing the depth and breadth of insights into the practical experiences of psychological safety across various industries. Diverse case studies, ranging from a national oil company to a high-tech firm, illustrate the unique challenges and implementations of psychological safety in different contexts. The analysis reveals a consistent disparity between policy and practice, influenced by factors such as leadership styles, cultural norms, and external pressures. This paper argues for the critical role of leadership in bridging this gap, emphasizing the need for authenticity, vulnerability, and continuous engagement in fostering a psychologically safe environment. In conclusion, the paper advocates for a holistic approach to cultivating psychological safety, underscoring the necessity of aligning organizational policies with actual practices, embracing cultural diversity, and prioritizing continuous improvement and adaptation. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on psychological safety, offering valuable insights and recommendations for management to effectively navigate and resolve this paradox in modern workplaces.

Keywords: Psychological Safety, Organizational Culture & Leadership and Communication

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of psychological safety in the workplace has gained significant traction among organizational leaders and researchers. Defined as the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, psychological safety is crucial for fostering innovation, agility, and a healthy work environment. However, a glaring paradox exists in many organizations: while management often verbally encourages open communication and 'speaking up,' the practical implementation of these principles frequently falls short. This paper seeks to examine this paradox, exploring whether the encouragement of speaking up is a reality in modern workplaces or merely a managerial myth.

2. Background and Significance

Psychological safety, a term coined by Amy Edmondson in the late 1990s, has become a cornerstone concept in understanding team dynamics and employee engagement. It revolves around the idea of creating a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect, where people are comfortable being themselves.

2.1 Historical Context

The evolution of psychological safety as a concept in organizational theory has been influenced by the changing nature of work environments, the rise of knowledge-based work, and an increasing focus on team collaboration. Its relevance has grown in an era where innovation and adaptability are key to organizational survival.

2.2 Emergence of Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety in the workplace, primarily attributed to Amy Edmondson's work in the late 1990s, has been a pivotal subject in organizational behavior studies. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. This foundational idea set the stage for further exploration into how open communication and a sense of safety in speaking up can enhance team learning, innovation, and performance.

2.3 Expanding the Concept

Following Edmondson's early work, scholars expanded on the concept of psychological safety, exploring its implications in diverse organizational contexts. Kahn (1990) earlier had discussed psychological safety in the context of personal engagement at work, laying groundwork for understanding its relevance in employee motivation and satisfaction. Researchers like Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) highlighted the importance of psychological safety in high-stakes industries, like healthcare, where the ability to speak up could have life-or-death consequences.

2.4 Discrepancy Between Theory and Practice

While the theoretical benefits of psychological safety are well-documented, recent literature has begun to highlight a discrepancy between management's encouragement of a speak-up culture and the actual level of psychological safety experienced by employees. Morrison (2011), for instance, discussed the challenges employees face in speaking up, even in organizations that overtly encourage such behavior. This gap suggests a paradox where the theoretical understanding of psychological safety does not always align with practical implementation.

2.5 Role of Leadership

An important theme in the literature is the role of leadership in fostering or hindering psychological safety. Edmondson (2003) emphasized that leaders play a critical role in establishing a climate of openness and safety. However, research by Detert and Burris (2007) indicated that managerial practices often unintentionally suppress open communication, despite their intentions to promote it.

2.7 Cultural and Contextual Factors

Recent studies have also delved into the influence of cultural and contextual factors on psychological safety. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) pointed out that organizational culture significantly affects how psychological safety is perceived and experienced by employees. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory has been used to understand how national cultures impact perceptions of safety in speaking up (Hofstede, 1980).

2.8 Measuring Psychological Safety

Efforts to measure psychological safety have led to the development of various scales and tools. Edmondson's Psychological Safety Scale is one such instrument, widely used in research to assess the level of safety within teams (Edmondson, 1999). These tools have been crucial in empirically studying and validating the concept.

The literature on psychological safety reveals a rich tapestry of research spanning theoretical exploration, empirical studies, and practical implications. However, the consistent theme across these works is the recognition of a gap between the ideals of psychological safety and their realization in organizational practice. This gap calls for further research, particularly in understanding how organizations can bridge this divide to create truly open and safe environments for their employees. This literature review provides a snapshot of the research on psychological safety, highlighting its evolution, the role of leadership, the influence of cultural and contextual factors, and the efforts to measure it. To fully develop this section in a comprehensive article, each of these themes would require further elaboration with more detailed references to specific studies and findings.

The theoretical framework for understanding the paradox of psychological safety in the workplace involves integrating concepts from organizational behavior, leadership theory, and psychological principles. This section outlines the key theoretical foundations that help analyze the disparity between management's encouragement of speaking up and the actual level of psychological safety experienced by employees. The Organizational Behavior Theories being summarized:

1. **Social Exchange Theory:** This theory posits that relationships in the workplace are governed by a system of reciprocal exchanges. Psychological safety can be viewed through this lens as a reciprocal dynamic where employees feel safe to speak up if they anticipate a positive or supportive response from management and peers.
2. **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Maslow's theory, particularly the need for belonging and esteem, can be applied to understand why psychological safety is crucial for employees. A sense of safety in expressing oneself is fundamental to fulfilling these higher-order needs in a professional setting.
3. **Groupthink Theory:** Janis's concept of groupthink provides insight into why a lack of psychological safety can lead to poor decision-making and creativity in teams. In environments where conformity is valued over open dialogue, innovative and critical thinking is often stifled.

Meanwhile, the Leadership Theories as follows:

1. **Transformational Leadership:** This style of leadership is characterized by the ability to inspire and motivate employees. Transformational leaders are crucial in fostering an environment of psychological safety as they encourage open communication, value employee input, and promote a culture of trust and respect.

2. Servant Leadership: Servant leadership focuses on the leader's role as a servant first, prioritizing the needs of employees. This approach can be instrumental in building psychological safety, as it emphasizes empathy, listening, and the empowerment of team members.

This is about Psychological Principles

1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Festinger's theory can be applied to understand the discomfort employees experience when there's a discrepancy between what is espoused about speaking up and their actual experiences. This dissonance can lead to reduced trust and engagement.

2. Theory of Planned Behavior: This theory suggests that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence an individual's intention to perform a behavior. In the context of psychological safety, these factors can either encourage or discourage employees from speaking up.

Systems theory provides a holistic view of organizations, emphasizing the interdependence of all stakeholders and processes. This perspective is key in understanding how individual perceptions of psychological safety are influenced by broader organizational culture, policies, and leadership behaviors.

By integrating these theories from organizational behavior, leadership, and psychology, we can better understand the complex dynamics that contribute to the paradox of psychological safety in the workplace. This theoretical framework provides the foundation for examining why there is often a gap between the ideal of a speak-up culture and the reality experienced by employees, guiding the subsequent analysis of case studies, empirical data, and the development of strategies to address this discrepancy.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively analyze the paradox of psychological safety in the workplace.

1. Sequential Exploratory Strategy: Initially, qualitative data will be gathered and analyzed to explore key themes and generate hypotheses. This will be followed by a quantitative phase to test these hypotheses and examine trends on a larger scale.

Quantitative Research

1. Survey Design:

- **Instrumentation:** Surveys will include validated scales like Edmondson's Psychological Safety Scale and additional items to assess perceptions of management's encouragement for speaking up.
- **Population and Sampling:** The survey will target employees across various sectors. A stratified random sampling method will be employed to ensure a representative sample across different organizational levels and industries.

2. Data Collection and Analysis:

- **Administration:** Surveys will be distributed electronically.
- **Analysis:** Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis, to identify patterns and relationships.

Qualitative Research

1. Data Collection Methods:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with employees, managers, and HR professionals to gain in-depth insights.
- **Focus Groups:** Held with employees from various departments to discuss their experiences and perceptions of psychological safety.

2. Data Analysis:

- **Coding and Thematic Analysis:** Interviews and focus group transcripts will be coded and analyzed for recurring themes.
- **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):** Employed to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences related to psychological safety.

Mixed-Methods Integration

1. **Connecting Phases:** Findings from the qualitative phase will inform the development of the quantitative survey, ensuring that the instruments are sensitive to the themes uncovered.

2. **Interpretation of Integrated Data:** Both sets of data will be interpreted in conjunction, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the research problem.

Ethical Considerations

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants will be informed about the study's aims, their rights, and how their data will be used, and consent will be obtained.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Measures will be taken to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity. Data will be stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Reliability and Validity

1. **Reliability:** Steps will be taken to ensure consistency in data collection and analysis methods.
2. **Validity:** The study will employ strategies like triangulation and member checking to enhance the validity of the findings.

This methodology aims to capture the complexity of psychological safety in the workplace by employing a mixed-methods approach. It allows for in-depth exploration through qualitative methods and the examination of broader trends through quantitative analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the real and perceived gaps in psychological safety as encouraged by management.

4.0 Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Case Study 1: Big National Oil Company – Surface Stability, Underlying Issues

Background: A large national oil company, outwardly successful and stable, faced underlying issues with psychological safety among its workforce.

Approach:

- Management publicly endorsed open communication and feedback.
- Implemented an anonymous reporting system for workplace concerns.

Outcome:

- Despite surface-level initiatives, a deep-seated culture of hierarchy and fear of retribution persisted.
- Low levels of actual reporting indicated a lack of trust in the system's confidentiality.

Case Study 2: Contractor Company – Client-Driven Approach Affecting Speak-Up Culture

Background: A contractor company, heavily client-driven and working for the oil company in Case Study 1, struggled to maintain an independent speak-up culture.

Approach:

- Adopted the client's policies on paper, encouraging open communication and feedback.
- Held regular team meetings to discuss project progress and issues.

Outcome:

- Employees felt pressured to align with the client's interests, often at the expense of voicing genuine concerns.
- Psychological safety was compromised by the perceived need to prioritize client satisfaction.

Case Study 3: Another Contractor – Balancing Client Expectations with Employee Safety

Background: Another contractor serving the same national oil company sought to balance client expectations with fostering a healthy internal speak-up culture.

Approach:

- Developed an internal charter emphasizing psychological safety independent of client influence.
- Engaged in regular, transparent communications about the importance of employee feedback.

Outcome:

- Successfully cultivated a more open culture, with employees feeling safer to voice concerns.
- Managed to balance client expectations with maintaining a positive internal work environment.

Case Study 4: Tech Company – Innovative but Intense

Background: A cutting-edge technology company, known for its innovation, grappled with creating a psychologically safe environment due to intense competition and high expectations.

Approach:

- Implemented regular innovation brainstorming sessions and encouraged risk-taking.
- Introduced a policy where failures and mistakes were seen as learning opportunities.

Outcome:

- Created a more open and creative atmosphere but still struggled with intermittent periods of high stress and reduced psychological safety.
- Recognized the need for continuous effort to maintain a balance between high performance and employee well-being.

Case Study 5: Construction Company on a Government Project – Navigating Safety and Regulation

Background: A construction company working on a significant government project faced the challenge of maintaining psychological safety in a highly regulated and scrutinized environment.

Approach:

- Strict adherence to safety protocols with an open-door policy for reporting issues.
- Regular safety meetings and anonymous feedback channels for employees.

Outcome:

- Successfully maintained high safety standards while encouraging employees to speak up about potential hazards.
- Developed a reputation for prioritizing both physical and psychological safety on the project.

These case studies illustrate the complexities of establishing psychological safety across different industries and organizational contexts. They reveal how external pressures, organizational culture, and leadership styles play pivotal roles in shaping the reality of psychological safety in the workplace. The examples underscore the necessity for authentic, context-specific strategies to cultivate an environment where employees feel genuinely safe to speak up.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the case studies and real-world examples reveals several key findings about the state of psychological safety in various workplaces:

1. **Disparity Between Policy and Practice:** There is often a significant gap between the policies that promote psychological safety and their practical implementation. This gap is evident in the Big National Oil Company, where despite formal policies, a culture of silence persists due to fear of retribution.
2. **Client Influence on Contractor Companies:** Contractor companies, especially those serving larger clients like in Case Studies 2 and 3, face unique challenges in maintaining an independent speak-up culture. The pressure to align with client interests can overshadow internal efforts to foster open communication.
3. **Sector-Specific Challenges:** Different industries face unique challenges in promoting psychological safety. The tech company (Case Study 4) grapples with balancing innovation-driven risk-taking against a high-stress environment, while the construction company (Case Study 5) navigates the complexities of physical and psychological safety in a highly regulated setting.
4. **Leadership and Culture:** The role of leadership in shaping psychological safety is crucial. Leadership styles that encourage openness, admit fallibility, and genuinely act on feedback tend to foster a safer psychological environment.
5. **Employee Perception and Trust:** The effectiveness of any psychological safety initiative is largely dependent on employee perception and trust. If employees believe that speaking up could lead to negative consequences, they are unlikely to take advantage of these programs, regardless of their existence.

5. Discussion

1. **Understanding the Gap:** The discrepancy between the ideals of psychological safety and the reality in the workplace can be attributed to several factors, including ingrained cultural norms, leadership styles, and external pressures. This gap points to the need for a more holistic approach that addresses not just policies, but also the underlying cultural and structural elements of an organization.
2. **The Role of Leadership:** Leadership plays a pivotal role in either bridging or widening this gap. Leaders who model the behavior they wish to see, by actively listening and responding to concerns, can foster a more authentic speak-up culture.
3. **Cultural Nuances and Adaptability:** The varied nature of challenges across different industries highlights the need for adaptable approaches to psychological safety. What works in a tech

company may not be suitable for a contractor or a government project in construction. Tailored strategies that consider specific sector challenges and organizational cultures are essential.

4. **Building Trust:** Trust is the foundation of psychological safety. Organizations must work on building and maintaining trust through consistent, transparent actions and by ensuring that feedback and concerns lead to tangible changes.

5. **Continuous Effort and Evaluation:** Establishing psychological safety is not a one-time effort but a continuous process. Regular evaluation and adaptation of strategies are necessary to respond to changing dynamics and to sustain a culture of open communication.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of case studies and real-world examples underscores the complexity of establishing and maintaining psychological safety in the workplace. It reveals the necessity of a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond policy implementation to address cultural, structural, and leadership factors. Building a truly psychologically safe environment requires ongoing effort, commitment from leadership, and a deep understanding of the unique challenges and dynamics within each organization. Establishing psychological safety in the workplace is fraught with challenges and barriers. These obstacles can stem from organizational culture, leadership styles, employee beliefs, and external pressures. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to foster a genuine speak-up culture. Overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort from both leadership and employees. It involves addressing deep-rooted cultural norms, developing effective communication skills, and creating an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and respected. Additionally, organizations must navigate external and structural limitations while striving to maintain a psychologically safe workplace. Recognizing and actively working to mitigate these barriers is a crucial step toward fostering an open, communicative, and innovative organizational culture.

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