



Leader competencies for building psychological safety in hybrid teams: A South African FMCG sector study

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Purpose: Psychological safety has attracted a fair amount of research in recent years, with most scholars focusing on its importance in driving team performance. Little attention, although, has been given to how leaders build an environment of psychological safety, especially in hybrid work teams in organisations, which have become popular since the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. This study aimed to explore how leaders create a psychologically safe environment for hybrid work teams, including the required leader competencies.

Design/methodology/approach: This was a cross-sectional qualitative study in which 20 managers from 13 multinationals in the fast-moving consumer goods sector were interviewed to share their views on how they built psychological safety, and the leader competencies needed to create such an environment for hybrid work teams.

Findings/results: While managers are generally aware of the importance of psychological safety in their organisations, the latter has not been given the priority attention it deserves. It should be a strategic imperative to ensure that leaders develop the competencies (such as emotional intelligence and accountability) needed to create and maintain a psychologically safe environment.

Practical implications: Building on Edmondson's framework, the study contributes a three-phase framework to guide leaders in creating a psychologically safe environment in which hybrid work teams can thrive.

Originality/value: Whereas most previous studies on psychological safety have been conducted in relation to traditional teams, this study extends the application of psychological safety theory on hybrid work teams.

Keywords: psychological safety; leadership development; leadership competencies; hybrid work teams; e-leadership.

Introduction

There has been a notable transition in the world of work since the advent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic in 2020. A significant change has been the pronounced shift towards hybrid work, which is a combination of on-site and remote work (Wong et al., 2020). This has created some challenges for the staff of organisations, such as work-home interferences, ineffective communication, procrastination, a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness (Wong et al., 2020).

As a result, managers have had to learn new competencies to help them support their employees while simultaneously driving organisational performance. One of these competencies is creating a psychologically safe work environment where 'employees feel safe to voice ideas, willingly seek feedback, provide honest feedback, collaborate, take risks and experiment' (Newman et al., 2017). Team members in traditional environments have plenty of opportunities to interact with one another face-to-face, which fosters rapport and trust – both of which are necessary for psychological safety (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). In contrast, members of hybrid teams rely heavily on virtual communication, which necessitates different leadership competencies (Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

While psychological safety has received a fair amount of attention from researchers since it was first conceptualised in the early 1990s, various studies have provided compelling evidence of the

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advantages of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018; Newman et al., 2017) and the value of various leadership competencies in driving organisational success in challenging times (Swanson et al., 2020). However, there is limited literature on how leaders use their competencies to create psychologically safe hybrid working environments (Edmondson & Bransby, 2022). One of the reasons for this is that the nature of hybrid work has been evolving since its marked acceleration at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and studies have not yet caught up with its various permutations (Hopkins & Figaro, 2021).

We addressed this research gap by conducting a cross-sectional study in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, examining leaders of teams who had adopted a hybrid work model in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose the FMCG sector because it is characterised by high levels of competition and is subject to continuously changing demand and consumption patterns, which contribute to high levels of stress among managers. In such circumstances, psychological safety is paramount among teams (Mutambara & Munyaka, 2022). Importantly, the FMCG sector has given considerable attention in recent years to health and safety standards (Maicu, 2017).

The following two research questions guided our study:

1. *How do leaders create psychological safety in hybrid work teams?*
2. *What are the leader competencies and behaviours required to create psychological safety in hybrid work teams?*

Building on Edmondson's (2018) framework of psychological safety, we developed a three-phase framework to guide leaders in creating a psychologically safe environment in which hybrid work teams can thrive. This is a unique contribution because previous studies on psychological safety have not focused on hybrid teams, which pose unique leadership challenges. Our study, therefore, extends psychological safety theory into hybrid work contexts.

Literature review

Psychological safety in hybrid work teams

In the context of a team or a group, psychological safety is defined as 'a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking' (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23). Psychologically safe work environments offer numerous advantages, including individuals' willingness to share information, to practise active citizenship behaviours, to be innovative and creative, to communicate openly, to engage with team members and to display a positive attitude and a strong work ethic (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017).

There is widespread consensus that in such a setting, it is safe to take interpersonal risks, such as disclosing one's authentic thoughts, feelings and ideas (Newman et al., 2017). Moreover, that people will not be penalised for making a mistake (Delizonna, 2017). A feeling of psychological safety, therefore,

encourages one to experiment, explore and innovate (Newman et al., 2017). Zhang and Wan (2021) caution, however, that the members of a team may have different perceptions of how safe a particular environment is, which could cause inconsistencies in how team members react to interpersonal risk.

Psychological safety theory and hybrid work teams

Scholars have proposed a variety of models for creating psychological safety. However, these models often have limitations when applied to hybrid work contexts. The seminal works of Edmondson (2018) show that the level of psychological safety aligned to performance standards will yield certain levels of performance in an organisation (Figure 1). When there is a low level of psychological safety and low performance standards, individuals and teams experience apathy. When there is a high level of psychological safety and low performance standards, individuals and teams tend to find themselves in a comfort zone.

Deng et al. (2019) assert that when employees feel comfortable, they may not be motivated to put in much effort at work. For example, they may feel that their performance is not being monitored, and therefore, there is reduced risk from their lower productivity. This can lead to procrastination and a lack of accountability on their part, especially in a hybrid work environment where employees are not required to be at the office every day. Similarly, Zhang and Wan (2021) argue that psychological safety reduces employees' fear of negative consequences, which prompt employees to take risks that involve unethical behaviour. This potential misuse of psychological safety can result in lost trust, coupled with potential legal ramifications for the organisation concerned.

However, if performance standards are high and the level of psychological safety is low, employees find themselves in an anxiety zone, which negatively impacts performance. As anxiety produces fear, employees may feel forced to perform. However, if such performance is merely a way to avoid punishment, it may be mediocre (Dyer et al., 2023; Edmondson, 2018). In addition, when there is a high level of fear among employees, they will conclude that mistakes are unwelcome. As a result, individuals and teams will hide

	Low standards	High standards
High psychological safety	Comfort zone	Learning and high-performance zone
Low psychological safety	Apathy zone	Anxiety zone

Source: Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. John Wiley & Sons

FIGURE 1: Psychological safety model.

mistakes when they occur and perhaps not learn from them (Edmondson, 2018).

Dyer et al. (2023) identified another drawback of psychological safety. While individuals are encouraged to speak up and share their ideas and views, they may not do so in a respectful and constructive manner.

Organisations require high psychological safety levels and performance standards to encourage optimal learning, results (Edmondson, 2018) and well-being (Clarke et al., 2024). Leaders, therefore, need to steer their teams away from apathy, comfort and anxiety zones towards a high-performance zone and learning (Clarke et al., 2024).

Extant literature indicates that individual, group and organisational factors all play a role in fostering psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). At an individual level, a proactive personality, emotional stability and a learning orientation are said to be attributes that contribute to a feeling of psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). At a group level, role clarity, autonomy, peer support, trust, mutual support and inclusive leadership have been found to promote a sense of psychological safety. At an organisational level, a supportive work context and human resource (HR) practices, as well as high-quality relationships across the organisation, are seen to create a conducive environment for psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017).

Another model by Clark (2020) discusses four stages of psychological safety, where team members advance from a feeling of inclusion to a feeling of confidence to ask questions, to make mistakes, to actively express their ideas and to fearlessly challenge the status quo. A limitation of this model is that breaking up the process of creating psychological safety into four distinct steps oversimplifies a complex process, particularly in a hybrid work context where location, technological competence or family responsibilities may result in certain stages overlapping or taking place in a different sequence. Another limitation is that the model does

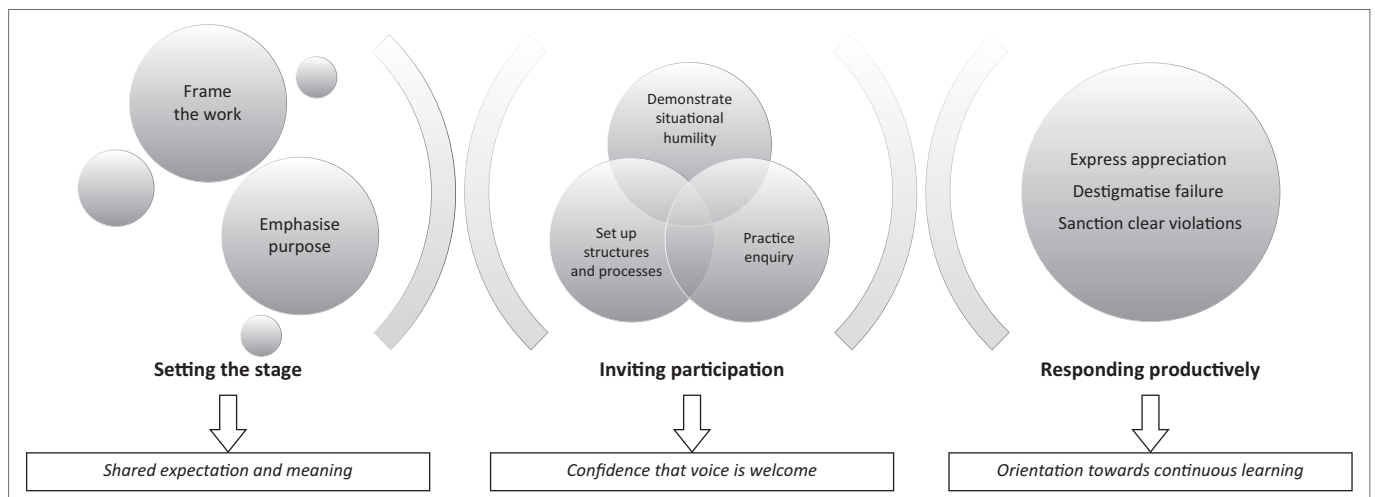
not consider factors such as leadership styles and competencies, which can contribute significantly to the creation of psychological safety in a hybrid work environment.

Edmondson (2018) proposed a three-phase framework to guide leaders in creating psychological safety for their teams. The framework shows the overall process and the inherent competencies required for the successful execution thereof as depicted in Figure 2. We used an adapted version of this framework in our study to illustrate the process of creating psychological safety in *hybrid* teams.

Setting the stage

The intention of this stage is to ensure that individuals arrive at a common goal or set of expectations by framing the work. Framing 'is concerned with the ways in which individuals create internal representations of decision problems and how these determine the choices they make' (Maule & Villejoubert, 2020, p. 25). In this context, psychological safety refers to individuals' beliefs and assumptions about the work environment, the team they belong to and their organisation (and whether it is safe to take on interpersonal risk), which inform how they make decisions about their interpersonal interactions. If, in the framing, the work context is evidently not safe, then the leader needs to reframe the context.

Importantly, reframing is about reframing failure because, in a psychologically unsafe environment, employees fear failure or reporting failure when it occurs (Edmondson, 2018). Reframing failure means setting expectations regarding failure, uncertainty and interdependence, encouraging individuals to express themselves more freely. In practical terms, this involves a leader defining the problem that their team should explore and motivating them to arrive at a solution. In addition, Edmondson and Mortensen (2021) advise leaders to create psychological safety in a hybrid context by being vulnerable, taking small steps, sharing positive examples and being alert to behaviours that undermine the quest for psychological safety.



Source: Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. John Wiley & Sons

FIGURE 2: Leaders' framework for creating psychological safety.

Inviting participation

Fear stops team members from participating and contributing (Clark, 2020), particularly in strict hierarchical organisations (Clarke et al., 2024). Therefore, the second stage of creating psychological safety involves inviting participation from team members to give them confidence that their views will be welcome (Edmondson, 2018; Sherf et al., 2021). In this regard, leaders need to demonstrate humility, acknowledge their own mistakes where necessary, demonstrate a willingness to dissolve the power distance that normally exists between leaders and their teams and address their own cognitive biases (Clarke et al., 2024; Edmondson, 2018; Sherf et al., 2021).

A core skill required to facilitate participation is proactive enquiry, which means purposeful probing aimed at tackling individual cognitive biases (Edmondson, 2018). This involves asking powerful, incisive and reflective questions to provoke, inspire and shift people's thinking.

Responding productively

The final stage of creating psychological safety involves leaders expressing their appreciation when staff provide input, including reporting failure because this is a way of destigmatising failure and making it a part of learning and innovation (Edmondson, 2018). The appropriate response to a failure will depend on its gravity or complexity. For example, it could be recommendations for training and retraining, systems improvement or redesign, or a new approach to the situation or problem, such as expressing appreciation to team members for their efforts.

Recent studies have found that when leaders seek and share feedback within a team context, it promotes psychological safety (Coutifaris & Grant, 2022), which lays the foundation for continuous learning. Feedback needs to be both positive and critical. In addition, while there is extant literature on how to create psychological safety in hybrid work contexts, using leader traits such as curiosity, transparency and empathy, and behaviours such as active listening and soliciting of feedback (Delizonna, 2017), the literature is noticeably light on *how* leaders can develop and strengthen these qualities (Edmondson & Bransby, 2022).

The role of leadership styles in building psychological safety

The framework described above implies that psychological safety requires some type of leadership style. Some scholars have recently provided evidence that certain leadership styles are key in building and enhancing psychological safety. Notably, inclusive leadership, which is characterised by openness, availability and accessibility, was found to be instrumental in developing and strengthening psychological safety as inclusive leaders create a positive work climate where diversity is upheld and encourage employees to feel safe to share opposing ideas without fear (Siyal, 2023). Similarly, Ahmad and Umrani (2019) identified the positive

impact of ethical leadership on fostering psychological safety, with their research highlighting that employees feel psychologically safe when they believe that their organisation is ethical and that their leaders operate morally on the basis of fairness, equality and truthfulness. Additionally, research on transformational leadership, which facilitates vision and motivation among employees, has confirmed that psychological safety acts as a mediator to transformational leadership outcomes (Wang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022).

Research on servant leadership (Brohi et al., 2021; Rabiul et al., 2023) also confirmed the impact of leadership style on psychological safety. The findings of these scholars revealed that servant leadership, which is marked by humility and empathy, increased psychological safety because servant leaders create environments where employee needs are prioritised, making them feel safe to express themselves (Rabiul et al., 2023).

Equally, certain leadership styles have been found to erode psychological safety. For instance, Mehmood et al. (2024) demonstrated that despotic leadership, which is characterised by autocracy, self-centredness and manipulation, can create a toxic environment that makes employees feel psychologically unsafe. Similarly, Huang et al. (2022) highlighted that authoritarian leadership, which is marked by authority and control over employees, increases workplace stress and creates a negative work climate that compromises psychological safety. These studies have demonstrated leadership style's importance in creating or undermining psychological safety in traditional teams. Our study builds on the current literature by providing a unique perspective on the role of leadership in building psychological safety in hybrid teams in the FMCG industry.

The importance of psychological safety in the fast-moving consumer goods sector

The FMCG sector specialises in manufacturing, marketing and distributing consumer products. It operates in a dynamic, highly competitive, fast-changing environment (Mutambara & Munyaka, 2022). The complexity and pressure experienced by those working in the FMCG sector can lead to stress and burnout (Maicu, 2017) and high employee turnover if not managed effectively. The trend towards hybrid work has exacerbated this.

In the South African context, FMCG companies face macroeconomic challenges, including a volatile currency, poor physical infrastructure, an unreliable power supply and undeveloped technological systems, which negatively impact supply chains and place added pressure on suppliers (Magagula et al., 2020). In such a challenging environment, leaders have a particularly important role to play in driving innovation, ensuring team collaboration and retaining talent, all of which are outcomes of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018).

Several scholars stress the importance of innovation in the FMCG sector (Binuyo et al., 2019; Magagula et al., 2020;

TABLE 1: Participants' profile.

Participant	Designation	Sector	Gender	Age (years)	Years in management	Number of subordinates
P1	Senior Brand Manager	Beverages	Male	37	8	4
P2	Customer Team Leader	Home and Personal Care	Female	35	8	8
P3	Sales Manager	Home, Personal Care and Food	Female	32	3	4
P4	Customer Marketing Manager	Home and Personal Care	Male	34	5	2
P5	Marketing Manager	Home, Personal Care and Food	Female	35	4	2
P6	Supply Chain Manager	Food	Male	34	9	2
P7	Customer Marketing Executive	Food	Female	40	10	7
P8	Marketing Manager	Home, Personal Care and Food	Female	35	3	2
P9	Senior Procurement Manager	Food	Female	41	9	2
P10	Senior HR Business Partner	Food and Beverages	Male	34	9	2
P11	Supply Chain Team Leader	Food and Beverages	Male	39	10	7
P12	Business Development Manager	Beverages	Male	35	6	2
P13	Artwork and Production Manager	Home, Personal Care and Food	Male	46	12	7
P14	Senior Supply Chain Manager	Food	Female	39	13	4
P15	Customer Collaboration Manager	Beverages	Female	39	14	6
P16	Talent Engagement Lead	Beverages	Female	30	5	7
P17	National Account Manager	Home, Personal Care and Food	Male	31	5	4
P18	Head of Trade	Food and Beverages	Male	42	7	4
P19	Head of Sales	Food	Female	39	15	4
P20	General Manager	Home and Personal Care	Male	36	1	6

Mutambara & Munyaka, 2022). Achieving a competitive edge through innovation, with the creation of psychological safety being an important component of this quest, is therefore key (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 2018). Moreover, the FMCG sector is characterised by cross-functional collaboration between specialist teams, often across multiple geographical regions (Derqui et al., 2022). According to Edmondson (2018), operating in an environment of psychological safety enables cross-functional teams to effectively manage conflict, leverage diversity and address some of the difficulties caused by geographical dispersion.

Methodology

In setting out to understand what strategies leaders use to create psychological safety in hybrid work teams, we were guided by the interpretivism philosophy, which emphasises subjective personal experiences that are context-dependent and socially constructed (Hackley, 2019).

Sampling method and study participants

The sample was drawn from the broad population of multinational corporations operating in the FMCG sector in South Africa. We approached 50 potential participants through a professional network (LinkedIn) and arrived at a total sample of 20 managers working with hybrid teams who agreed to participate. The 20 participants were affiliated to 13 multinational corporations that had all received prestigious top employer awards.¹ Diversity of the participant group was assured by including all relevant FMCG sub-sectors, different leadership roles in the organisation (including marketing, purchasing, supply chain, HR and general management) and different demographic characteristics (including gender, age and management experience). All the participants were located in South Africa, with the exception

of one who was based in Turkey. The profile of respondents is found in Table 1.

Data collection

The data collection process entailed conducting semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams (i.e. virtually) over a 2-month period in 2023. This was the preferred method as participants were geographically dispersed throughout the country. The use of this method also mitigated the risks of data loss and transcription errors. We limited the number of participants to three per organisation to ensure a broad spectrum of viewpoints. The average length of each interview was 40 min. Each interview was transcribed and anonymised before being loaded onto the ATLAS.ti V.24, a software program for analysis.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a combination of Braun and Clark's (2006) framework for thematic analysis and Saldana's (2014) coding process. The first step involved reading the transcripts, getting a high-level view of the data and recording first impressions. Working within the ATLAS.ti system, we embarked on the second step, which involved inductively generating and assigning meaningful codes. This process resulted in 186 primary or first-level codes. Then proceeded to the third step, which involved analysing the 186 primary codes and categorising them into 23 secondary codes that were relevant to the research questions. These were then further analysed as a fourth step, which involved abstracting nine sub-themes from the categories and aggregating these into three main themes, which were *leader behaviours that promote psychological safety*, *leader competencies that enable the creation of psychological safety and organisational support needed to build leader competence*. The different themes and sub-themes are presented and discussed in the following results section.

1. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/745293/these-are-the-top-employers-in-south-africa-in-2024-with-a-new-number-one/>.

Ethical considerations

The research proposal was presented to the Ethics Committee of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) at the University of Pretoria. The committee approved the proposal and granted permission for the study to proceed once all the ethical clearance requirements had been met and allocated for student number 22957822.

Results

In this section, we present the study's results according to the three main themes and nine sub-themes generated during the analysis.

Leader behaviours that promote psychological safety

Under this theme, several core behaviours contributed to creating psychological safety. Among the more prevalent core behaviours were *proactive communication, building trust, cultivating a learning culture, supporting employees, rewarding employees, encouraging different voices and being vulnerable*, which are listed in Table 2. We discuss them in relation to one another under three subheadings: *proactive communication*, which includes encouraging different voices; *building trust*, which includes being vulnerable and *cultivating a learning culture*, which includes supporting team members, rewarding them and allowing them to lead.

Proactive communication is a driver of psychological safety

An overwhelming 95% of participants emphasised the importance of proactive communication as it promotes inclusion and encourages employees to be open about the mistakes they have made, which they can then learn from. When a leader accepts mistakes made by team members, the

latter realises that it is safe to reveal mistakes. For example, P6 said that, in the case of mistakes occurring, they would ask the team member to '*document what went wrong [and] what they could have done differently*' so that they can learn from it. However, some mistakes can be very costly to a business. It is, therefore, important to ensure that the magnitude of the learnings will prevent a recurrence of such mistakes in the future.

About 50% of participants indicated that one-on-one discussions improved team members' contributions to the team. Therefore, those team members who may have difficulty expressing themselves in large forums (whether virtual or in person) would benefit from an individual follow-up discussion. As a complement to individual discussions, 35% of the participants indicated that informal contact and communication with team members was an effective way to cultivate psychological safety. Activities such as having an occasional drink '*allows flexibility to query things they may not have felt safe to ask ...*'.

One of the challenges of virtual meetings is that introverted people may easily hide behind the screen. Half the participants highlighted that the differences between introverts and extroverts needed to be acknowledged and that an individualised approach should be adopted. This could be done by asking specific individuals '*who hardly talk*' what their thoughts are. Encouraging such engagements makes team members feel safe to freely challenge the status quo and to '*express thoughts and ideas in front of senior people in the organisation*'.

Building trust is a foundation for psychological safety

Building high levels of trust was seen as fundamental to fostering psychological safety, with 90% of participants regarding trust as a '*pillar of psychological safety*'. It starts with '*being vulnerable as a leader*' and sharing their personal story, while encouraging team members to share theirs. This level of vulnerability encourages honesty and candour among team members.

Another key component of trust is understanding team members' circumstances and challenges by '*listening to their concerns and frustrations*' so as to determine what type of support they require. Leaders can also demonstrate trust by '*entrusting team members with increased responsibilities*'. Trust was also seen as a reciprocal process. For instance, by being trusted and given the flexibility to work from home, team members feel a responsibility to execute their assigned duties.

Building trust invariably minimises or eliminates fear. Fear was considered a barrier to the creation of psychological safety by 65% of participants. For example, when it came to '*challenging the status quo, the individual's level of confidence*' was seen as a significant obstacle, often because of previous experience. At times, fear (including fear of job loss) is linked to an inferiority complex within the organisational hierarchy.

TABLE 2: Psychological safety promoters.

Participant	Proactive communication	Building trust	Cultivating a learning culture	Supporting employees	Being vulnerable	Encouraging different voices
P1	X	X	X	X	X	-
P2	X	X	X	X	-	-
P3	X	-	X	-	-	-
P4	X	X	X	X	-	X
P5	X	X	-	X	-	X
P6	X	X	X	X	X	-
P7	X	X	X	X	X	X
P8	X	X	X	X	X	X
P9	X	X	X	X	X	-
P10	X	X	X	X	X	-
P11	X	X	X	X	-	X
P12	X	-	X	-	-	-
P13	X	X	X	X	X	-
P14	X	X	X	X	X	X
P15	X	X	X	X	-	X
P16	-	X	X	-	X	X
P17	X	X	X	X	-	X
P18	X	X	X	X	X	-
P19	X	X	X	X	-	X
P20	X	X	X	X	X	-
Total	19	18	18	17	11	10

Psychological safety cultivates a learning culture

Cultivating a culture of learning was regarded by 90% of participants as an effective way of creating psychological safety. Different participants indicated that obtaining feedback from various sources was invaluable, such as bottom-up, top-down and cross-functional feedback (typical of the 360-degree feedback method), providing a holistic view of areas where they can develop. Feedback also includes 'rewarding employees and celebrating success'. However, participants asserted that feedback needs to be respectful, constructive and objective, as it is 'not only what we say but also how we say it'. What individuals then do with the feedback is the most important of all, as the action taken makes the feedback more impactful.

In addition to feedback, supporting employees through the provision of relevant information and the necessary 'tools to enable them to discover their potential' was seen by 85% of participants as one of the keys to promoting a culture of learning. In addition, 20% of participants highlighted the importance of continuous learning through 'self-initiative' or by using their organisations' online learning platforms.

Leader competencies that enable the creation of psychological safety

The results of our study revealed that the three core leader behaviours that induce psychological safety (trust, proactive communication and fostering a learning culture) are enabled by certain key competencies. At the top of the list (see Table 3) are: *knowing and understanding individual team members* (comprising empathy and social awareness); *practising self-leadership* (comprising self-management, initiative and leading by example); *managing diversity and inclusion* and *leading as a coach or a facilitator*.

TABLE 3: Psychological safety promoting competencies.

Participant	Knowing and understanding individual team members (empathy and social awareness)	Practising self-leadership (self-management, initiative and leading by example)	Managing diversity and fostering inclusion	Leading as a coach or a facilitator
P1	-	X	-	-
P2	X	X	X	-
P3	X	X	X	X
P4	X	X	X	X
P5	X	-	X	X
P6	-	X	X	X
P7	X	-	-	-
P8	-	X	X	-
P9	X	X	X	-
P10	X	X	-	-
P11	X	-	X	X
P12	X	X	X	-
P13	X	X	-	-
P14	X	X	X	-
P15	X	X	-	X
P16	X	-	X	-
P17	X	X	X	-
P18	X	X	-	-
P19	X	-	X	-
P20	X	-	X	X
Total	17	14	14	7

Knowing and understanding individual team members

To build high levels of psychological safety, most participants acknowledged the importance of understanding each individual team member and their personalities and tailoring their leadership approach accordingly. One way to achieve this was through regular one-on-one engagements with team members, which also involved 'understanding how they are feeling' and establishing a state of 'comfort' with them. These individual discussions were regarded as more 'crucial in a hybrid setting'.

The results suggest that building interpersonal relational skills that allow leaders to get to know their team members (who they are, their strengths and weaknesses) and to display empathy (social awareness skills) is critical to driving team members' contribution and promoting learning.

Practising self-leadership

Participants considered it important to advocate for psychologically safe environments by setting the right example and 'using their positions of power to challenge behaviours' that were not supportive of this goal. One of the participants described how a leader can be passionate about creating psychological safety:

'She's very good at creating an environment where people outside of her immediate space feel safe ... I think it's because she champions injustices. When there is a context that people have shared, she takes it upon herself and uses her authority, power and privilege to address certain things.' (Participant 10)

When leaders are authentic, they are also comfortable being vulnerable and acknowledging being wrong in the eyes of their subordinates, as reported by 35% of participants. If a manager is to create a psychologically safe environment, they need to understand their employees, which requires both empathy and self-leadership skills, according to at least 20% of participants. Moreover, self-leadership includes 'self-awareness and self-management'.

Managing diversity and fostering inclusion

Managing diversity and being an inclusive leader were regarded as key competencies for inducing psychological safety. However, many participants saw it as a challenge as they felt ill-equipped to lead diverse teams – in other words, to manage people with 'different personalities and backgrounds'.

Managing diverse teams and encouraging inclusion were regarded as even more challenging when employees work remotely as 'you can't really see how people feel'. Moreover, inclusion can be compromised 'on online meetings, especially if you don't have your camera on'. Managers, therefore, need to be more intentional and employ different approaches when dealing with diverse teams in a hybrid context.

Leading as a coach or a facilitator

Coaching and facilitation skills were considered important when leading hybrid teams, with coaching helping to upskill

team members and facilitating streamlining online meetings or information-sharing sessions. Coaching and facilitation should be accompanied by a *'forgiving attitude'* on the part of the leader, remarked one of the participants:

'The true test comes in what you do when mistakes happen ... You need to be absolutely super calm and be comfortable and let the other person know that it's OK to make a mistake.'
(Participant 1)

Organisational support needed to build leader competence

Various types of support were identified as being essential for equipping leaders with the competencies to create and maintain a psychologically safe environment. However, participants' responses indicated that their organisations were at different levels of preparedness in this regard (Table 4).

The need to build a company-wide culture of psychological safety

Some 85% of participants recognised the need for an organisation-wide culture of psychological safety, with 55% believing that psychological safety was an organisational priority and 65% feeling safe in their organisations. However, 35% believed that their organisation was not doing enough to promote psychological safety. These findings suggest inconsistent behaviours within the organisations in question. While this could be attributed to different leadership styles, it also indicates that there was no organisation-wide strategy or plan for equipping leaders to bring about the psychologically safe environment that was clearly called for.

TABLE 4: Organisational support required to create an environment of psychological safety.

Participant	Create an organisation-wide culture of PS	PS is a top priority for the organisation	I feel safe in my organisation	Create opportunities for learning PS skills	Have received training on PS	Introduce measures (KPIs) for PS for managers
P1	X	X	X	X	X	X
P2	X	X	X	X	-	X
P3	X	-	X	X	X	X
P4	-	X	X	X	X	X
P5	X	-	-	-	X	X
P6	X	-	-	-	X	X
P7	-	-	-	X	-	-
P8	X	-	-	-	X	X
P9	X	-	X	-	X	-
P10	X	X	X	-	X	X
P11	X	X	-	X	X	X
P12	X	-	X	X	X	-
P13	X	X	X	X	X	-
P14	X	-	X	-	X	X
P15	X	-	-	X	-	X
P16	X	X	X	-	-	-
P17	X	X	X	-	X	X
P18	X	X	-	X	X	X
P19	-	X	X	-	-	-
P20	X	X	X	X	-	X
Total	17	11	13	11	14	14

PS, psychological safety; KPIs, key performance indicators.

Introducing a culture of psychological safety involves innovation and creativity. However, *'changing conventional ways of thinking'* can be challenging, with leaders often *'stuck in the old ways'*. Sometimes, organisations find it difficult to manage the seemingly opposing objectives of developing a high-performance culture on the one hand and meeting the needs of their employees on the other hand. This can result in leaders losing credibility in the eyes of their employees, who perceive leaders talking about the importance of psychological safety but falling short in practical terms, as *'business results normally take precedence'*.

In the face of these challenges, participants highlighted three crucial areas requiring attention: creating a psychologically safe environment, holding leaders accountable for creating a psychologically safe environment and encouraging team members to speak freely and challenge the status quo.

Creating learning opportunities and providing quality training for leaders in the creation of a psychologically safe environment

The participants all agreed that psychological safety was a top training priority in their organisations, with 70% of participants reporting that they had received some form of training in this regard. In the case of three participants, the training was *'mandatory'*, occurring monthly, and focused on topics such as harassment in the workplace and how to encourage inclusion. However, in most instances, it appeared that the training on psychological safety amounted to a *'tick-box exercise'*. Therefore, the training quality was questioned, especially when delivered via virtual platforms where trainers were not well equipped to engage fully with participants. Meanwhile, 55% of participants felt that more learning opportunities were needed in their organisations to develop skills in creating psychological safety.

Holding leaders accountable for the creation of a psychologically safe environment: Some 70% of participants indicated that organisations should introduce a performance management system with appropriate structures and processes to ensure that leaders are accountable for creating and maintaining a psychologically safe environment. In this context, leaders' accountability relates to what psychological safety measures they put in place and *how* they do this. This involves setting key performance indicators that measure not only what employees are required to deliver but also how leaders manage the delivery of the required outputs to indicate that they *'care about the well-being'* of the employees.

Encouraging employees to speak freely and challenge the status quo: Lastly, participants were of the view that leaders need to create a supportive environment in which employees are free to share innovative ideas without fear of criticism if they make mistakes and to challenge the status quo.

Discussion

Those working in the FMCG sector in South Africa are prone to high stress levels owing to the sector's competitive nature and the stringent health and safety standards to which they need to adhere. Against this backdrop, our study produced some insightful results.

Firstly, leaders in the FMCG sector know the importance of creating a psychologically safe environment to improve organisational performance and reduce stress. Secondly, while some leaders practise behaviours that promote psychological safety, others are less effective in this regard, particularly when managing hybrid work teams. Thirdly, there is a need to build and enhance leaders' competencies in leading diverse teams, coaching and facilitating (which includes communicating effectively) – all of which are important stepping stones towards creating an environment of psychological safety. To this end, organisations must provide sufficient learning opportunities and appropriate training interventions. Fourthly, creating a psychologically safe environment should be a strategic imperative and an organisation-wide endeavour, supported by the necessary performance management and accountability structures. This will go a long way towards formally institutionalising psychological safety.

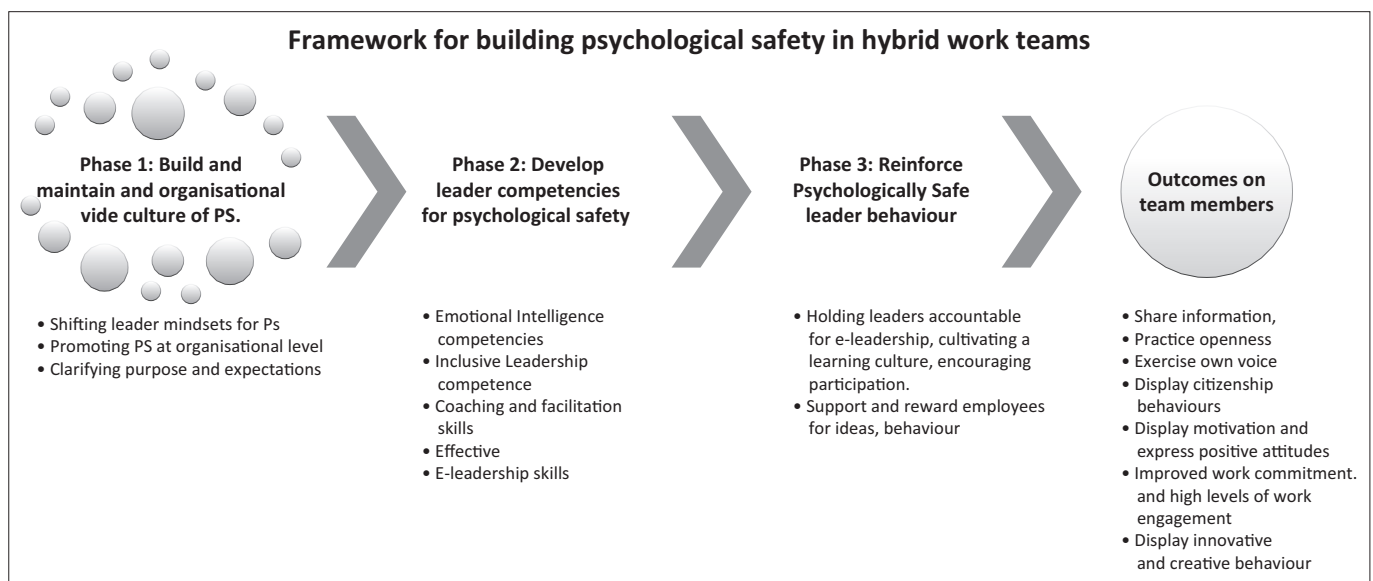
Based on the study's results and expanding on Edmondson's (2018) framework, we propose a framework for building psychological safety competencies for leaders of hybrid teams. Although the study was conducted within the FMCG sector, we believe this framework could be applied to other sectors with similar, high-stress environments. The framework is premised on the following: that organisations should be intentional in fostering a culture of psychological safety to support existing HR development practices; that the creation of psychological safety should be a strategic

imperative driven by top management; that HR practitioners should design capacity-building programmes for leaders to enable them to create a psychologically safe environment for hybrid teams and that leaders should be held accountable for maintaining the psychologically safe environment, through various performance-monitoring mechanisms. The proposed framework has three phases (Figure 3).

Phase 1: Build and maintain an organisation-wide culture of psychological safety

Leading hybrid teams introduces different challenges from those experienced encountered when leading teams in a purely face-to-face context. Our study revealed that there are often inconsistencies between what leaders say and what they do when it comes to psychological safety. This is mainly because of the absence of an organisation-wide commitment to creating an environment of psychological safety to enhance employee well-being and induce stronger organisational performance (Clarke et al., 2024; Edmondson, 2018; Zhao et al., 2020) and innovation (Newman et al., 2017), which are necessary in the fast-paced and fast-changing FMCG sector.

Phase 1 of the framework, therefore, sets the stage – clarifying the reason for and value of psychological safety and ensuring commitment from top management down. Top management needs to relinquish 'old ways' of leading and adopt new leadership approaches that are conducive to hybrid teams. The old command-and-control management approach has proven relatively ineffective, even when applied to traditional teams (Graen et al., 2020). Leadership should not only be directed at extracting strong performance from employees but also reflect caring about employees' well-being (Zhao et al., 2020). The literature tells us that when organisations and leaders care about their people, they feel safe and are more likely to deliver a high level of performance



PS, psychological safety.

FIGURE 3: Framework for building psychological safety in hybrid work teams.

(Zhao et al., 2020). This phase aligns with Edmondson's (2018) initial stage of setting the scene, which primarily focuses on micro-level leadership behaviours. However, our study emphasises the significance of the meso-level environment. Leadership styles such as servant leadership and transformational leadership have demonstrated effectiveness in making employees feel heard, valued and motivated through the humility they exhibit. These styles can play a crucial role in fostering and sustaining an organisation-wide culture of psychological safety (Rabiul et al., 2023).

Phase 2: Develop leader competencies for creating an environment of psychological safety

Our study revealed that, while leaders are broadly aware of what is involved in creating an environment of psychological safety, they still have knowledge and skills gaps, which need to be addressed.

Phase 2 of the framework, therefore, focuses on the competencies that leaders need to develop to create a psychologically safe environment in which hybrid teams feel free to speak up and speak out. We discerned four competency categories. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2001) and self-leadership (Neck et al., 2019) are the first category. The second category is inclusive leadership, which is the ability to lead diverse teams (Randel et al., 2018). The third category is coaching and facilitating skills. The fourth category is e-leadership skills (Van Wart et al., 2017). These four categories are discussed in more detail next.

Emotional intelligence and self-leadership

To provide a psychologically safe environment, leaders need to be aware of themselves and know and understand their team members. This is the essence of emotional intelligence, which implies empathy or social awareness on the one hand and the ability to lead by example on the other hand (Goleman, 2001). Emotional intelligence can be defined as the ability to understand and manage your own emotions and recognise and influence the emotions of others around you (Goleman, 2001). Some scholars refer to these skills as human capital (covering intrapersonal competencies) and social capital (interpersonal competencies) (Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015), which can be developed and enhanced through training and coaching (Carvalho et al., 2022; Ellinger & Ellinger, 2021). Although these skills may be implied in the third phase of Edmondson's (2018) framework – specifically in productive responses – and in certain aspects of the second phase involving situational humility, they are not explicitly outlined. Therefore, our study offers a comprehensive skill set that leaders can acquire to effectively cultivate psychological safety.

Inclusive leadership (the ability to lead diverse teams)

The literature on diversity and inclusion emphasises the need for leaders to understand these concepts from a 'commitment' perspective rather than a 'compliance' perspective (Shore et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the need for

corporate compliance with a range of regulatory requirements, compliance on its own does not imbue in employees a sense of belongingness, which is an important facet of psychological safety (Shore et al., 2018).

Organisations worldwide are becoming more diverse. Although diversity is easier to achieve in an environment that legislates it, like South Africa through the *EE Act* (*EE Act 55, 1998*), it is becoming more complex as it is not confined to demographic issues (such as race, age and gender); it also relates to deeper issues such as values, personality, culture, religion and sexual orientation (Bell et al., 2011; Nkomo et al., 2019).

For psychological safety to be created, leaders must strive for inclusion, meaning employees are treated as 'insiders' to the organisation or team, while their 'uniqueness' is recognised (Clark, 2020; Shore et al., 2011). What generally happens is that employees assimilate the dominant culture in the organisation (Shore et al., 2011, 2018). Inclusion practices, in contrast, encourage diverse contributions to a group, create a feeling of being respected and valued, ensure participation in decision-making on relevant issues and promise equity and justice (Edmondson, 2018; Shore et al., 2018).

In a hybrid work context, inclusion practices ensure that teams working virtually are given as much consideration and attention as those in the office. This requires specific types of leadership skills that result in employees feeling safe, psychologically empowered and mentally agile (Qi et al., 2019; Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2018). Inclusive leadership is a leadership style that fosters fairness and equality among all employees, regardless of their workplace, thereby enhancing psychological safety in diverse work environments (Siyal, 2023). Notably, Edmondson's framework does not specifically identify inclusive leadership as a required skill. However, our findings highlight its significance, aligning with support from other literature.

Coaching and facilitation skills

The results of this study highlighted the need for three critical coaching skills to induce a sense of psychological safety, aligning with Edmondson's (2018) second stage of inviting participation: active listening, feedback and questioning skills, which can be practised in both a face-to-face situation and via virtual platforms (Van Coller-Peter & Manzini, 2020). Extant literature shows that coaching (through skilful questioning) encourages team members to express their views (Edmondson, 2018; Sherf et al., 2021) and challenge the status quo, where necessary (Clark, 2020). Moreover, coaching positively impacts performance (Carvalho et al., 2022; Ellinger & Ellinger, 2021) by promoting employee learning, innovative thinking and commitment, resulting in team members feeling psychologically safe (Edmondson, 2018).

The flip side of this is active listening, where leaders not only hear but also understand what team members are saying,

which requires humility on their (leaders') part, particularly if team members are challenging the status quo and coming up with innovative ideas that may not have been tested before. Humility, a hallmark of servant leadership, can contribute positively to active listening. The literature on managerial coaching asserts that active listening raises the awareness of the person who is being listened to but also encourages reflection on the part of the leader (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2021). The third coaching skill is providing honest feedback, which can be positive (for a job well done) or constructively critical (in the event of wrongdoing).

Effective e-leadership skills

In the case of hybrid teams, where some team members work virtually, e-leadership skills are called for (Roman et al., 2019). Van Wart et al. (2017, p. 83) define e-leadership as:

[T]he effective use and blending of electronic and traditional methods of communication. It implies an awareness of current ICTs, selective adoption of new ICTs for oneself and the organisation, and technical competence in using those ICTs selected. (p. 83)

Important e-leadership skills are: e-communication skills (the ability to communicate clearly using ICTs); e-social skills (the ability to use media, face-to-face interactions and video conferencing to drive inclusion) and e-team-building skills (the ability to inspire, motivate and develop virtual team members as effectively as team members in a face-to-face context) (Van Wart et al., 2017). The various e-competencies contribute to the fostering of e-trustworthiness (Roman et al., 2019; Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). This new skill is essential but often not included in current psychological safety frameworks because they primarily focus on traditional teams. Therefore, it adds valuable insight to our understanding of how to build psychological safety in hybrid teams.

Phase 3: Reinforce psychologically safe behaviour among leaders

Phase 3 of the framework focuses on reinforcing desirable leader behaviours so that the environment of psychological safety can be maintained. Behavioural reinforcement involves establishing performance measures, implementing the necessary structure and systems to hold leaders accountable, and supporting and rewarding positive team performance. This aligns with the psychological safety literature in relation to setting up structures and systems to ensure an effective, safe environment (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). If effectively executed, likely outcomes would include team members' willingness to be open and share information, enhanced motivation and creativity, improved work commitment and a high level of engagement (Edmondson, 2018; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The limitations of this study are threefold. Firstly, the limitations of external validity or transferability are

constrained because of a monomethod and a cross-sectional design with no triangulation. Secondly, the sample size is insufficient to provide robust conclusions. The third limitation is that the study was conducted in the FMCG industry. These three limitations imply that the study results cannot be generalised across different sectors or populations. We, therefore, recommend that future studies should incorporate larger sample sizes and include multiple sectors of the economy to enhance external validity.

Conclusion and implications for business practice

This study demonstrates that hybrid work teams, just like traditional work teams, are most effective if team members feel psychologically safe. Moreover, managers who lead hybrid work teams need to have various competencies, such as the ability to display emotional intelligence, practice self-leadership, lead diverse teams, engage in coaching and use digital technologies and applications to communicate and manage in virtual spaces. While these competencies and associated behaviours can be developed, it requires leaders to 'unlearn' old habits, which often means breaking the traditional power distance with team members, adopting good listening skills and remaining humble and open to frank views and opinions.

The study results have several implications for business practice. Firstly, organisational leaders must prioritise psychological safety as a strategic imperative to promote a culture of psychological safety across the organisation. Secondly, HR development practitioners can use the proposed framework to inform the design of leadership development programmes aimed at building the capacity of managers to build psychological safety among their hybrid work teams. Thirdly, HRs and senior managers should consider integrating psychological safety capabilities into the organisations performance management systems.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature and extends psychological safety theory to managing and leading hybrid work teamwork teams. The results provide valuable insights into leading hybrid work teams, and the proposed three-phase framework for building psychological safety offers a unique perspective and practical guidance for leaders across various commercial sectors to navigate the challenges posed by advancing technologies and changing work environments as well as specific leadership skills needed to build a psychologically safe environment.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

N.N. was responsible for conceptualising the study and its approach. N.N. conducted the initial literature review, collected the data and produced an MBA research thesis. G.M. acted as a supervisor in the production of the initial research report. G.M. also contributed to enhancing the literature review, re-analysing the data and enhancing the results and discussion sections of the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, G.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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