PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

How internal communication can encourage employees to speak up

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Psychological safety describes the perception of being able to engage in risky interpersonal behaviour through communication without fearing negative consequences. When employees feel psychologically safe in their workplace, they share their opinions, articulate criticism, propose creative solutions, and ultimately help their organization to become a better place. A research project at the University of Vienna addresses psychological safety from the perspective of strategic communication. The project's first study examined communication settings in the workplace that make employees feel psychologically safe (or unsafe), and encourage (or hinder) them to voice their concerns. Results emphasize the importance of internal communication to create and maintain communication formats and channels that encourage employees to speak up.

Authors

Jens Hagelstein
Jeannine Huber
Sabine Einwiller
University of Vienna

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety has been a hot topic in organizational psychology and management studies for over 30 years (for an overview see Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). Studies in these fields usually consider the *team* or the *organization* and their attributes as the reason why employees feel psychologically safe or unsafe. This project takes a new perspective on psychological safety: It aims to identify *communication settings* in the workplace that make employees feel safe or unsafe. A communication setting describes a particular constellation of communicators, audiences, topics, tonalities, channels, and organizational structures (Lasswell, 1948). Some communication settings could encourage risk-taking behaviours, while others may hinder them. For example, employees might feel safe to suggest a new approach for solving a problem to a friendly colleague in a private chat – but highly unsafe to critically discuss the top leader's business strategy in a face-to-face meeting with a lot of other team members present.

To uncover the characteristics and patterns of safe and unsafe communication settings, we conducted semi-structured, problem-centered interviews with 56 employees. They work in different functions and roles – from project managers and consultants to salespeople and nurses – in large and medium-sized organizations in Germany and Austria with a minimum of 250 employees. The goal was to achieve as diverse a sample as possible with a broad variety in gender, age, educational level, professional experience, and job location (on site, hybrid,

or remote). In the interviews, we asked them to describe concrete communication settings in which they have felt safe or unsafe to voice their concerns. We then used a set of follow-up questions to explore the settings in more detail, for example, "Which channel did you use to communicate in this setting?" The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed.

CHARACTERISTICS AND PATTERNS OF SAFE AND UNSAFE COMMUNICATION SETTINGS

Study participants mentioned and explained various characteristics of communication settings that increased or decreased their psychological safety. We organized these characteristics according to the typical components of communication settings in an organization: communicators, audiences, topics, tonalities, channels, and the organizational structures in which conversations occur.

Communicators: Several participants mentioned their preference for anonymity when speaking up. Anonymity enables them to more explicitly voice their concerns without the fear of negative consequences. Possessing role-associated expertise also provides communicators with psychological safety. For example, one participant stated: "It is only because I hold the position of the visual merchandiser in the store that I feel more capable of addressing issues in this area." Experience also had a similar impact on the perception of psychological safety. Lastly, employees reported more psychological safety when they can prepare in advance for the communication setting. On the other hand, communication settings were perceived by interviewees as unsafe when they were younger and less experienced. Similarly, a perceived lack of knowledge also hinders the participants from speaking up in their workplace.

Audiences: The interviewees reported feeling safer when communicating to colleagues in the same age group, to colleagues with comparable professional experience, and to colleagues they foster friendships with. One study participant stated: "Generally speaking, we have very collegial, friendly relationships, especially with the people I work with in Hamburg, I don't have to mince my words." Moreover, participants experience more psychological safety when talking to an external coach, an internal counsellor or trusted person, or to members of the works council. Women also reported feeling safer when communicating with other women. By contrast, the interviewees reported feeling less safe to speak up when high-level leaders or a larger team are listening: "The bigger the team gets, the quieter I become," one participant said. Some study participants are also hesitant to articulate critical thoughts to a friend in the organization as they fear it impacting negatively on their relationship. Others reported feeling unsafe to voice their concerns to colleagues on the same hierarchical level: "[...] my colleagues often ask me for my opinion, but I'm not a manager and don't want to give them the impression that they're subordinate to me, which they are not. That's why I sometimes find it difficult to communicate with them."

Topics: The participants generally reported feeling safe to voice their concerns on task- or project-related issues, for example, on the "implementation of the project, the availability of resources, the goals, and the changes that are coming," as one participant stated. Workload and its distribution, on the other hand, were perceived as sensitive topics, as participants fear negative consequences when addressing them. Some employees also feel unsafe discussing responsibilities for mistakes. More generally, several participants reported that they remain silent when they believe their opinion is in the minority.

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Tonalities: Some participants perceived humor as contributing to psychological safety because, as one participant stated, "it could break the ice in a situation." However, others judged the use of humor or irony to be inappropriate, at least when discussing serious issues. Using respectful, less emotional language encourages employees to voice their concerns, whereas technical or expert language decreases psychological safety.

Channels: Communicating via email was perceived to provide psychological safety, presumably because it allows employees to carefully phrase their concerns. But for some participants, face-to-face communication was also perceived as a psychologically safe communication setting. Organization-wide communication platforms like Viva Engage, Teams, and Slack that are open to all employees tend to suppress critical voices. For example, one participant said: "So criticizing individuals or criticizing a team, no, definitely not in this space. It may be a personal attitude, but I believe that it doesn't belong there". Other participants mentioned that not having a dedicated forum to voice concerns or a direct channel to top management reduced psychological safety in workplace communication.

Organizational structures: Regular feedback formats like employee surveys and dialogues with leaders were considered to support psychological safety. Participants also expressed their wish to be actively asked for input by their leaders. One interviewee referred to "golden rules" in their company, which encourages employees to speak up. Moreover, employees mentioned institutionalized diversity management as contributing to psychological safety. They also highlighted the importance of role models, especially on a leadership level. "Perhaps if someone else in management had gone a step further then I would have added my opinion to reinforce that," one participant reflected. On the other hand, the interviewees were critical about separated work and communication flows across organizational units and teams. Ongoing restructuring processes were also reported as decreasing psychological safety. One participant said: "And I think that with the recent wave of layoffs employees don't feel safe speaking up because they could there's always a chance they could be the next to go".

Characteristics of psychologically safe and psychologically unsafe communication settings in the workplace

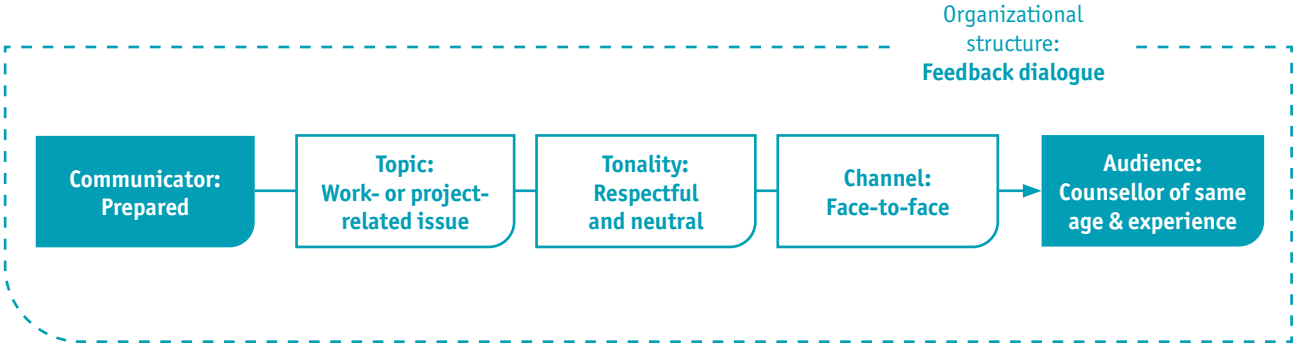
	Safe communication settings	Unsafe communication settings
Communicators	Anonymity Expertise Experience Preparation	Younger age Lack of knowledge Inexperience
Audiences	Colleagues of a similar age Colleagues with similar experience Friendly colleagues External coaches Internal counsellors Members of the works council Female colleagues (for women)	High-level leaders Large teams Friendly colleagues Colleagues on the same hierarchical level
Topics	Task- and project-related issues	Workload Work distribution Responsibility for mistakes Minority opinion
Tonalities	Humour Respectfulness Emotional neutrality	Humour Irony Technical/expert language
Channels	Written communication (e.g., email) Face-to-face	Organization-wide communication platforms (e.g., Viva Engage, Teams, Slack) Lack of forum to voice concerns Lack of direct channel to top management
Organizational structures	Employee surveys Feedback dialogues Role models	Separated work and communication flows Ongoing restructuration processes

Examples of described safe and unsafe communication settings

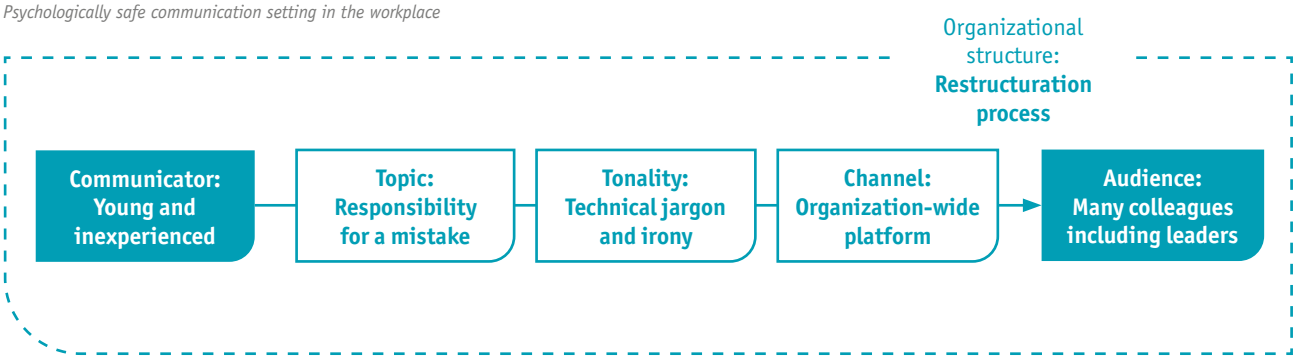
An psychologically safe communication setting is embedded in a structured feedback dialogue. The communication is planned in advance and employees have the chance to prepare for it. They communicate to a trusted person, for example, an internal counsellor who is of comparable age and work experience and, in the case of female employees, also a woman. The communication happens in a face-to-face exchange, addresses task- and project-related issues, and uses a respectful and neutral tonality. In such a setting, employees are likely to speak up and voice their opinions, ideas, and criticism.

An psychologically unsafe communication setting happens during an ongoing restructuration process. Young and less experienced employees find themselves in a conversation with many colleagues, including leaders, on an organization-wide platform. The discussion focusses on the responsibility for a mistake that has currently happened. Technical jargon and irony are used. In a communication setting like this, it is very unlikely that these employees will speak up and voice their concerns.

Current examples of psychologically safe and psychologically unsafe communication settings in the workplace



Psychologically safe communication setting in the workplace



Psychologically unsafe communication setting in the workplace

HOW INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MANAGERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Our findings carry important implications for communication practice. Internal communication professionals can consider various measures to support psychological safety in their organization, enhance employees' willingness to speak up, and, ultimately, contribute to their organization's capability to learn and grow. Obviously, it is impossible for internal communication managers to

control every aspect of psychologically safe communication settings. For example, they cannot influence an employee's individual expertise and experience in a field, or the tonality of a face-to-face dialogue with their supervisor. However, what communication managers can address are the organizational structures that these conversations are embedded in, and the channels that are available to employees. They may, for example, establish regular employee surveys and structured feedback formats with supervisors across all divisions and hierarchy levels. They can also set up internal forums and direct channels to top management, and initiate counsellor programs to enable leaders to act as role models in speaking up (Zerfass & Franke, 2013). Internal communicators could also engage in contributing to their organization's efforts for diversity and inclusion (Wolfgruber & Einwiller, 2023). Finally, they may think about proposing organization-wide "communication rules" that serve as guiding framework for communication processes across all levels and functions.

How internal communication can contribute to psychological safety

- Set up employee surveys to gather anonymous feedback.
- Encourage regular feedback formats between employees and their supervisors.
- Build internal forums for exchange in various constellations.
- Open up direct communication channels to top management.
- Initiate counsellor programs for leaders.
- Establish organization-wide "communication rules".

WRAP-UP AND OUTLOOK

In every organization, different actors and functions are involved in establishing a working climate that encourages employees to speak up and voice their concerns. Supervisors and direct colleagues, but also HR and works councils play important roles here. Our study puts psychological safety on the agenda of internal communication managers. Our analytical approach allowed us to uncover attributes of communication settings that contribute to employees' perception of psychological safety in the workplace. Now it is up to internal communication managers to apply these findings, improve their communication infrastructures, and eventually establish a "spiral of voice" (Madsen & Johansen, 2019) in their organization.

The discussion about psychological safety within the scientific field of strategic communication has just started. In practice, however, internal communication managers are likely already working on measures that contribute to employees' willingness to articulate their concerns. Considering this, the next step of the research project will involve a practice-based approach with interviews with communication managers in organizations about their ongoing activities. What is already being done in communication practice to encourage employees to speak up? Which measures work best and which are likely to fail? And what can others learn from these experiences? Ultimately, establishing psychological safety will become one of internal communication's core fields in driving organizational innovation and securing employees' job satisfaction.

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AUTHORS

Jens Hagelstein is a postdoctoral researcher in the Corporate Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna. Prior to that, he was a research associate at the Chair of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University. Jens Hagelstein's research interests include strategic communication, corporate communications, and organizational communication with a focus on its reception, processing, and effects. ✉ *jens.hagelstein@univie.ac.at*

Jeannine Huber is a predoctoral researcher in the Corporate Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication. Her dissertation deals with the development of psychological safety in the workplace. ✉ *jeannine.huber@univie.ac.at*

Sabine Einwiller is Professor of Public Relations Research at the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna and head of the Corporate Communication Research Group. ✉ *sabine.einwiller@univie.ac.at*

RESEARCH PROJECT

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Nikolaistrasse 27 – 29, 04109 Leipzig, Germany
info@academic-society.net
www.academic-society.net
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