

TEAM PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY – A STABLE OR DYNAMIC PHENOMENON?

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores fluctuations in team psychological safety. Various patterns of how psychological safety can develop in teams are identified. Some team characteristics are associated with an increase in psychological safety, others with a decrease, while experiences involving stress and conflict show paradoxical patterns in psychological safety across teams.

Keywords: Team psychological safety, team dynamics, startup activities, team conditions, work design, work context

1. PURPOSE

Team psychological safety is a phenomenon where team members are “able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career” (Kahn, 1990). Working in a team involves interpersonal risk. Psychological safety is fundamentally about reducing such interpersonal risk (Schein & Bennis, 1965).

Acknowledged as a critical factor for team performance, there is still a need to understand more on the mechanisms underlying psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In their comprehensive meta-analysis, Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, and Vacheva (2017) advice researchers to explore dynamics and events that influence psychological safety fluctuation over time.

Most research on psychological safety is based on cross-sectional survey studies (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). There is need for more use of longitudinal studies to permit a better examination of changes in psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Recent meta-analysis and literature reviews identify only two longitudinal studies (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Schulte, Cohen, and Klein (2012) found an assimilation effect of team members’ perception of psychological safety, through the creation of friendship and advice ties. Liang, Farh, and Farh (2012) reported that perceptions of psychological safety collected just six weeks apart were only moderately correlated. This indicates that the level of psychological safety may fluctuate over time within individuals.

This study aims at contributing theoretically to the field of psychological safety by exploring these dynamics further. Firstly, does team psychological safety fluctuate and how can such fluctuations look like? If this team phenomenon is subject to change, treating it as a stable team trait could lead to misleading conclusions. The goal of this project is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. For practice, it will matter in how to build this safety impacting on several desirable team outcomes (Frazier et al., 2017). For research, it is useful to know more of common patterns of such fluctuations, if any, as the validity of the conclusions drawn from cross-sectional studies will depend on when the cross-sectional picture is taken.

Secondly, the study aims at exploring team characteristics influencing potential fluctuations in team psychological safety, increasing our knowledge on how we can build high performing teams.

2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative material for this case study is in-depth interviews with six board members in a humanitarian student organization, based on their experience from being participants in a fundraiser. They all had leading positions within five different fundraising teams. The teams were working over the same time period, within the same organization, and members were selected based on the same criteria.

In the first part of the interviews, the informants talked about their role in the team, how the team was organized, and the team’s tasks. It moved on to the more subjective experience of being a part of the team.

For the last part, the focus was directed towards psychological safety specifically, firstly introducing what kind of safety we were talking about, followed by open-ended reflections.

This study serves as a pilot for an ongoing study, where newly formed teams are followed over time through a mixed method design, using diaries, observation, and interviews. The main study has a more explicit longitudinal process perspective on how team psychological safety can fluctuate. Hence, the study follows the assumption of psychological safety not necessarily being a stable team property.

2.1 Data Analysis

To move from raw data to interpreting meaning of the data, the study followed the technique recommended by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012). Following their interpretive approach, searching for informants' understanding with the purpose of capturing and modeling their meanings, this serves as a useful method (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

Through the iterative process, looking more closely into the data as to how these characteristics had affected the team psychological safety and consulting theory on antecedents to psychological safety, the analysis came down to 22 empirical themes. These again were categorized into six conceptual categories, and furthermore, three aggregate dimensions (figure 1).

The characteristics presented by the informants and their impact on psychological safety were analyzed, and each team's "developing curve" was drawn. Figure 2 explains the perceived fluctuations in psychological safety in the teams ("building" characteristics above the curve, "hampering" characteristics below the curve). The informants themselves were asked to sketch how they felt the safety fluctuated throughout the weeks, in order to control for the researcher's interpretation. The sketches matched considerably.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Data Structure Diagram

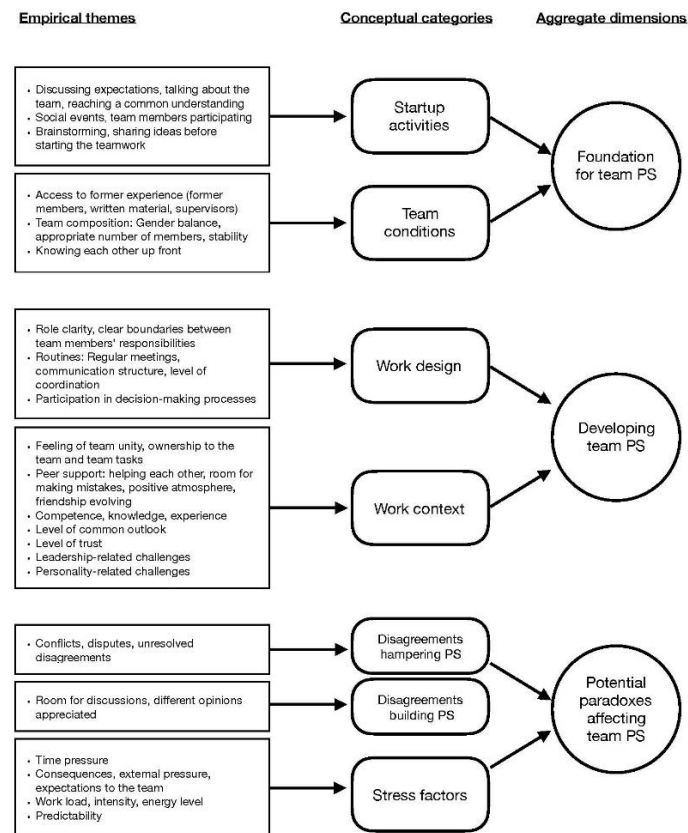


Figure 1: Data structure diagram

3.2 Patterns of Team Psychological Safety

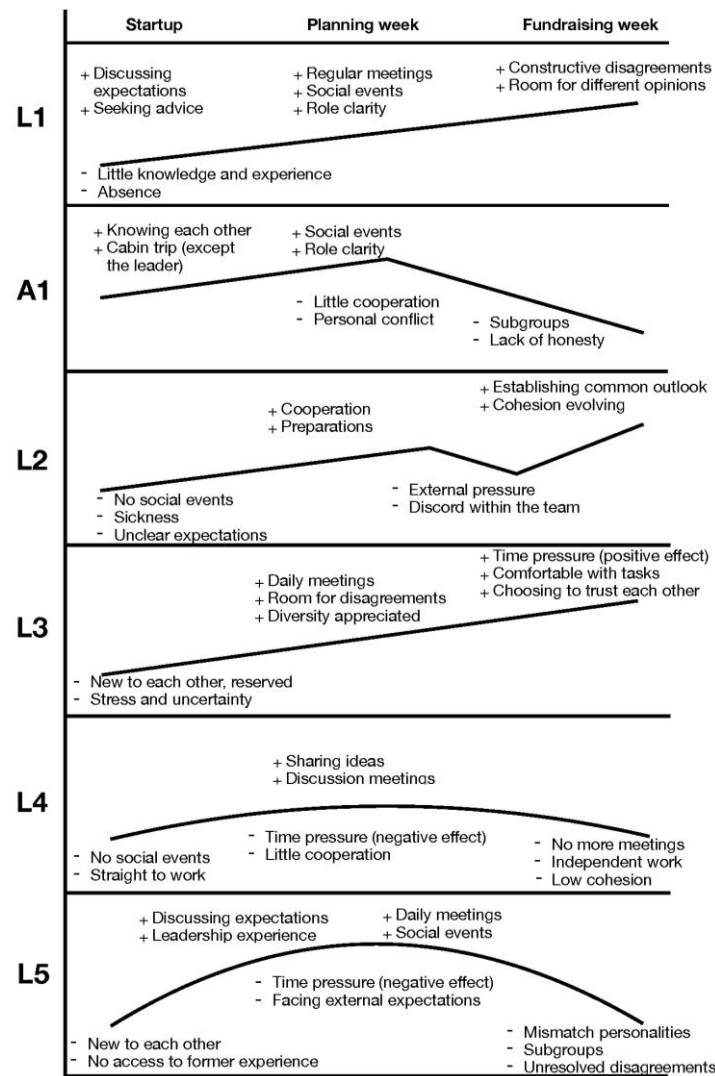


Figure 2: Psychological safety fluctuations (L1 = leader team 1, A1 = assistant leader team 1, L2 = leader team 2, etc. "+" characteristics were positively associated with that team's psychological safety, while "-" characteristics were negatively associated.)

3.3 Discussion

All respondents reported on variation in their team's psychological safety, based on their own perception. L1 and L3 saw a continuous increase in psychological safety through the lifespan of the team. L4 and L5 experienced an increase in the first period, followed by a decrease in the second period, without there being a clear incident causing this shift. A1 had a similar experience of an increase followed by a decrease, which was connected to a conflict in the team. A1 was the assistant leader of L1, who did not see the same conflict as a threat to their team's level of psychological safety. Their experience of the team's psychological safety from that point on, was radically different between the two leaders. Taking the mean average of a psychological safety scale in this team could have overseen this important difference.

L2 reported on a similar peak in psychological safety for their team, followed by a decrease. However, they managed to address this within the team, and through that experienced another strengthening of their psychological safety. This opens for the possibility that not only can a team reach a peak or a bottom in their psychological safety, but experience several shifts, complicating this phenomenon.

Based on the data analysis, a wide range of identified team characteristics were associated with these fluctuations in team psychological safety. Some characteristics can form the *foundation* for psychological safety, others contribute in *developing* psychological safety, while other characteristics are seen as potential *paradoxes* in the way they are associated with psychological safety. There is no clear cut between these aggregate dimensions. However, this categorization can be useful in order to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of this team phenomenon.

Characteristics categorized as either startup activities or team conditions, dimensioned as “foundation for team psychological safety”, were in general positively associated with psychological safety. Teams that prioritized to get to know each other, or already did, and spent time talking about the team before they jumped into their team tasks, either discussing expectations or sharing ideas, all reported on an increase in psychological safety. For the teams that did not prioritize such activities, the building of psychological safety took more time, or was not built at all. Ericksen and Dyer (2004) found that structured and targeted events in the mobilization and launch phase of teams were determinants of team performance. With psychological safety being a determinant of team performance (Frazier et al., 2017), there is a possibility that such safety transfers the effect of the startup activities to team performance. However, such activities’ effect on psychological safety is a topic where more research needs to be done.

Work design and work context were interpreted as categories “developing team psychological safety”. As for the characteristics within the “foundation dimension”, these developing characteristics were positively associated with psychological safety when present, and seemingly less positively, or even negatively, associated when not present. Teams where these characteristics were present reported on higher motivation and commitment to their work. This insight resonates with the findings of Newman et al. (2017) that supportive environments (relationships with colleagues, organizational practices, leadership, etc.) are key antecedents to psychological safety, and furthermore that psychological safety transmits the effect of such supportive environments to desirable team outcomes. As seen in some teams, however, the design and context need to be adjusted to the team maturity and the expectations of the team members. Role clarity, as an example, was positively associated with psychological safety in some teams, in accordance with the findings of Frazier et al. (2017). In those teams, the commitment among the team members were high, and there was room for helping each other even though there were clear boundaries between roles. In other teams, such role clarity was not followed by the same level of cohesion or motivation among the team members. Role clarity was then not necessarily a positive ingredient for developing psychological safety. This exemplifies how complex team dynamics can be and highlights the need to see the whole picture in analyzing the mechanisms.

The discussion on role clarity leads naturally to the potentially paradoxical characteristics, that is, characteristics that did not have an obvious positive or negative association with psychological safety. These were the most surprising findings in the data analysis. The findings discussed so far, are mostly characteristics identified as antecedents to psychological safety in recent meta-studies and literature reviews (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The characteristics found with more of a paradoxical association with psychological safety, such as disagreements, conflicts, stress, and pressure, were not covered in these reviews. Even though they are established terms within organizational research, the literature on their potential effects on psychological safety seems scarce.

The extent to which these characteristics were associated with psychological safety was different between the teams. Some perceived disagreements and conflicts as positive processes, while others did not. Where one team lost some of their motivation and communication structure due to time pressure, another team had the opposite experience. An interpreted difference between these teams lies in how they faced the mismatch between time available and work at hand. One team trusted each other less, while the other chose to trust each other more. A similar experience was present in a third team, where the external pressure at first was perceived to challenge their team processes. When they took the time to discuss this challenge and face the pressure from external stakeholders together as a team, they experienced an increased psychological safety.

Based on this analysis, disagreements and stress are potentially negatively associated with team psychological safety. However, the pressure the team faces can force teams into making more use of the underlying team foundation and the degree of supportive environment that has evolved, thus increasing their level of team psychological safety. In such a case, “what does not kill you makes you stronger.” If the team does not have a robust foundation, either by own prioritization or by unfortunate situations, they do not seem as able to face such challenges.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There are several important findings from analyzing these data. One key finding is the support for the underlying assumption—that team psychological safety can fluctuate, and thus needs to be treated as a potentially changing team phenomenon. Furthermore, one can potentially divide team characteristics into “building psychological safety” and “hampering psychological safety”. However, the non-existence of characteristics that hamper psychological safety seems to function as facilitating psychological safety, and vice versa, which makes this categorizing challenging. Another key finding is the potential paradoxical role some characteristics can play, building safety in some teams and hampering the safety in others. An important takeaway is the understanding of the way these mechanisms work together. One team characteristic can compensate for the lack of something else, and at the end, the sum matters for the level of team psychological safety.

4.1 Limitations and Implications

The present study does have some clear limitations. The data material of the five teams is based on interviews with five team leaders, and one assistant leader. Relying on one method alone is a potential weakness when it comes to understanding team dynamics. Furthermore, the findings rely on the leaders’ perceptions. The weakness of this is clearly exemplified through the team where this view is contrasted by the assistant leader. Another challenge is the information given in retrospect, with the potential sense making bias that offers. Furthermore, the use of student teams can limit the generalizability.

The main study will explore these dynamics in both student teams and in other contexts, such as teams in the public administration of a major Norwegian city and in private industries. Mixed methods will be used, triangulating between diary surveys, interviews and observation—following the teams as they work.

5. KEY REFERENCES

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