



An Analysis of Healthcare Leaders' Experience as They Endeavor to Nurture a Climate of Psychological Safety

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>Psychological safety is essential in healthcare, allowing team members to express ideas, seek help, and acknowledge mistakes without fear of negative consequences. While leaders play a critical role in fostering this environment, there is limited understanding of the specific behaviors they employ. This qualitative study explores how healthcare leaders perceive, implement, and interpret their efforts to cultivate psychological safety within their teams. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, six key themes emerged: (1) leaders are driven by both personal and organizational motivations, (2) building strong relationships is fundamental to psychological safety, (3) democratic leadership practices encourage open communication, (4) leaders reinforce safety through their responses to critical incidents, (5) organizational barriers create challenges, and (6) leadership efforts lead to observable behavioral changes in teams. These findings highlight that cultivating psychological safety is a dynamic and ongoing process, requiring adaptive leadership strategies rather than rigid, prescriptive approaches. Despite challenges such as inconsistent organizational support and policy enforcement, leaders emphasize the importance of empathy, collaboration, and proactive engagement. This study contributes to leadership literature by offering insights into the interplay between individual leadership behaviors and systemic factors in promoting psychological safety. It provides practical recommendations for healthcare leaders, advocating for a shift toward relationship-based, flexible leadership practices to enhance team dynamics and patient care. Future research should explore how leadership strategies can continue to evolve in high-stakes healthcare environments.</i>
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Introduction

The study provides practical strategies for fostering psychological safety within teams, offering valuable insights for leaders and team members alike. A central finding highlights the importance of consistently reinforcing practices that promote psychological safety, ensuring that a supportive and secure environment is maintained over time. Additionally, the study shares real-world examples of effective behaviors demonstrated by leaders, which serve as actionable tools for building trust and openness. These examples not only provide concrete methods for nurturing psychological safety within existing teams but also offer guidance for leaders transitioning to new teams, helping them carry these principles forward.

The study highlights several promising directions for future research, offering a roadmap for deeper exploration. One key area involves examining the role of positive personal relationships as a foundation for psychological safety. By investigating how these relationships develop and influence workplace dynamics, researchers can better understand their impact on creating a safe and supportive environment.

Another important avenue is exploring how organizational context shapes psychological safety. This could involve studying specific settings, such as healthcare environments, where caregiver-patient interactions play a critical role, or comparing practices across different industries to identify strategies that are universally effective versus those that are context-dependent.

The study also suggests the value of longitudinal research to assess how leader-team relationships evolve over time and how leadership practices contribute to sustained psychological safety. Finally, delving into leadership qualities like emotional intelligence and resilience could provide insights into targeted training programs designed to strengthen psychological safety within teams. These areas collectively offer rich opportunities to advance our understanding of this critical aspect of workplace culture.

The study makes a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge on leadership and psychological safety, particularly within healthcare settings. It offers researchers a solid foundation for further exploration while equipping organizations with actionable insights and practical tools to support their leaders in fostering a psychologically safe environment. By prioritizing the development of such a climate, healthcare leaders can nurture stronger teamwork, improve communication, and ultimately remove obstacles that hinder the safe and effective delivery of care. This, in turn, can lead to better outcomes for both teams and patients alike.

Significance of the Study

While the importance of leaders in fostering psychological safety within organizations has been widely acknowledged, much of the research has focused on the perspectives of team members, leaving several key aspects underexplored. For instance, there is limited understanding of how leaders themselves experience the process of building a psychologically safe environment. Similarly, little is known about the specific actions leaders take and how they interpret the impact of these actions on creating such a climate. Moreover, although research provides straightforward, actionable steps for promoting psychological safety, the inconsistent implementation of these practices particularly in high-pressure settings suggests that deeper, more intricate challenges are involved.

This gap highlights the need for further investigation into the complexities that hinder the widespread adoption of these strategies. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to illuminate the

critical role leaders play in nurturing psychological safety, ultimately contributing to a safer and more effective healthcare system.

Research Objectives

The goal of this foundational qualitative study was to examine the specific behaviors healthcare leaders described using and to understand how they interpreted their efforts to foster psychological safety in the workplace. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, the core aim of basic qualitative research is to uncover how individuals interpret and give meaning to their lives and experiences. This study sought to explore how leaders navigate and make sense of their roles in creating a psychologically safe environment through the process of sense making. According to Weick (1995), sense making involves interpreting and giving meaning to unclear or complex situations, events, and experiences, which is central to understanding how leaders perceive and approach their responsibilities in this context.

This study had a primary question and two sub questions:

Research Questions

1. How do healthcare leaders make sense of their experience as they endeavor to cultivate a climate of psychological safety?

Sub Question 1: What are the specific behaviors leaders report when cultivating psychological safety in the workplace?

Sub Question 2: How do leaders interpret and make sense of the influence these behaviors have in cultivating psychological safety?

Literature Review

“Literature review is a written overview of major writings and other sources on a selected topic. Sources covered in the review may include scholarly journal articles, books, and websites. The purpose of literature review is to gain an understanding of the existing research and debates relevant to a particular research topic” (Ahmad, Farhat & Abbas, 2024, p. 302). Following is the literature review of the present research study.

Research has highlighted various leadership approaches that play a role in fostering a psychologically safe environment (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Edmondson, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Maximo, Stander & Coxen, 2019; Javed et al., 2019; Yukl & Gardner, 2020; Akram et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2024; Arshad et al., 2025). However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to the specific actions’ leaders take to cultivate psychological safety and how they interpret their experiences in doing so. This study aimed to fill that gap by directly asking leaders to describe the behaviors they use and how they make sense of their efforts to build psychological safety.

The findings reveal that creating psychological safety is a nuanced and multifaceted process, requiring a range of strategies tailored to different situations. Leaders emphasized that this process is not quick or straightforward it demands sustained effort and adaptability over time. These insights challenge the common assumption in existing literature that psychological safety can be achieved through simple, one-size-fits-all solutions (Naz & Zafar, 2023; Fatima et al., 2024; Mohiman et al., 2024; Shafqat et al., 2024). By shedding light on the complexities involved, the

study makes a valuable contribution to leadership theory, practical applications, and future research in this area.

This research enhances theoretical understanding by emphasizing the importance of incorporating leadership perspectives into the study of psychological safety. It also identifies the development of positive personal relationships as a key factor in fostering a psychologically safe environment. This is demonstrated through leaders' examples of how they engaged with individuals and teams, the strategies and behaviors they used to build connections, and their perceptions of the resulting impact. Furthermore, the findings suggest integrating psychological safety into broader discussions on organizational climate and social dynamics, highlighting how leader-team interactions shape both the immediate work environment and, over time, the overall organizational culture.

Research Methodology

"The research methodology is the procedure which is used by the researchers to gather data for resolving problems of investigation" (Ahmad et al., 2022, p.524). Research methodology is the part of the research study in which researchers give an account of the research methods, which they have used to conduct their research (Ahmad et al, 2021; Iqbal, Riaz & Rashid, 2023; Zafar et al., 2023; Kosar, M., Riaz & Arshad, 2024 Murtaza et al., 2025). This basic qualitative study explored healthcare leaders making sense of their experience as they endeavored to cultivate a climate of psychological safety.

The study was designed to answer the primary research question: How do healthcare leaders make sense of their experience as they endeavor to cultivate a climate of psychological safety?

They are questions:

1. How do healthcare leaders make sense of their experience as they endeavor to cultivate a climate of psychological safety?

A qualitative methodology was used for the study, employing a basic interpretive approach. This approach involved conducting in-depth interviews to explore the subjective meanings and perspectives of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rao et al., 2023; Riaz, Shahzad & Kubra, 2024; Soomro et al., 2025). Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on understanding and exploring the complexities of human behavior, experiences, and phenomena (Creswell, 2014; Riaz, Bhatti & Awan 2018; Mumtaz et al., 2024).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

This study utilized a purposeful sampling approach to carefully select participants. A snowball sampling method was employed, as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), to recruit individuals for the research. The participants consisted of leaders holding director-level positions or higher. This deliberate selection was crucial, as managers often concentrate on operational challenges and problem-solving, whereas leaders are instrumental in driving innovation and shaping strategic direction. To ensure relevance, participants were chosen based on specific criteria that aligned with the study's objectives.

To be eligible for this study, participants needed to have a clear recollection of actively fostering or establishing a psychologically safe environment while leading a team of at least three members.

They were also required to remember specific actions and behaviors they intentionally used to promote psychological safety within their teams. The minimum team size was determined based on the definition provided by Levi and Askay (2021), which describes a team as a group of three to twelve individuals with distinct roles yet comparable skill sets, working within an organizational framework.

Data Collection

For this study, data was gathered through two individual interviews with each participant, conducted via Zoom. A semi-structured format was used to provide flexibility and allow for follow-up questions, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection for several reasons. First, they offer valuable insights when direct observation of participants' experiences is not possible (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Anjum & Zafar, 2022; Naz et al., 2024). Second, since the study explored past events and participants' recollections, interviews provided a suitable means to capture these reflections.

The interviews took place over a span of nine weeks, with each session initially scheduled for 90 minutes to allow for in-depth discussions. However, the actual duration varied, ranging from 38 to 74 minutes. The first interview was designed to establish rapport with participants, creating a comfortable environment for meaningful conversations.

Data Management and Analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, allowing for a more focused approach, reducing redundancy, and enabling the identification of key themes and categories as new data emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sadaf et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2025).

The analysis process followed established guidelines from Creswell (2014), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Saldana (2009). This involved several key steps: organizing the data, thoroughly reviewing interview transcripts and notes to develop an initial understanding, conducting first-cycle coding to capture core ideas and begin categorization, engaging in second-cycle coding to explore relationships and patterns between codes, and finally, synthesizing and interpreting the findings.

Transcripts generated using Fathom were carefully reviewed for accuracy, with all personally identifiable information removed such as replacing participant names with assigned participant numbers. To deepen familiarity with the data, each transcript was read multiple times. The transcripts were then uploaded into Atlasti software for systematic coding and analysis. Throughout the process, ongoing memo writing within the software allowed for the documentation of emerging insights and questions as the researcher engaged with the data.

Findings

This report of the findings is organized into sections. The chapter presents the major themes that emerged from the data analysis, supported by direct participant quotes. A synthesis of these themes is provided, offering insights into the broader implications of the findings. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study's key discoveries, setting the stage for further discussion and recommendations.

Description of the Participants

The participants included 02 healthcare leaders at the director level and above who worked in both public and private healthcare delivery systems. The section begins with a table outlining the general demographics of the participants. This section goes on to provide individual profiles of each participant.

Participant Demographics

Table presents a general profile of the participant's demographics, including their highest levels of education, current leadership level, years in their current role, and years in formal leadership roles.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant number	Highest level of education	Current leadership level	Years in current role	Years in formal leadership roles
1	M.S.N.	Vice president	5	25
2	Ed.D.	Chief operating officer	3	32

Participant Profiles

Although participants shared common experiences, each brought a unique background and perspective to the study. To highlight this diversity, individual profiles were developed. These profiles provide insights into each participant's background, their personal definition of psychological safety, its significance to them, the key behaviors they used to foster it, and the influences that shaped their focus on the concept.

The profiles incorporate participants' own words to authentically represent their perspectives, as suggested by Seidman (2019). Quotes are presented as spoken, with only minor edits to remove identifying details and filler words such as "um," "like," and repetitive phrases to improve clarity and readability.

Participant 1

Background. The first participant started their professional journey in nursing, specializing in emergency medicine. They earned both a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science in Nursing. As their career progressed, they took on leadership roles with increasing responsibility within the healthcare system, eventually attaining the position of vice president at a regional hospital.

Definition of Psychological Safety. The first participant described psychological safety as a supportive and nonpunitive environment where hospital staff feel confident responding to situations and voicing their concerns without fear of negative consequences. They highlighted the importance of fostering open communication, ensuring that employees feel secure in speaking up. As they explained, *"We want staff members to speak up... We don't want them to feel like they'll get in trouble for doing so because that's how we learn to improve safety."* The participant stressed that creating a culture of open dialogue and idea-sharing is essential for continuous learning and maintaining patient safety.

Why Psychological Safety Is Important. Participant 1 shared that they often struggled to fully grasp what others were saying during discussions, which made them hesitant to contribute their own thoughts. They frequently felt intimidated, worrying that their input might not align with the conversation or could be seen as irrelevant. This fear was compounded by a physical challenge, which added to their anxiety about speaking up. “I’m always afraid,” they explained, “that I might repeat something already said or say something completely off-topic.” This constant apprehension highlighted their need for a supportive environment where they felt safe to express themselves without judgment. Through these experiences, Participant 1 gained a deep understanding of the importance of psychological safety and how crucial it is for encouraging open participation from everyone.

Key Behaviors in Cultivating Psychological Safety. Participant 1 shared several strategies they used to foster psychological safety within their team. These included recognizing and appreciating team members who voiced their opinions, promoting a culture of kindness, involving the leadership team in decision-making processes, creating an environment where it was safe to make mistakes, and incorporating discussions about psychological safety into new employee orientation programs.

A significant influence on Participant 1’s focus on psychological safety was their background in aviation. They were deeply shaped by the industry’s adoption of CRM (cockpit or crew resource management), a system developed in response to tragic air accidents. As a flight nurse on a helicopter team, Participant 1 experienced firsthand the critical importance of speaking up about safety concerns. They explained, “There were three of us on the helicopter. If a flight request came in, all three of us had to agree it was safe to proceed. If even one person felt uneasy, we didn’t take off. Safety always came first. We each had to feel comfortable saying, ‘I have a gut feeling we shouldn’t fly.’” This aviation mindset, where open communication and safety were paramount, strongly influenced Participant 1’s commitment to building psychological safety in their workplace.

Participant 2

Participant 2 began their career as an X-ray technician and held certifications in radiography and quality management. Early on, they moved into leadership roles, steadily taking on more responsibilities over time. While balancing work and family life, they pursued higher education, earning both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. Their dedication to learning continued, culminating in a doctorate in education. Currently, they serve as a vice president of operations within a hospital system.

Definition of Psychological Safety. Participant 2 described psychological safety as an environment similar to an open brainstorming session, where all ideas are accepted without fear of criticism or judgment. They explained it as ensuring that individuals feel comfortable speaking up, expressing their thoughts, and contributing without worrying about negative consequences. They also highlighted the value of listening to those who are directly engaged in tasks or processes, as their firsthand experience provides the most valuable insights.

Why Psychological Safety Is Important. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of psychological safety in healthcare, noting that it plays a crucial role in fostering innovation and maintaining a safe environment for patients. They stressed that achieving zero patient harm requires creating a culture where employees feel comfortable voicing even minor concerns. Actively listening and addressing these issues is essential to building trust. They also highlighted

the need to follow through on feedback, ensuring that employees feel heard and remain encouraged to speak up about potential risks or improvements.

Key Behaviors in Cultivating Psychological Safety. Participant 2 described multiple behaviors, including: 1. Trusting, empowering, and giving autonomy to team members. 2. Listening and then validating the experiences of the people who are sharing. 3. Ensuring there is no blame assigned. 4. Acknowledging and celebrating when team members take a personal risk, ask questions, challenge decisions, and ask for help. 5. Encouraging open dialogue: “By telling (team members) that in most cases they know more about the situation in their department than I do.”

Key Influencers for Focusing on Psychological Safety. Past experiences influenced Participant 2’s focus on creating a climate of psychological safety, namely, a former boss who empowered and trusted Participant 2. He sought out Participant 2’s input on decisions:

“He did little things that made me, and I am sure others, feel like we were part of the team, that our contributions mattered. He was inclusive. I remember some of the things he did, but mostly I remember how I felt as part of his team”.

Participants’ Perspectives on Psychological Safety: Participants described psychological safety as a broad concept that includes a supportive and nonpunitive environment, open communication, mutual respect, confidentiality, inclusivity, and emotional well-being. These factors work together to create a workplace where individuals feel secure in sharing their thoughts and ideas. While most participants felt their overall understanding of psychological safety had remained consistent, they acknowledged that their awareness and approach had evolved in different situations. This section explores their perspectives and how their views have developed over time.

Theme 2: Leaders Recognize the Importance of Building Positive Relationships as an Antecedent to Psychological Safety.

Participants recognized that building strong relationships with their team members is essential for fostering psychological safety. When trust is established, individuals feel more comfortable sharing ideas and concerns without fear of negative repercussions. To create this supportive environment, participants focused on four key actions: (a) fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and appreciation; (b) building meaningful connections with team members; (c) supporting team growth and development; and (d) maintaining open, honest, and transparent communication.

Creating an Environment of Value, Inclusion, and Respect Participants emphasized that fostering a sense of value, inclusion, and respect among team members is crucial for building strong relationships, which they viewed as the foundation of psychological safety.

In some organizations, this focus was ingrained from the start, reinforcing a workplace culture where employees feel confident sharing their thoughts and concerns without fear of negative consequences. To reinforce this commitment, the importance of psychological safety was highlighted during new hire orientation, ensuring that all employees understood its role in the organization’s culture.

Participant 1 Participants explained how their organization establishes a foundation for psychological safety from the very beginning. New employees go through a multi-day orientation program that includes training on Team STEPPS, a framework designed to improve teamwork,

communication, and patient safety. The program emphasizes key principles such as mutual support, effective communication, and the importance of speaking up. The goal is to create an environment where employees feel secure; knowing they can share concerns and collaborate without fear of punishment or negative consequences.

Participant 2 Participants shared how their organization emphasizes the value of every employee's contribution, comparing psychological safety to the harmony of an orchestra where each member plays a vital role. During orientation, new hires are reminded that regardless of their background or position, their work is essential to the organization's success. Whether it's a nurse practitioner with an advanced degree or a team member in environmental services ensuring cleanliness, every role is interconnected. Without each contribution, the system would struggle to function effectively. By recognizing and appreciating employees' efforts, the organization fosters a sense of pride and commitment, reinforcing the idea that everyone plays a crucial part in the bigger picture.

Interpretations, Conclusions and Recommendations

The literature on psychological safety often presents it as a straightforward concept that can be achieved through a set of prescribed steps. However, as illustrated by the interactive, psychological safety is a much more complex construct. The interpretations of the findings of this study led to four key conclusions.

- Cultivating psychological safety is complex and ongoing, requiring time consuming and sustained focus.
- Participative leadership theory is an appropriate lens through which to study the behaviors a leader employs when cultivating psychological safety.
- Social interactions between leaders and their teams shape psychological safety and the team environment.
- Leaders cultivate psychological safety by adapting and refining their strategies and tactics over time.

Conclusion Synthesis

The literature on psychological safety portrays it as a straightforward construct. While psychological safety is often presented in the literature as a simple concept, the findings of this study reveal that it is a dynamic and ongoing process that requires continuous effort from leaders. Rather than a one-time initiative, it develops through strong interpersonal relationships and consistent engagement. Leaders in the study highlighted the importance of fostering open communication and building meaningful connections with their teams. Their experiences suggest that psychological safety is not static it evolves through regular, intentional interactions. Maintaining a safe and inclusive environment requires leaders to actively reinforce these behaviors over time, adapting to the needs of their teams.

The study reveals that while psychological safety generally develops over time, certain high-pressure environments such as healthcare demand its immediate establishment. In critical situations like operating rooms, leaders can quickly foster psychological safety by actively seeking input and encouraging collaborative decision-making. However, this form of psychological safety is delicate and requires continuous reinforcement to ensure it remains intact.

Additionally, the study supports participative leadership theory as a valuable framework for understanding how leaders cultivate psychological safety. It highlights that leaders who engage in democratic practices such as involving team members in decision-making, fostering openness, and creating an environment where taking risks is encouraged help reinforce psychological safety. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that strong personal relationships serve as a key foundation for psychological safety, a perspective that has been incorporated into an updated conceptual framework.

The findings highlight that trust, openness, and respect are fundamental elements for creating a psychologically safe workplace. When leaders consistently prioritize and reinforce these values, team members feel secure enough to take interpersonal risks, which encourages open communication, collaboration, and a culture of learning.

Additionally, the study reveals that building psychological safety is an ongoing process that requires leaders to develop and refine their strategies over time. Leaders must remain adaptable, tailoring their approaches to address the unique and evolving needs of their teams. This ability to adjust and grow is crucial for fostering psychological safety in varied and dynamic organizational settings. Ultimately, the flexibility and commitment to continuous improvement demonstrated by leaders are essential for establishing and maintaining environments where individuals feel safe, valued, and empowered.

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