

Psychological Safety among New Employees: Emotional Adjustment in Competitive Workplaces

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Abstract:

Psychological safety has become increasingly critical in competitive workplaces where new employees face intense evaluation and adaptation demands. This study explores how new employees experience and construct psychological safety during early entry into the organization. This qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The study analyzed data through condensation, data display, and verification. The findings indicate that performance pressure can undermine psychological safety when framed primarily through evaluation, whereas relational trust, inclusive dialogue, and developmental feedback foster voice and belonging. New employees actively negotiate legitimacy before engaging openly in workplace interactions. The study contributes by positioning psychological safety as a dynamic process embedded in organizational socialization rather than a static team climate. Organizations should align performance systems with supportive relational practices to sustain employee well-being and performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological safety has become a crucial issue in contemporary workplaces characterized by intense competition, rapid innovation, and performance-based evaluation systems. In highly competitive environments, employees are expected to adapt quickly, voice ideas, and demonstrate high productivity from the outset (Chaika, 2025; Ghashghaeizadeh, 2020; Sousa et al., 2023). This study matters because the workplace is a central arena where adults spend much of their time, and its climate significantly affects mental health, organizational sustainability, and social well-being. When individuals feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage, collaborate, and contribute creatively. Conversely, environments that suppress voice and risk-taking can foster anxiety, silence, and disengagement (Akdeniz et al., 2022; Schug et al., 2021).



Therefore, understanding psychological safety, particularly among new employees in transitional and vulnerable positions, is essential to promoting healthier organizational cultures and preventing long-term psychological strain in the workforce.

A common problem in competitive workplaces is the heightened pressure new employees face when entering an organization. Newcomers often face unclear expectations, implicit performance standards, and social comparison with more experienced colleagues (Fawaid et al., 2025; Nabaho et al., 2022). In many organizations, probation periods and key performance indicators intensify feelings of evaluation and uncertainty. As a result, new employees may hesitate to ask questions, admit mistakes, or propose ideas due to fear of negative judgment. Field observations and organizational reports frequently indicate increased stress levels, early turnover intentions, and emotional withdrawal among new hires in competitive sectors such as finance, technology, and consulting (Jali et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2025; Zamroni et al., 2025). These phenomena suggest that the absence of psychological safety can undermine adaptation processes, reduce learning opportunities, and limit innovation.

Previous studies have extensively examined psychological safety in organizational contexts. For instance, Lateef (2020) and D'Silva et al. (2024) conceptualized psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, emphasizing its role in learning behavior. Similarly, Buonomo et al. (2021), Ding et al. (2024), and Jamilah et al. (2025) linked psychological safety to personal engagement at work. Herlina et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of supportive cultures in facilitating open communication, while Gu et al. (2022) and Iqbal et al. (2020) discussed how prosocial motivation interacts with safe climates to enhance performance. However, much of this research focuses on established teams or long-tenured employees. Limited attention has been given to how new employees subjectively experience psychological safety when entering highly competitive workplaces, revealing a significant research gap that warrants focused investigation.

This study's novelty lies in its emphasis on the lived experiences of new employees navigating competitive environments, rather than examining psychological safety solely as a team-level construct or an outcome of managerial intervention. While prior research often employs cross-sectional surveys to measure perceived safety, fewer studies explore the nuanced, dynamic processes through which newcomers interpret organizational cues, power hierarchies, and performance expectations (Ekblad, 2020; Usman et al., 2021). By foregrounding individual narratives and early employment phases, this study advances the state of the art by integrating organizational socialization perspectives with psychological safety theory. Addressing this issue is important because early work experiences can shape long-term career trajectories, professional identity formation, and patterns of voice behavior (Lodi et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2022). Understanding these processes provides deeper insight into how competitive climates can either cultivate resilience and growth or reinforce silence and self-protection.

Based on the background above, this study's central research problem is how new employees in competitive workplaces experience, construct, and negotiate psychological safety. Specifically, the study explores which organizational factors,

interpersonal dynamics, and internal psychological processes shape newcomers' sense of safety or unsafety. It also examines how these experiences affect their willingness to speak up, seek feedback, admit errors, and engage in collaborative learning. By focusing on subjective meanings rather than solely measurable outcomes, the research problem extends beyond identifying whether psychological safety exists, toward understanding how it emerges and fluctuates during the early stages of employment. This problem matters because it addresses the intersection of organizational structure and individual vulnerability during transitional career phases.

This study argues that psychological safety for new employees in competitive workplaces is not merely determined by formal policies or leadership rhetoric, but is co-constructed through daily interactions, implicit norms, and power relations. The provisional assumption guiding this research is that newcomers interpret competitive pressure differently: some may see it as a motivating challenge when paired with supportive feedback, while others may experience it as threatening without relational trust. This contribution is original in situating psychological safety within the tension between competition and belonging during organizational entry. By illuminating these dynamics, the study contributes theoretically to psychological safety literature and practically to organizational strategies aimed at fostering inclusive, high-performing, and mentally healthy work environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how new employees experience and construct psychological safety within competitive workplaces (Kohn et al., 2024). A case study approach was selected because the research focuses on a contemporary organizational phenomenon within its real-life context, where perceptions of psychological safety are closely connected to interpersonal interactions, performance expectations, organizational practices, and workplace conditions. Rather than treating psychological safety as an isolated variable, the study examined how employees interpret situations involving speaking up, receiving feedback, making mistakes, interacting with supervisors, and adapting to competitive organizational environments. The case study design enabled an in-depth examination of these experiences across multiple sources of evidence, allowing the researcher to develop a contextualized understanding of psychological safety during early organizational entry.

The research spanned three competitive sectors: finance, technology startups, and management consulting firms in major urban business districts. These organizational settings constituted the bounded context of the case because they share performance-driven cultures, strict evaluation systems, and fast-paced working environments that place substantial adaptation demands on new employees. Fifteen informants participated in the study. All informants had less than two years of work experience in their current organizations and had completed at least three months of probation. Their backgrounds varied in gender, educational qualifications (including bachelor's and master's degrees), and job roles such as analysts, junior consultants, and project associates. This variation provided multiple perspectives for examining

psychological safety across competitive workplace contexts while maintaining the common condition of early organizational entry.

We collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis (Kekeya, 2023). Interviews served as the primary evidence source and explored participants' experiences of speaking up, receiving feedback, handling mistakes, interacting with supervisors, and communicating with peers. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The study conducted non-participant observations in selected workplace settings, including meetings and collaborative sessions, to examine interaction patterns and communication climates around new employees. The study also analyzed organizational documents such as onboarding guidelines, performance evaluation frameworks, and internal communication policies. These documents provided contextual evidence concerning formal organizational expectations and practices. Combining interviews, observations, and documents enabled triangulation across different sources of evidence within the case.

Data analysis followed an interactive process of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification (Cole, 2024). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to identify statements relevant to psychological safety and early organizational adaptation. The data were then coded and categorized according to recurring patterns, including fear of negative evaluation, supportive leadership, peer comparison, responses to mistakes, and adaptive strategies. The researcher used thematic matrices and narrative summaries to compare patterns across informants and organizational contexts. The researcher subsequently developed interpretive themes by examining relationships among categories and revisiting the original evidence. The researcher continuously verified conclusions by comparing emerging interpretations with interview accounts, observational records, and organizational documents. This iterative process ensured the findings remained grounded in empirical evidence while accounting for the case's contextual characteristics.

The study's trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail (Lee et al., 2024). Triangulation involved comparing evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and organizational documents to examine the consistency of emerging interpretations. The team shared preliminary findings with selected informants through member checking to assess whether the interpretations adequately represented their experiences. The team conducted peer debriefing with fellow researchers to critically examine coding decisions, emerging themes, and potential researcher bias. An audit trail documented research decisions, coding procedures, analytical changes, and interpretive reflections throughout the study. Thick contextual description also clarified the organizational conditions surrounding the findings and supported assessment of their transferability to comparable competitive workplace settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the key findings derived from in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results highlight how new employees experience, interpret, and negotiate psychological safety within competitive workplace environments. Three major themes emerged, reflecting the interplay among performance pressure, relational trust, and belonging dynamics during early organizational entry and adaptation.

Performance Pressure Undermines Psychological Safety

Performance pressure in this study refers to the condition in which new employees experience continuous demands to demonstrate competence through targets, evaluation, comparison, and task completion during their early organizational entry. In the field, this pressure emerged in employees' responses to probation requirements, performance monitoring, feedback, meeting participation, and mistakes. Psychological safety became visible through employees' willingness or reluctance to ask questions, express opinions, acknowledge difficulties, and respond to feedback. Thus, performance pressure was operationally understood through everyday interactions between performance expectations and employees' perceived freedom to communicate openly.

Several informants described performance evaluation as a source of hesitation in workplace communication. Informant 1 stated, "During probation, I felt that every task was being watched, so I was afraid to ask questions that might make me look incapable." Similarly, Informant 4 explained, "I usually prepared what I wanted to say in meetings, but sometimes I decided not to speak because senior employees seemed more confident." These statements indicate that continuous evaluation shaped employees' perceptions of interpersonal risk. New employees did not necessarily lack ideas or questions; rather, concerns about competence and judgment encouraged them to remain silent in situations where they might otherwise participate.

A similar pattern appeared in participants' accounts of mistakes and feedback. Informant 7 explained, "When I made a small mistake, I immediately worried that my supervisor would think I was not good enough for the job." Informant 11 described a different experience, stating, "The pressure was still there, but my supervisor explained what I needed to improve and made it clear that mistakes were part of learning." These accounts show that employees did not experience performance pressure uniformly. Pressure became threatening when employees associated feedback with deficiency, comparison, or possible rejection. Conversely, employees interpreted pressure more positively when supervisors linked expectations to guidance, clarification, and opportunities for improvement.

Observations of meetings and collaborative work showed that new employees were more likely to remain silent when senior employees dominated discussions or when performance-related issues were emphasized. Several newcomers appeared to listen carefully, review their notes, or wait before responding rather than contributing ideas immediately. In contrast, employees became more communicative when

supervisors invited questions, clarified expectations, or responded to mistakes without visible criticism. The observed pattern restates the interview findings: performance pressure influenced psychological safety through everyday communication. The pattern indicates that psychological safety decreased when evaluation was accompanied by scrutiny, comparison, and limited relational support, while developmental guidance reduced defensive communication.

Relational Trust Facilitates Adaptive Voice

Relational trust emerged as a central mechanism enabling newcomers to adapt and express themselves more confidently. Participants emphasized that supportive supervisors and approachable peers significantly reduced their fear of making mistakes. When leaders openly acknowledged their own learning processes or invited questions, newcomers felt legitimized in expressing uncertainty. Trust was built through consistent, respectful interactions rather than formal onboarding sessions alone. Informants described small gestures such as constructive feedback delivered privately or encouragement after presentations as powerful signals of safety. These relational cues shaped how employees interpreted the broader competitive climate.

Moreover, peer relationships played a crucial buffering role. Several participants reported forming informal alliances with fellow newcomers, creating micro-communities of mutual support. Within these smaller circles, they felt safe sharing concerns and clarifying expectations before engaging in larger team discussions. This peer-based trust gradually strengthened their confidence to contribute more openly in formal settings. Over time, positive relational experiences reduced anticipatory anxiety. As trust accumulated, voice behavior increased, indicating that psychological safety is socially constructed through repeated affirming interactions.

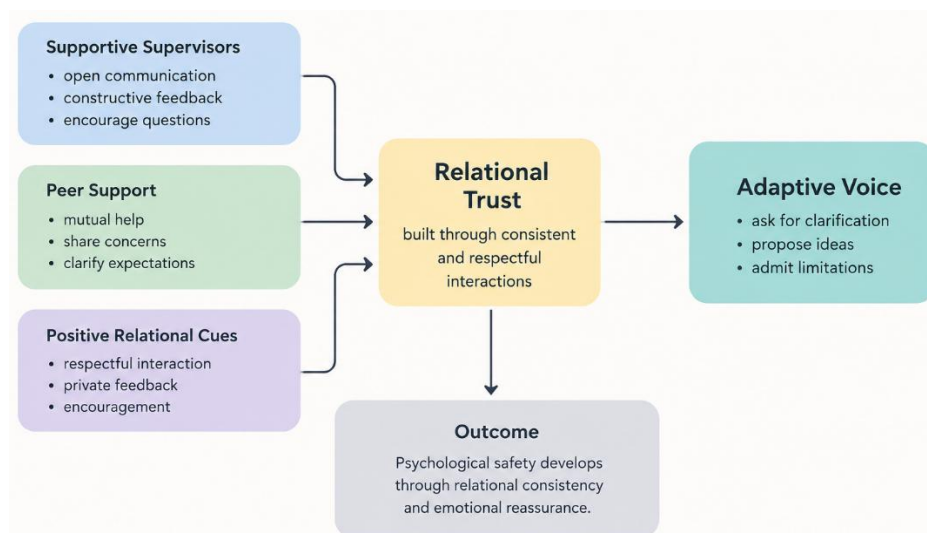


Figure 1. Diagram of Relational Trust and Adaptive Voice

Figure 1 shows that the supervisory communication style also significantly influenced adaptive voice. Leaders who framed errors as part of professional growth encouraged experimentation and initiative. In contrast, leaders who reacted critically or publicly highlighted mistakes diminished employee confidence. Participants noted

that even highly competitive organizations could foster psychological safety when leadership modeled openness. This suggests that relational trust moderates the impact of structural competition. Trust does not eliminate pressure, but it changes how employees perceive and manage it.

In summary, relational trust functions as a protective factor that facilitates adaptive voice among new employees. When trust is present, competition becomes manageable rather than threatening. Employees become more willing to ask for clarification, propose ideas, and admit limitations. Psychological safety, therefore, develops through relational consistency and emotional reassurance. These findings highlight that leadership behavior and peer dynamics are central to cultivating safe communicative spaces within competitive environments.

Performance Pressure Undermines Psychological Safety

The third finding indicates that newcomers continuously negotiate their sense of belonging within competitive organizational cultures. Psychological safety was closely tied to whether employees felt accepted as legitimate members rather than temporary subjects of evaluation. Participants described an internal tension between demonstrating competence and revealing vulnerability. To better illustrate these dynamics, the table below summarizes the core patterns of experience.

Table 1: Performance Pressure Undermines Psychological Safety

Dimension	Dimension	Dimension
Feedback Climate	Developmental, private, supportive	Comparative, public, critical
Team Interaction	Inclusive dialogue	Dominated by senior voices
Error Response	Learning-oriented framing	Blame-oriented reaction
Peer Support	Mutual reassurance	Isolation and rivalry

The table demonstrates that belonging is shaped by everyday interactional signals: inclusive dialogue and private developmental feedback enhanced feelings of legitimacy. Conversely, public criticism and hierarchical dominance reinforced self-protective silence. Participants interpreted these cues as indicators of whether vulnerability would be accepted or penalized. Psychological safety was therefore not a fixed state but a situational perception emerging from repeated interactions. Competitive culture intensified sensitivity to these cues, making subtle relational behaviors highly influential.

Furthermore, participants revealed adaptive strategies to secure belonging. Some increased work effort to gain recognition before expressing opinions, while others limited participation until they felt socially secure. These strategies indicate that newcomers actively manage impressions to minimize interpersonal risk. Belonging was gradually established when consistent positive feedback aligned with fair evaluation practices. Over time, employees who perceived fairness reported greater engagement and openness. Conversely, those who experienced persistent rivalry described emotional exhaustion and withdrawal tendencies.

Overall, negotiating belonging within a competitive culture represents a dynamic psychological process. Psychological safety emerges when competition coexists with inclusive relational practices. Without belonging, performance pressure becomes isolating; with belonging, it becomes motivating. This finding underscores that the early employment stage is pivotal in shaping long-term engagement patterns. By understanding how newcomers interpret inclusion and rivalry, organizations can design cultures that balance excellence with psychological well-being.

Discussion

The findings confirm and extend Amy Edmondson's foundational work, which conceptualized psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Consistent with her framework, the present study shows that employees are more willing to speak up when they perceive supportive interpersonal climates. However, unlike much of the team-level emphasis, the current findings highlight how psychological safety is initially fragile for newcomers and strongly shaped by performance evaluation intensity (Moin et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2020). This nuance complements William A. Kahn's engagement perspective, which argues that psychological safety enables personal engagement. Our findings suggest that in competitive contexts, new employees' engagement depends on how performance pressure is relationally framed, revealing a more dynamic and transitional dimension of safety.

The first finding, that performance pressure undermines psychological safety when detached from relational trust, aligns partially with prior research emphasizing the negative effects of excessive evaluation climates. However, this study adds an important distinction between constructive and threatening pressure. While previous studies often portray competition as either beneficial or harmful, these findings suggest that its psychological consequences depend on communicative framing and feedback style (Ahmad et al., 2022; Yadav et al., 2025). This expands the literature by demonstrating that structural competition does not automatically eliminate safety; rather, its relational enactment determines outcomes. Theoretically, this refines psychological safety theory by integrating performance appraisal systems into its explanatory scope (Aziz et al., 2025; Widiyastari et al., 2024). Practically, organizations should reconsider how they communicate probation systems, key performance indicators, and feedback mechanisms to newcomers.

The second finding underscores relational trust as a facilitator of adaptive voice, reinforcing earlier insights that leadership behavior shapes communicative openness. However, this study advances existing knowledge by showing how micro-interactions such as private encouragement or acknowledgment of learning carry disproportionate weight during early employment stages (Bennett et al., 2021; Gilbert et al., 2021). Unlike studies focusing on long-tenured teams, this research highlights how newcomers rely heavily on interpersonal cues to interpret organizational norms. Theoretically, this suggests that psychological safety should be understood as a socially negotiated process rather than a stable climate variable (Abbas et al., 2024; Huei et al., 2025).

The third finding, concerning the negotiation of belonging within competitive culture, reveals an important intersection between identity formation and psychological safety. While prior scholarship often treats safety as a precondition for performance, this study illustrates how belonging and performance evaluation are intertwined in the early career phase (Qin et al., 2025; Tiako et al., 2021). New employees actively manage impressions and strategically withhold voice until they establish legitimacy. This extends psychological safety theory by situating it within organizational socialization processes. The implication is that safety evolves alongside identity construction and perceived legitimacy (Kuss et al., 2022; Shepherd, 2021). Organizations that ignore belonging dynamics risk reinforcing silence and emotional withdrawal, even if formal policies promote openness.

Overall, these findings contribute theoretically by reframing psychological safety as a dynamic, relationally constructed experience shaped by evaluative intensity, trust-building interactions, and belonging negotiation during organizational entry. Rather than conceptualizing safety as merely a team-level attribute, this study positions it within transitional career phases and competitive cultural contexts. Practically, the results encourage organizations to balance excellence with inclusion by redesigning feedback systems, strengthening mentoring structures, and fostering inclusive communication norms. By doing so, competitive workplaces can transform pressure into developmental energy rather than psychological threat, ultimately enhancing both employee well-being and sustainable organizational performance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that psychological safety among new employees is dynamically constructed through relational trust rather than organizational policies alone. Performance pressure does not necessarily undermine psychological safety when expectations are communicated through constructive feedback, inclusive dialogue, and supportive leadership. Conversely, intense evaluation without relational reassurance encourages silence and self-protection. The findings position early employment as a decisive period for negotiating belonging, legitimacy, and voice. The phenomenological focus contributes a process-oriented perspective on psychological safety. However, the limited sample of 15 participants restricts transferability. Future studies should employ longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method designs across diverse work contexts.

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