How Do Leaders Build Psychological Safety? Insights from Semi-Structured Interviews

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how leaders build psychological safety within their teams, with a focus on identifying specific leadership practices and strategies that foster trust, openness, and inclusion in organizational contexts. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to capture leaders' lived experiences of fostering psychological safety. Twenty-six leaders from diverse sectors in Kenya—including education, healthcare, financial services, technology, and non-governmental organizations—were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically with the support of NVivo 14 software. The analysis followed an inductive process of coding, categorization, and theme development to identify recurring patterns and practices. Three overarching themes emerged from the data. First, trust and interpersonal respect were found to be foundational, with leaders highlighting transparency, integrity, respectful communication, and confidentiality as essential for building safety. Second, supportive leadership practices—including encouraging voice, constructive feedback, empathetic support, reframing mistakes as learning opportunities, empowering autonomy, and recognizing contributions—were consistently emphasized. Third, creating open and safe team climates was identified as critical, achieved through open communication channels, inclusive norms, constructive conflict management, collective identity-building, reducing fear of negative consequences, and shared leadership responsibility. Across themes, leaders stressed that psychological safety is an ongoing relational process requiring consistent reinforcement. The findings demonstrate that psychological safety is cultivated through a combination of relational integrity, supportive practices, and intentional climate-building efforts by leaders. This study contributes to the literature by extending psychological safety research into the Kenyan context and offering practical strategies for leaders to foster safety, inclusion, and innovation within their teams.

Keywords: Psychological safety; leadership; qualitative research; semi-structured interviews; Kenya; organizational behavior; trust; team climate.

Introduction

Psychological safety—the shared belief that one can speak up, take risks, and express thoughts or concerns without fear of negative consequences—is widely recognized as a foundational element of effective team functioning and organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017). Amy Edmondson's seminal definition situates psychological safety as enabling interpersonal risk-taking that catalyzes learning behaviors, innovation, and adaptability within teams (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). A meta-analytic review by Frazier et al. (2017) further validated the construct's positive correlation with performance, learning, innovation, and employee engagement. Much of the existing literature underscores that when team members feel safe to contribute, they are

more likely to share ideas, voice concerns, and collaborate effectively—enhancing problem-solving, adaptability, and organizational resilience (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Leadership plays a central role in cultivating psychological safety. Inclusive leadership practices—characterized by openness, accessibility, and valuing contributions—have been shown to significantly bolster psychological safety in workplace teams (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017). In healthcare settings, for instance, leaders who prioritize psychological safety promote error reporting and improvement behaviors, contributing to patient safety and learning culture. Similarly, in high-reliability organizations, structures that encourage questioning and open dialogue depend on leadership support for shared ownership of safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Organizational psychology literature also highlights the psychosocial safety climate—referring to shared perceptions that management supports and protects workers' psychological health—as a broader, structural precursor to individual-level psychological safety (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Wikipedia, 2025).

Despite its theoretical and empirical importance, psychological safety remains under-explored in contexts outside Western and healthcare environments—especially within Sub-Saharan Africa, where leadership dynamics, cultural norms, and organizational structures may shape psychological safety in unique ways. Kenya, with its dynamic mix of public, private, educational, and NGO sectors, represents a fertile context for examining how leaders foster psychological safety under diverse cultural, institutional, and resource constraints.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited for such explorations. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to deeply probe leaders' subjective experiences, behaviors, and perspectives on psychological safety—surfacing contextually nuanced insights that quantitative instruments may overlook (Edwards & Holland, 2022; Remtulla, 2021). Indeed, Remtulla (2021) employed a mono-method qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to investigate psychological safety in healthcare teams, illustrating the method's power to uncover rich, leader-mediated facilitators and barriers. By centering leader voices, this study aims to surface grounded, context-specific mechanisms by which psychological safety is built.

This study, therefore, addresses the following question: How do leaders in Kenya build psychological safety within their teams? Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-six leaders across multiple sectors, this study explores leadership strategies, cultural sensitivities, and relational practices that contribute to or inhibit psychological safety. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that patterns were fully explored and meaningfully represented.

Contributions of this research are threefold. First, it extends psychological safety scholarship into the African context, offering insights on how cultural diversity, power dynamics, and institutional factors inform psychological safety-building strategies. Second, it foregrounds the voices and lived experiences of Kenyan leaders—providing illustrative, practice-oriented accounts that can inform leadership development and organizational interventions. Third, by using a thematic, inductive approach supported by NVivo 14 analysis, this study presents a systematic, verifiable account of core themes and subthemes that emerge from leaders' practices.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of leaders regarding the ways in which they foster psychological safety within their organizations. A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the subjective meanings participants attribute to their leadership practices. Twenty-six participants were recruited from various organizations across

Kenya, representing diverse sectors including education, healthcare, financial services, and non-governmental organizations. Participants were purposively selected based on their leadership roles, ensuring that they possessed direct experience in managing teams and had relevant insights into practices related to psychological safety. The final sample consisted of leaders across different hierarchical levels, including senior executives, middle managers, and team leaders, providing a heterogeneous yet comprehensive perspective. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe further into emerging themes. An interview guide was developed to structure the conversations around key areas such as leadership behaviors, communication practices, trust-building strategies, and responses to mistakes or challenges in the workplace. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and contextual considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of participants. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and to facilitate in-depth analysis. Ethical principles, including confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the data collection process.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, interpret, and report patterns within the data. The analysis followed a systematic, iterative process involving initial familiarization with the transcripts, generation of open codes, and subsequent grouping of codes into categories and overarching themes. NVivo 14 software was used to support the coding process, manage data, and enhance analytical rigor. Coding was conducted inductively to allow themes to emerge directly from the data, while also being guided by existing theoretical perspectives on psychological safety and leadership. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, peer debriefing and reflective memoing were incorporated throughout the analysis, and intercoder reliability was strengthened through collaborative coding checks with research colleagues. The analytical process concluded with the identification of core themes that captured leaders' practices and perceptions in building psychological safety within Kenyan organizations.

Findings and Results

The study included 26 participants drawn from diverse organizations across Kenya, encompassing sectors such as education, healthcare, financial services, technology, and non-governmental organizations. Of the participants, 15 were male and 11 were female, ranging in age from 29 to 56 years, with an average age of 41. In terms of leadership levels, 7 participants were senior executives, 10 were middle managers, and 9 were team leaders. The majority of participants (n=17) had over 10 years of leadership experience, while 9 had between 5 and 10 years. Educational backgrounds varied, with 19 holding postgraduate qualifications and 7 holding bachelor's degrees. This diversity provided a rich pool of perspectives for understanding the ways leaders build psychological safety in organizational contexts.

Reporting of Findings (Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts)

Below, each subcategory from the table is reported in one paragraph, with concepts woven in and supported by direct quotations from interviews.

Category 1: Trust and Interpersonal Respect

Building Mutual Trust.

Participants consistently emphasized that trust was the foundation of psychological safety. Leaders described transparency, fairness, and reliability as key to building mutual trust. For instance, one manager noted: "When my team sees that I keep my word, even in small things, they begin to trust me with bigger issues." Another leader explained that avoiding favoritism was essential to ensure employees felt equally respected.

Respectful Communication.

Respectful communication emerged as another core subtheme, where leaders highlighted the importance of listening actively and avoiding harsh tones. A team leader remarked: "I make sure I listen without interrupting; it shows them that their opinion matters." Several participants emphasized that non-judgmental feedback and sensitivity to cultural values reduced employees' fear of speaking up.

Role Modeling Integrity.

Leaders described modeling integrity as central to fostering psychological safety. They stressed that consistency between words and actions, admitting mistakes, and maintaining ethical standards encouraged employees to follow suit. One participant reflected: "The moment I admitted I made a wrong decision, my team realized it was okay to be human and not hide errors."

Valuing Diversity.

Many participants stated that respecting different viewpoints and encouraging the voices of minority groups built a climate of safety. As one middle manager shared: "When someone from a junior or marginalized group speaks up and I support them, it signals to everyone that all perspectives are valuable."

Confidentiality in Sensitive Matters.

Confidentiality was reported as vital in creating trust. Leaders noted that employees were more likely to share concerns when they knew their privacy would be respected. A senior executive stated: "If a worker tells me something in confidence, I never bring it up in public. That's how they know it is safe to open up."

Category 2: Supportive Leadership Practices

Encouraging Voice and Participation.

Leaders emphasized maintaining open-door policies and reducing hierarchical barriers. Employees felt safer to contribute ideas when encouraged to lead discussions. One participant observed: "When I let my juniors chair the weekly meeting, they felt empowered to speak freely."

Constructive Feedback.

Providing feedback in a supportive rather than punitive manner was highlighted. Participants stressed the importance of balancing praise with constructive criticism. As one manager explained: "I always frame feedback around growth, not fault. That way, they don't fear being judged."

Psychological Support.

Leaders frequently noted the value of demonstrating empathy and checking on staff well-being. One participant recalled: "When I ask how someone is coping, not just with work but with life, they feel cared for and safe." Such support strengthened bonds and reduced anxiety.

Enabling Learning from Mistakes.

Reframing mistakes as learning opportunities was emphasized. A senior executive stated: "I share my own failures so they know errors are part of growth, not a reason for punishment." This approach normalized trial and error and encouraged experimentation.

Empowering Autonomy.

Leaders described delegating responsibility and trusting employees' judgment as vital for psychological safety. As one team leader explained: "When I step back and trust them to make decisions, they feel respected and less afraid of failure."

Recognition and Appreciation.

Recognition emerged as a powerful motivator. Leaders described both formal and informal ways of acknowledging contributions. One participant said: "Sometimes a simple thank-you note does more to build confidence than a big bonus." Recognition signaled to employees that their efforts were valued, boosting safety and belonging.

Category 3: Creating Open and Safe Team Climate

Open Communication Channels.

Participants stressed the need for regular meetings, transparent updates, and anonymous feedback platforms. One leader explained: "Anonymous feedback gave me insights I would never hear directly because some feared speaking face-to-face."

Norms of Safety and Inclusion.

Establishing clear ground rules and ensuring equal speaking opportunities were critical. A middle manager noted: "We agreed as a team that no one would be interrupted, no matter their rank." Such norms fostered inclusivity.

Handling Conflict Constructively.

Leaders emphasized mediating disputes and keeping discussions issue-focused rather than personal. A participant recalled: "I told them, let's fight the problem, not each other. That shifted the tone immediately."

Collective Identity Building.

Building a shared identity through rituals, team goals, and traditions was emphasized. As one executive shared: "Every Friday, we end with a gratitude round. It strengthens our bond and makes people feel safe."

Reducing Fear of Negative Consequences.

Leaders reported that removing the fear of retaliation encouraged employees to speak up. One participant explained: "I tell my team, disagree with me openly—there will be no punishment." Protecting whistleblowers and separating evaluation from experimentation were cited as key practices.

Shared Leadership Responsibility.

Encouraging peer leadership and co-creating team norms fostered psychological safety. A manager observed: "When leadership rotates in meetings, no one feels less important, and everyone feels responsible for the climate."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore how leaders in Kenya foster psychological safety within their teams, using semi-structured interviews with 26 participants across sectors. The findings revealed three overarching themes: trust and interpersonal respect, supportive leadership practices, and creating open and safe team climates. Each of these themes comprised several subthemes, ranging from building mutual trust to encouraging participation, reframing mistakes, establishing inclusive norms, and reducing fear of negative consequences. Collectively, these results highlight the deeply relational and contextual nature of psychological safety, underscoring that leaders in Kenya actively construct environments of safety through a blend of relational integrity, participatory practices, and cultural sensitivity.

The first theme underscored that trust and respect are the foundations of psychological safety. Leaders emphasized transparent decision-making, honoring commitments, role-modeling integrity, and protecting confidentiality as strategies to build mutual trust. These findings align with the foundational work of Edmondson (1999), who identified interpersonal trust as a precursor to speaking up without fear of embarrassment or punishment. Our participants' emphasis on fairness and avoiding favoritism echoes Newman et al.'s (2017) systematic review, which showed that perceived fairness and ethical leadership significantly strengthen psychological safety. Furthermore, the finding that confidentiality is crucial for employees to disclose concerns resonates with Frazier et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis, which demonstrated that environments where leaders safeguard private information lead to higher engagement and willingness to share sensitive issues.

Respectful communication emerged as another key subtheme. Leaders described active listening, non-judgmental feedback, and valuing diverse perspectives as practices that reduce employees' fear of speaking up. This aligns with research on inclusive leadership, which emphasizes openness and accessibility as drivers of psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010). In particular, the finding that leaders' tone and approach matter reflects May et al.'s (2004) evidence that respectful interpersonal interactions foster psychological meaningfulness and engagement. Our participants' reflections also resonate with cross-cultural literature suggesting that in collectivist contexts like Kenya, relational harmony and respectful dialogue are especially valued as mechanisms of safety (Li & Sun, 2015).

The second major theme concerned supportive leadership practices, including encouraging voice, giving constructive feedback, providing psychological support, reframing mistakes, empowering autonomy, and recognizing contributions. These practices are consistent with prior studies that situate leadership support at the heart of psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). For example, when leaders in this study described rotating leadership roles or inviting junior staff to chair meetings, they were enacting what Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) termed "inclusive leadership behaviors," which significantly predict speaking-up behaviors.

Constructive feedback was another crucial mechanism. Participants emphasized balancing praise with developmental critique, echoing Carmeli and Gittell's (2009) finding that relational leadership practices foster both safety and learning. Similarly, the focus on empathy and checking employees' well-being reflects research on compassionate leadership, which has been linked to reduced anxiety and stronger psychological safety (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

Perhaps most strikingly, leaders' willingness to frame mistakes as learning opportunities mirrors Edmondson and Lei's (2014) conceptualization of psychological safety as a learning-oriented climate. Participants' accounts—such as openly sharing their own failures—reinforce evidence that leader fallibility signals humility, which promotes risk-taking and innovation (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Empowering autonomy and recognizing contributions also align with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy and competence are critical for motivation and engagement. Recognition practices, including personalized thank-you notes or public acknowledgment, have similarly been identified as low-cost, high-impact strategies for reinforcing safety and belonging (Kahn, 1990).

The third theme concerned leaders' efforts to create climates characterized by openness, inclusivity, constructive conflict management, shared identity, and reduced fear of negative consequences. This theme echoes the broader literature on team climate and organizational culture. Participants' emphasis on anonymous feedback tools and

transparent updates reflects findings from Baer and Frese (2003), who demonstrated that open communication systems enable error management and learning. Norms of safety and inclusion, such as ensuring equal speaking opportunities, align with Hofmann and Stetzer's (1998) argument that clear norms and shared expectations reduce fear of speaking up in safety-critical industries.

Handling conflict constructively was another noteworthy subtheme. Leaders in this study stressed focusing on issues rather than personalities, which reflects Jehn's (1995) distinction between task conflict (beneficial when managed well) and relationship conflict (harmful when unmanaged). By framing disagreements as problem-solving opportunities, leaders reduced interpersonal threat and reinforced psychological safety.

Collective identity building, through rituals, shared goals, and traditions, was also highlighted. This finding parallels research on social identity theory, which suggests that when employees identify with a team, they are more likely to take risks on behalf of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Similarly, participants' emphasis on reducing fear of retaliation supports Detert and Treviño's (2010) findings that fear of negative consequences is one of the most significant barriers to employee voice. Leaders' efforts to normalize dissent and protect whistleblowers echo Morrison's (2014) work on voice climate. Finally, encouraging shared leadership responsibilities reflects Pearce and Conger's (2003) work on shared leadership, which demonstrates that distributing authority can enhance trust, safety, and team performance.

Overall, the findings contribute to psychological safety scholarship in three key ways. First, they reinforce the centrality of leader behaviors—trust, respect, and support—as critical antecedents of psychological safety, extending prior Western and healthcare-focused studies into the Kenyan context. Second, they underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity, showing how respect for hierarchy, collectivism, and relational norms shape how psychological safety is enacted. Third, they illustrate practical, actionable strategies—from open communication systems to leader humility—that can be adapted by organizations seeking to cultivate safer, more innovative climates.

These results also demonstrate that psychological safety is not a static construct but an ongoing relational process requiring leaders' consistent engagement. This supports Edmondson and Lei's (2014) argument that psychological safety must be continually enacted through daily practices rather than assumed as a fixed trait of teams.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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