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Trust as a Strategy: How Psychological Safety Shapes Risk-Taking and Innovation

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Abstract:

This thesis explores how psychological safety functions as a strategic driver of innovation and risk-taking within a customer operations team at a multinational automotive company. Drawing on both academic literature and real-world insights, the study investigates the relationship between trust, communication, and team behaviour in a high-pressure, remote work environment.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a survey with Likert-scale and open-ended questions, and a qualitative case study based on the researcher's firsthand experience within the team. Key findings indicate that while most team members feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, and take initiative, there are pockets of uncertainty particularly regarding trust in leadership and the perceived impact of employees' ideas.

The case study revealed how a strong sense of team community, even in a fully remote setting, supported resilience and proactive behaviour during a time of organizational change. However, it also highlighted opportunities for improvement, such as the need for more one-to-one communication and clearer decision-making autonomy.

Overall, the research confirms that psychological safety not only improves employee engagement but also enables innovation and smart risk-taking. The thesis concludes with practical recommendations for leadership, including regular check-ins, clear autonomy boundaries, and structured support for continuous improvement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In today's fast-changing and competitive business environment, innovation is no longer optional it is a strategic necessity. Organizations that adapt, experiment, and embrace change are more likely to survive and grow. However, the ability to innovate is deeply connected to the internal culture of a company particularly to the extent to which employees feel safe to express ideas, take risks, and challenge the standard practice without fear of negative consequences. This environment of openness and mutual respect is what leading scholars and practitioners now refer to as psychological safety.

The concept of trust in organizational behaviour has traditionally been studied in the context of leadership, teamwork, and employee engagement. However, recent research and practical applications such as Google's landmark Project Aristotle have highlighted that trust is not just a "soft skill," but a core business strategy. When leaders cultivate trust and psychological safety within teams, they create the conditions for learning, experimentation, and innovation to flourish. On the other hand, fear-based environments tend to suppress initiative, creativity, and long-term performance.

This thesis explores how psychological safety, as a form of strategic trust, shapes employee behaviour particularly their willingness to take risks and contribute to innovation. Drawing on both academic theory and a real-life case study at a multinational automotive services company operating globally in the car rental and mobility solutions sector.

1.2 Research Problem Objectives

1. To define and explore the concepts of trust and psychological safety in organizations.

2. To analyse how psychological safety influences risk-taking and innovative behaviour among employees.
3. To apply these concepts to a real-life business context specifically, a multinational automotive services company.
4. To assess whether employees at this multinational automotive services company perceive a psychologically safe environment.
5. To offer strategic recommendations on how businesses can embed trust and safety to drive innovation.

1.3 How does psychological safety foster innovation and risk-taking in a corporate setting like in a multinational automotive services company?

Through a survey of colleagues and the author's own experiences in team-based operations and client-facing roles, the thesis will examine how different levels of trust and safety affect employees' contributions, problem-solving, and willingness to speak up. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for managers, not only within multinational automotive services company but also in other large service organizations where innovation must come from the ground up.

1.4 Thesis Relevance to Modern Business Strategy

In the era of digital transformation, AI, and rapid global disruption, companies must tap into the full potential of their people. Innovation can no longer be the responsibility of a small R&D team it must be a cultural norm. Leaders and organizations that understand the strategic value of trust are more likely to build high-performing teams. This thesis contributes to this conversation by showing how psychological safety can become a lever for innovation, competitiveness, and long-term strategic advantage.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

1. **Introduction** – Presents the problem, objectives, and relevance of the topic.
2. **Literature Review** – Explores academic theories on trust, psychological safety, innovation, and risk-taking.
3. **Methodology** – Explains the research design, survey, and case study approach.
4. **Case Study: Multinational automotive services company** – Applies the theoretical framework to the author's experience and team context.
5. **Discussion** – Analysis and compares findings with existing literature, and highlights patterns.
6. **Conclusion & Recommendations** – Summarizes insights and offers practical advice for leaders and companies.
7. **References & Appendices** – Cites all sources and includes survey materials.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores the theoretical foundations and empirical research on four core interrelated concepts: trust, psychological safety, innovation, and risk-taking in organizations. These concepts support the central thesis that psychological safety can serve as a strategic foundation for innovation and calculated risk-taking within corporate environments. This review will also introduce and examine several theoretical frameworks, including Edmondson's Psychological Safety model, Google's Project Aristotle, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, while assessing how these theories converge to support the strategic relevance of trust in modern business practices.

2.1 Trust in Organizations

Trust in Teams, Leadership, and Organizations

Trust is a foundational pillar of any functional human relationship and holds critical implications within the context of business organizations. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995, p. 712) defined trust as "*the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.*" This definition represents the element of vulnerability, which is central to the concept of psychological safety.

In teams, trust enables open communication, collaboration, and mutual support (Costa et al., 2001). It encourages team members to share information and ideas without fear of judgment, which is essential for learning and performance. High-trust teams are more resilient and better at adapting to change. In contrast, teams lacking trust tend to be characterized by silence, inefficiency, and conflict avoidance.

Leadership trust is equally important. Leaders who are perceived as consistent, fair, and empathetic tend to inspire higher levels of engagement and cooperation among employees (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Leadership behaviours such as transparency, inclusivity, and active listening have been shown to build vertical trust between employees and managers. This vertical trust becomes essential in hierarchical organizations where the distance between decision-makers and front-line employees can inhibit innovation and feedback.

At the organizational level, institutional trust reflects employees' belief that the organization will act in their best interest. This includes fair policies, a just culture, and consistent values (Searle et al., 2011). When institutional trust is high, employees are more likely to feel aligned with the organization's mission and more motivated to contribute meaningfully.

2.2 Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety was extensively developed by Amy Edmondson (1999, p. 354), who defined it as "*a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.*" Edmondson's work was essential in shifting the focus of organizational behaviour studies from individual psychological traits to group dynamics. Psychological safety is not synonymous with job security or comfort; rather, it refers to the absence of fear in speaking up, asking for help, and admitting mistakes within a professional context.

Edmondson (1999) discovered that teams with high psychological safety were more likely to engage in learning behaviours, such as seeking feedback, discussing errors, and experimenting with new methods. In later work (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), she demonstrated that psychological safety significantly predicts organizational learning and innovation. It is particularly relevant in high-stakes, high-pressure environments, where the cost of silence can be damaging to performance.

Psychological safety is shaped by:

1. **Leadership behaviour**: inclusive, respectful, and open leadership fosters a climate of safety.
2. **Peer support**: trust and mutual respect among colleagues contribute to safety.
3. **Organizational culture**: when failure is viewed as a learning opportunity rather than a weakness, employees are more likely to take risks.

Edmondson's model identifies that team psychological safety leads to improved performance through its impact on communication, collaboration, and experimentation. This framework serves as a foundation for evaluating organizational readiness for innovation.

2.3 Innovation: Radical vs. Incremental

Innovation is generally understood as the process of translating ideas into goods or services that create value. It can take many forms but is often divided into two categories: incremental and radical innovation.

Incremental innovation refers to small, continuous improvements in existing products, services, or processes. It is typically low-risk and often driven by customer feedback and efficiency goals.

Radical innovation, also known as disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997), introduces significant changes that can transform industries, create new markets, or render existing models obsolete. It is inherently more uncertain and often requires challenging established norms and practices.

Both forms of innovation require a culture that promotes brainstorming, exploration, and experimentation. Importantly, the willingness to innovate is influenced by employees' perceptions of psychological safety. Employees are more likely to suggest bold or

unconventional ideas if they believe their contributions will be valued rather than laughed at or punished.

The literature consistently shows that innovation is not solely a function of research and development (R&D) investment but is also deeply rooted in cultural and psychological factors within the organization (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Teams that feel safe are more likely to challenge assumptions, question procedures, and think creatively. All of which are essential for both incremental and radical innovation.

2.4 Risk-Taking in Organizations

Risk-taking in the workplace involves engaging in actions that carry potential negative consequences but also the opportunity for significant reward. In the context of innovation, risk-taking includes speaking up with unconventional ideas, attempting new methods, and challenging authority when necessary.

According to Morrison and Milliken (2000), many employees choose silence over voice because they fear repercussions a concept known as organizational silence. This silence inhibits innovation, problem-solving, and organizational learning.

Organizations that support constructive risk-taking develop policies and cultures that buffer employees from negative consequences when ideas fail. Detert and Burris (2007) found that employees are more likely to engage in voice behaviour when they trust their leaders and feel psychologically safe. This aligns with Edmondson's findings that psychological safety mediates the relationship between leadership behaviour and team learning.

The business implications are significant. Without a culture of safe risk-taking, organizations may experience stagnation, missed opportunities, and disengaged employees. Conversely, companies that tolerate failure as a byproduct of innovation tend to have higher adaptive capacity and competitive advantage.

2.5 Theoretical Models

Edmondson's Psychological Safety Model

Edmondson's model posits that psychological safety arises from a combination of supportive leadership, mutual respect among peers, and organizational norms that encourage learning and curiosity. The model shows how psychological safety leads to:

1. Learning behaviours (e.g., asking questions, seeking feedback)
2. Information sharing
3. Increased experimentation
4. Improved team performance

These pathways suggest that psychological safety is a critical input for innovation, adaptive learning, and continuous improvement.

Google's Project Aristotle

Google's internal study, Project Aristotle, analysed over 180 teams to understand what makes teams effective. The research concluded that psychological safety was the most important factor, even more than individual talent or team structure (Rozovsky, 2015). Teams where members felt safe to take risks and be vulnerable were more productive and innovative. Other contributing factors included dependability, structure, meaning, and impact but psychological safety was identified as the foundation upon which these other traits rested.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Organizational Context

Maslow's classic hierarchy (1943) posits that human motivation follows a five-level progression, from physiological needs to self-actualization. Applied to the workplace, psychological safety aligns with the safety needs level. Before employees can pursue higher-level goals such as creativity and innovation (self-actualization), they must feel secure in their

social and professional environments. Without safety, employees prioritize self-protection over contribution, which suppress innovation.

2.6 Previous Research on Trust, Safety, and Innovation

Numerous empirical studies support the link between psychological safety and innovative behaviour:

Carmeli & Gittell (2009) found that relational coordination and high-quality connections both rooted in trust led to greater organizational learning and innovation.

Baer & Frese (2003) demonstrated that psychological safety predicted proactive behaviours and creativity in German firms.

Newman et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis confirming that psychological safety significantly correlates with creativity, voice behaviour, and knowledge sharing.

Luu (2020) examined service organizations and found that psychological safety promoted employee-driven innovation, particularly in customer-facing roles where flexibility and responsiveness are critical.

The union of these studies reinforces the thesis premise: that trust, and psychological safety are not only beneficial for employee well-being but also strategically vital for innovation and risk-taking. Their role in enabling bottom-up contributions, especially in decentralized service settings like those examined in this thesis, highlights their practical relevance.

2.7 Trust in Remote Work Environments

In addition to the traditional frameworks of psychological safety and trust within co-located teams, the rapid shift toward remote and hybrid work models, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has posed new challenges to team dynamics, trust-building, and psychological

safety. Research by Wang et al. (2021) highlights that remote teams experience increased communication barriers, social isolation, and a heightened risk of misunderstandings, all of which can undermine trust and openness. The absence of in-person interactions can make employees more hesitant to share concerns or challenge decisions, as the nuances of body language and informal exchanges are lost.

For organizations operating in high-pressure, customer-facing environments, these challenges are even more distinct. Remote teams require intentional efforts from leadership to foster open dialogue, create virtual spaces for informal check-ins, and establish transparent decision-making processes. As suggested by Edmondson and Lei (2014), psychological safety does not emerge spontaneously in virtual settings; rather, it demands proactive leadership behaviours, such as frequent communication, active listening, and visible support for employee voice.

Moreover, recent studies (Newman et al., 2022) have confirmed that distributed teams with strong psychological safety report higher levels of creativity, knowledge-sharing, and problem-solving capabilities. These findings further underscore the strategic importance of embedding trust-building practices in remote team management protocols.

2.8 Conclusion

The literature establishes a clear conceptual and empirical foundation for the thesis argument that psychological safety serves as a strategic enabler of innovation and risk-taking. Theoretical models from Edmondson, Maslow, and Google's Project Aristotle converge on the insight that safety, trust, and respect are prerequisites for high-functioning, adaptive teams.

In the next chapters, these theories will be applied to a real-world organizational setting to examine how psychological safety influences employee behaviour and innovation on the ground.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a mixed methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate how psychological safety contributes to risk-taking and innovation within a real organizational setting specifically, within the TNC (Transportation Network Company) team at a multinational automotive services company. The core aim of this methodological framework is to integrate measurable data with contextual insights to provide a rich, evidence-based understanding of how strategic trust manifests in daily team dynamics and decision-making.

The research consists of two complementary components:

A quantitative component in the form of an anonymous online survey distributed to members of the TNC team. This survey collects structured data on perceptions of psychological safety, trust in leadership, openness to risk-taking, and attitudes toward innovation. The responses are analysed statistically to identify patterns and relationships between these variables.

A qualitative component in the form of a case study, based on the researcher's direct experience within the TNC team at a multinational automotive services company. This includes critical reflection on team interactions, examples of innovation initiatives, and how psychological safety influenced the decision-making process in real-world scenarios.

This dual-method approach ensures a balanced and comprehensive analysis, as it not only captures employees' self-reported experiences but also places them within the operational and cultural context of a global service organization. The mixed methods strategy is particularly appropriate for this study because the topic psychological safety is inherently

behavioural and perceptual. Understanding its effect on innovation requires both measurable data points and qualitative depth to fully uncover how it functions in a team environment.

3.2 Justification for Mixed Methods Design

The decision to use a mixed methods design is driven by the complexity of the research question:

How does psychological safety foster innovation and risk-taking in a corporate setting like a multinational automotive services company?

This is not just a data-driven question it also involves critical reasoning. It asks not just what the relationship between psychological safety and innovation is, but also how this relationship plays out in practice.

A quantitative survey alone could quantify levels of psychological safety and its correlation with innovation-related behaviours. However, numbers alone cannot explain why people feel safe or unsafe, or how specific team or leadership behaviours affect their willingness to take interpersonal or professional risks. For this reason, the qualitative case study component becomes essential. It provides narratives and context that cannot be captured by structured survey items, such as how trust was established (or broken), how team leaders responded to new ideas, and whether individuals felt supported during critical decision-making moments.

Moreover, mixed methods research enhances validity and reliability through triangulation the process of cross-verifying results across different sources. For example, if the survey indicates a high level of psychological safety, and this is supported by concrete examples from the case study (such as team members freely contributing new ideas or openly discussing mistakes), then the overall conclusion gains credibility. However, if there is a discrepancy between perceived safety and observed behaviour, this too can yield meaningful insights about perception versus practice within the organizational culture.

Another justification is the practical relevance of this thesis. Psychological safety is increasingly recognized in modern organizational strategy as a competitive advantage. However, its actual implementation varies across industries and departments. Using a multinational automotive services company and specifically the TNC team as a case study brings real-world significance to academic theory.

The TNC team operates in a dynamic, customer-facing, and operations intensive environment, where innovation often emerges through frontline feedback and continuous improvement. It presents an ideal setting to explore how trust and safety shape proactive behaviour.

Finally, this methodological choice aligns with the recommendations of key scholars in the field. Amy Edmondson (1999), whose work is central to this thesis, advocates for understanding psychological safety not solely as a trait or perception, but as a dynamic condition influenced by team structure, leadership, and cultural norms. Mixed methods research enables that multidimensional exploration something purely quantitative or qualitative designs cannot fully achieve on their own.

In summary, the use of mixed methods in this research is both methodologically sound and strategically effective. It reflects the complexity of the subject, honours the lived experience of employees, and aligns with best practices in organizational behaviour research.

3.3 Participants

The survey was completed by approximately ten members of the Transportation Network Company (TNC) team at a multinational automotive services company. All participants work in customer support positions handling issues related to ride-hailing and car-sharing partnerships. The respondents are all based in Ireland, operating in a team that provides multi-channel support to drivers and customers.

The group included a mix of full-time and part-time employees, with a wide range of experience levels. Some participants have been with the company for over ten years, while others joined within the past year. This diversity in tenure offered valuable insight into how psychological safety and innovation are perceived across different levels of organizational familiarity.

The survey was conducted on a fully anonymous basis, with no identifying information (such as names or emails) collected. All participants were from the same department the TNC team ensuring consistency in the work environment and leadership structure. While the team primarily operates in English, several team members are also fluent in Italian and French, reflecting the multicultural and multilingual nature of the customer base they support.

This group was selected for their direct experience with customer-facing problem-solving, team collaboration, and the need for adaptive thinking in a dynamic operational environment all highly relevant to the core themes of trust, psychological safety, innovation, and risk-taking explored in this research.

3.4 Survey Design

The survey used in this research was designed to assess key dimensions of psychological safety, trust, innovation, and low-level risk-taking within the TNC team. It consisted of a total of 10 questions, administered in a single session using Microsoft Forms.

The first eight questions were multiple-choice statements using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from:

"Strongly Disagree," "Somewhat Disagree," "Somewhat Agree," to "Strongly Agree."

This scale was intentionally chosen to avoid a neutral middle point, encouraging respondents to reflect and lean toward agreement or disagreement. The Likert-scale questions were phrased in the first person to encourage self-reflection and relatability.

These eight questions addressed a mix of topics, including:

Psychological safety (e.g., feeling safe to speak up or admit mistakes)

Trust in leadership (e.g., support from the team leader)

Team expectations around innovation

Every day, risk-taking behaviours (e.g., making small process changes or speaking up with customer solutions)

While the questions were not grouped into visible categories on the form, they collectively touched on four distinct themes aligned to the thesis topic. This variety allowed the survey to capture a more comprehensive view of the team's working culture and interpersonal dynamics.

The final two questions were open-ended, designed to provide qualitative insight into participants' personal experiences and perceptions. These were:

1. *"Have you ever held back from suggesting an idea? If so, why?"*
2. *"What makes working in our team enjoyable or rewarding?"*

These questions were included to supplement the quantitative data by allowing participants to elaborate on situations involving psychological safety, voice behaviour, and team culture. All questions were written in English, the shared working language of the team.

The survey was kept intentionally brief estimated to take 4–5 minutes to complete to encourage full participation from colleagues without creating survey fatigue.

3.5 Case Study Design

In addition to the survey component, this research incorporates a qualitative case study based on the researcher's own experience as a TNC Administrator at a multinational automotive services company. The case study approach was selected to provide practical, setting specific insight into how psychological safety, trust, innovation, and risk-taking manifest in a real-world organizational setting.

The TNC team is responsible for managing a wide range of services and issues related to ride-sharing partnerships. Unlike most departments that specialize in a single function, the TNC team handles a broad and complex workload including reservations, vehicle swaps, damages, debt and collections, accidents, and customer service resolution. The team's responsibilities span multiple areas, requiring constant coordination across internal departments such as fleet, debt, branch operations, and management.

The researcher has been part of the TNC team for seven months and has worked at the multinational automotive services company for just under four years, offering a perspective that balances both fresh engagement with the team and deep organizational understanding.

This case study is particularly relevant to the themes of psychological safety and innovation because the team operates in a high-pressure, high-responsibility environment. The nature of the work requires clear communication, rapid decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving. Mistakes such as double allocating a vehicle or failing to escalate a debt issue can have direct operational or customer consequences, which puts pressure on employees to perform accurately and efficiently.

Despite regular changes in personnel, including managerial transitions and colleague departures, the team has demonstrated strong internal cohesion and adaptability. The study will examine how the team has maintained communication, trust, and innovation in the face

of these challenges. The insights gained will help illustrate how psychological safety can enable consistent performance and initiative, even in dynamic and evolving team structures.

The case study draws on day-to-day experiences, observed behaviours, and personal reflections to bring theory into real-life context, supporting and expanding the data obtained through the survey.

3.6 Data Analysis

The survey results were analysed using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from closed-ended questions and qualitative insights from open-ended responses.

The goal of this analysis was to assess the presence and strength of psychological safety, trust, innovation, and low-level risk-taking within the TNC team.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to fundamental ethical principles to ensure the integrity of the study and the protection of participants. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as trust, psychological safety, and perceptions of leadership, particular attention was paid to confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. No personal or identifiable data were collected, and the survey was designed to be fully anonymous. Responses were collected via an online platform that did not require names, email addresses, or any personal information.

Additionally, participants were assured that the data would be used solely for academic purposes and that all findings would be presented in aggregate form to prevent individual

identification. The researcher also acknowledged their dual role as a team member and took steps to maintain objectivity and respect participant privacy throughout the research process.

This study did not involve vulnerable populations or sensitive personal data requiring formal ethical board review; however, approval was obtained from the Human Resources department to distribute the internal survey, and best practices in ethical research conduct were followed throughout the project.

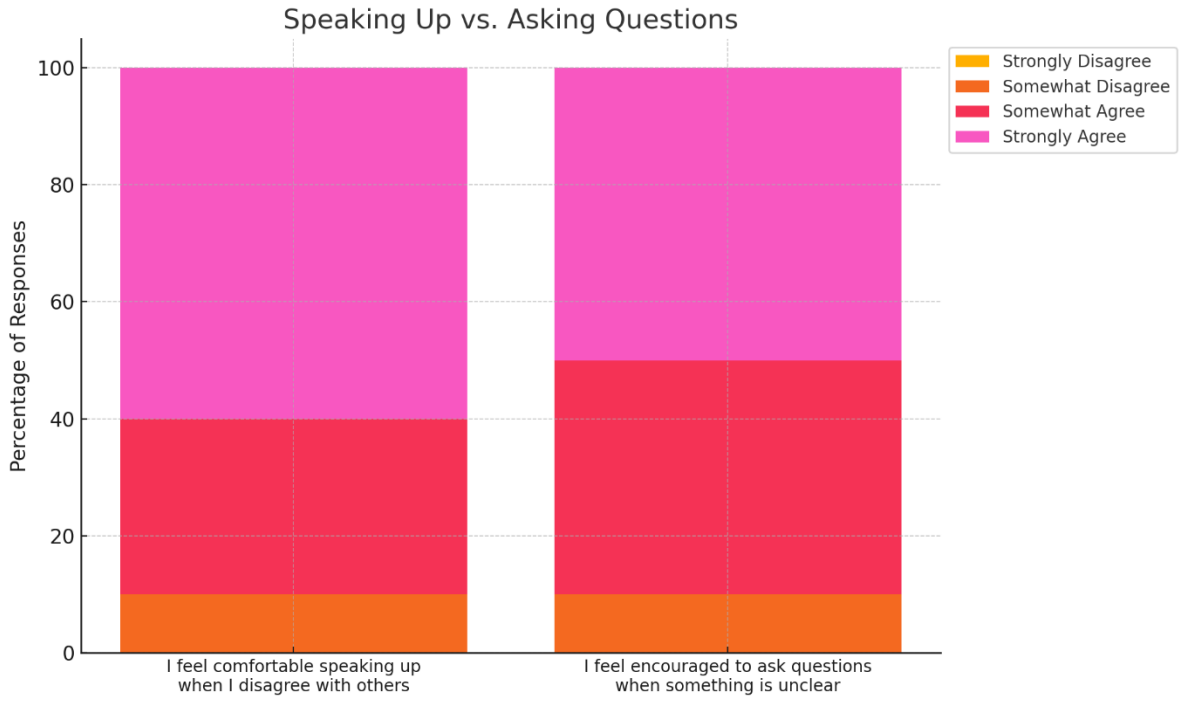
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The first eight questions in the survey were Likert-scale statements, designed to assess core areas of psychological safety, trust in leadership, mistake management, and innovation behaviours. Participants responded using a four-point scale:

Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree.

Speaking Up and Asking Questions



The comparison between respondents' comfort in speaking up and their willingness to ask clarifying questions offers valuable insight into the team's psychological safety climate.

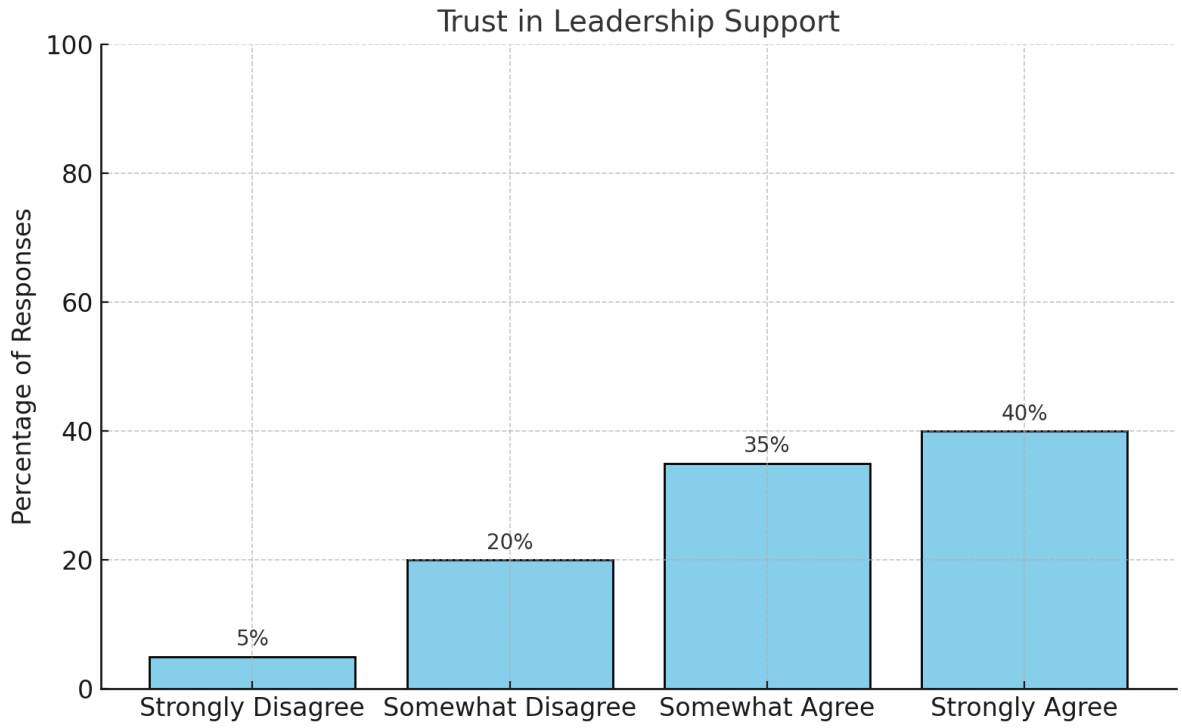
On the first metric *"I feel comfortable speaking up when I disagree with others"* most respondents indicated agreement, with a combined 67% selecting "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree." However, 33% of respondents selected "Somewhat Disagree," indicating that while a majority feel safe challenging ideas, there is still a noticeable minority that

experiences hesitation. This slight hesitation may reflect concerns around perceived confrontation, fear of judgment, or uncertainty about how their input will be received during disagreements. This suggests an opportunity for further improvement in fostering a culture where dissenting viewpoints are not only tolerated but actively encouraged as a source of strength and growth.

In contrast, responses to the second statement *"I feel encouraged to ask questions when something is unclear, even if I think I should already know the answer"* demonstrated a significantly higher level of psychological safety. Here, a striking 83% of respondents chose "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree," and only one individual selected "Strongly Disagree." This result indicates a healthy team norm that normalizes curiosity and supports learning without shame. The team appears to view questioning as a strength, not a weakness a sign of a psychologically safe culture.

This difference between the two items is telling. It may suggest that while the team culture embraces vulnerability in learning (asking questions), there may be more work to do in making disagreement and constructive challenge feel equally safe. Encouraging open debate, normalizing dissent as part of problem-solving, and visibly rewarding respectful disagreement could help close this gap.

Leadership Support and Trust



The survey results indicate an overall positive perception of leadership support, with 75% of respondents selecting either “Somewhat Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” This reflects a generally trusting relationship between the team and its leadership, which is crucial for fostering psychological safety.

However, the split between moderate and strong agreement and the presence of 25% of responses in the disagreement categories suggests there is still room to strengthen this trust.

While most employees feel supported, a notable minority may not consistently experience that support, especially during challenging moments.

These findings highlight the importance of continued leader visibility, open communication, and regular individual check-ins. Reinforcing support through consistent feedback and responsiveness can help shift moderate trust to strong confidence a shift that can further encourage innovation, openness, and team cohesion.

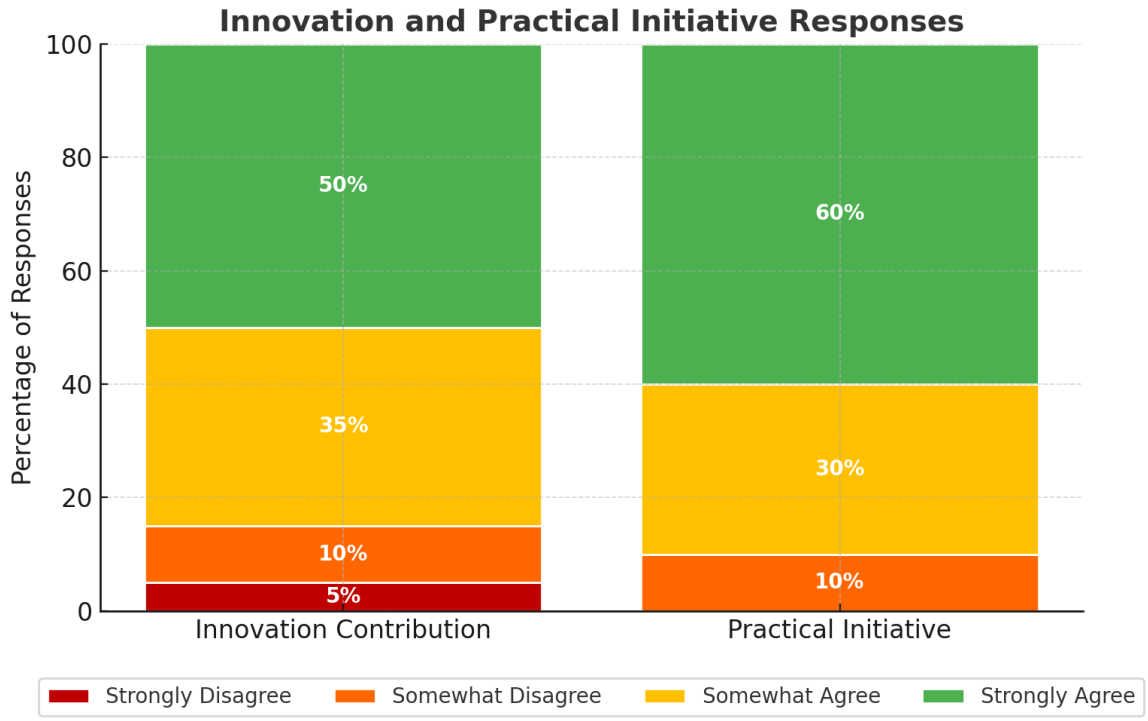
Handling Mistakes and Learning Culture

When asked whether mistakes are treated as learning opportunities and whether they feel safe admitting mistakes, all participants leaned toward agreement, with a notable portion selecting "Strongly Agree." This points to the presence of a supportive, low-blame environment where errors are not penalized but instead viewed as valuable moments for learning and growth.

Such a response pattern reflects a high level of psychological safety, where team members feel comfortable being vulnerable a crucial condition for open communication, creativity, and continuous improvement. It suggests that employees are not only willing to take interpersonal risks, such as admitting fault or asking for help, but also trust that their honesty will be met with understanding rather than criticism.

This cultural dynamic is especially important in fast-paced or high-pressure environments like customer support, where decisions are often made quickly and mistakes are inevitable. A team that encourages learning from failure rather than assigning blame is more likely to adapt, share knowledge, and innovate over time reinforcing the foundation for long-term team resilience and success.

Innovation and Low-Level Risk-Taking



On the question of whether innovation is expected within the team, most respondents selected "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," indicating that innovation is generally seen as part of the team's role. However, a small portion expressed mild disagreement, suggesting that the formal expectation of innovation may not be consistently communicated or interpreted across the group.

In contrast, responses to more practical statements such as feeling comfortable making small changes to one's work and speaking up when identifying better customer solutions showed very strong levels of agreement. This suggests that while broader or formal innovation may feel abstract or less clearly defined, everyday initiative and continuous improvement behaviours are both supported and normalized.

This pattern highlights an important distinction: innovation is not always associated with large-scale change, but can also be expressed through small, proactive actions that improve service or internal processes. The team appears to operate in a climate where bottom-up

problem-solving is welcomed, reinforcing the psychological safety needed to take initiative without fear of negative consequences.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The final two questions asked respondents to share short reflections related to psychological safety and team culture.

"Have you ever held back from suggesting an idea?"

Responses were mixed. Some participants said they always feel comfortable sharing ideas, describing the environment as respectful and open. Others admitted to holding back either because they doubted the value of their idea or felt their input wouldn't make a difference. This suggests that while the team's culture is broadly open, a few individuals experience internal or interpersonal barriers to speaking up.

Key themes identified:

1. Self-doubt or undervaluing one's own ideas
2. Perceived lack of impact or follow-up on suggestions
3. A majority still affirming a safe, inclusive atmosphere

Team Member Responses
"The team feels like a family, even if we work remotely."
"Sometimes I feel like my ideas don't reach the manager level."
"We support each other a lot, even when under pressure."
"Risk-taking is encouraged, but only within certain limits."

"What makes working in our team enjoyable or rewarding?"

Responses here were overwhelmingly positive and focused on interpersonal support and shared purpose. Recurring themes included:

Team closeness and collaboration: e.g., "We are a text away," "Helping people when we can"

Positive emotional culture: "The sense of togetherness," "Support and collaboration"

Value for diversity and open dialogue: "Different ideas and opinions," "More creativity, more communication"

These insights offer qualitative confirmation of the psychological safety reflected in the Likert responses.

4.3 Summary of Findings

Overall, the data suggests that the TNC team operates in an environment of high psychological safety, with team members feeling empowered to ask questions, share ideas, admit mistakes, and take initiative. Trust in leadership is present, though not unanimously strong, and while formal innovation may not be perceived as a constant expectation, everyday creativity and process improvement are clearly supported.

While most responses were positive, the presence of a few hesitant or disengaged voices should not be overlooked. These findings reflect research suggesting that psychological safety is not static, but shaped by daily interactions, leadership behaviour, and shifting team dynamics.

In addition to the patterns identified in the quantitative data, a deeper examination of the open-ended responses revealed subtle yet critical aspects in the team's experience of trust,

psychological safety, and innovation. While the overall tone of the feedback reflected a strong sense of camaraderie and peer support, several participants voiced concerns regarding decision-making bottlenecks and a lack of autonomy in certain scenarios. This reflects a tension between the team's desire to act decisively in customer-facing situations and the organizational requirement for managerial approvals.

These insights suggest that while psychological safety is present at the peer level, it is occasionally constrained by hierarchical structures that limit risk-taking behaviours. Furthermore, some responses hinted at feelings of being overlooked or unheard by management, highlighting an opportunity for leaders to engage more proactively in open dialogue and recognition practices. These reflections provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the team's dynamics, reinforcing the importance of leadership clarity and empowerment in fostering an innovative and psychologically safe environment.

The data collected here will be explored in more depth in the following chapter, using real workplace experiences to bring the findings into a practical, real-life context.

Chapter 5: Case Study – The TNC Team at a multinational automotive services company

5.1 Team Background

The TNC (Transportation Network Company) team was formed following a major organizational transition. Previously working only under the MCC (Member Care Centre) team, which focused on short-term B2C van rentals, the team was repositioned to handle B2B services for Uber drivers and gig-economy entrepreneurs, managing long-term car rentals. This shift from customer-focused to business-focused service delivery brought new challenges in systems, customer expectations, and operational complexity.

Compounding this transition was a change in leadership, including a new manager with a different management style and the departure of a long-time supervisor. These changes were disruptive, especially during a period that demanded quick adaptation.

The combination of a new team identity, different workflows, and leadership change created operational instability and emotional uncertainty. Yet, the team remained united a testament to strong internal communication, mutual support, and a shared commitment to high performance.

5.2 Psychological Safety

One example of psychological safety involved a colleague who mistakenly applied a £1,000 excess charge to a customer for a windscreen replacement when the correct charge should have been £500, in line with standard operating procedures (SOPs). Instead of reacting with blame or frustration, the manager approached the error as a teachable moment. They calmly explained the proper SOPs, highlighting the different charges depending on the type of damage and encouraged the colleague to review the documentation for future cases.

This experience reflects high psychological safety the team member felt safe enough to report the mistake, and the manager's measured, constructive response demonstrated that errors were not punished but seen as opportunities to learn. This aligns directly with Edmondson's definition of a psychologically safe environment, where individuals can take interpersonal risks without fear of humiliation or punishment.

Reflection: This moment reinforced the belief that it's okay to be wrong sometimes what matters is that you learn, and the team improves. It builds trust in leadership and makes you more confident in taking ownership.

5.3 Innovation

Innovation in the TNC team often occurs at the level of process adaptation rather than large-scale initiatives.

One such example came from a team member who was struggling with productivity after moving from the MCC team to TNC. Previously achieving 100–130% productivity, they now found themselves operating at around 30%, mainly because many new TNC tasks required managerial approval, and their working hours did not always overlap with available supervisors.

To solve this, the team member proposed a simple yet effective idea: continue to process MCC-related backlog emails during times when TNC approvals were pending. Their manager welcomed the suggestion, and the employee was able to increase their productivity to 90–110%, restoring both confidence and performance.

This is a clear case of bottom-up innovation not driven by hierarchy or formal roles, but by individual initiative and practical thinking. It also demonstrates the presence of psychological safety, as the team member felt comfortable enough to suggest a personal solution and was met with support rather than resistance.

Reflection: Innovation doesn't have to be something big. Even adjusting how you work to overcome a blocker is innovation and when leadership supports that, it builds engagement and motivation.

5.4 Trust in Leadership

One of the clearest demonstrations of trust within the team comes from the relationship between team members and their manager. Even outside working hours, the team leader is known to be responsive via WhatsApp, consistently providing support when team members encounter difficulties or need quick guidance.

This consistent availability, even informally, builds a strong sense of reliability and support. The fact that employees feel they can reach out without hesitation shows a high level of vertical trust, a key dimension in organizational behaviour studies. Trust in leadership is a cornerstone of psychological safety and, by extension, employee performance and resilience.

Reflection: It's reassuring to know that if I'm stuck, even if she's not working, I won't be ignored. That kind of access builds real loyalty and trust.

5.5 Risk-Taking Behaviour

The team's environment also encourages informed risk-taking, particularly in time-sensitive situations. In instances where a manager is unavailable, team members are trusted to make decisions independently if they are thought through and justifiable.

Even when a decision turns out to be incorrect, the response from leadership tends to be constructive. Employees are expected to be accountable but not penalized for initiative. This reinforces a culture where calculated risks are viewed as part of professional growth.

Reflection: Knowing I won't be punished for doing my best even if I'm wrong gives me the confidence to act when I need to. That kind of freedom pushes you to grow.

5.6 Team Challenges and Resilience

The team has faced significant challenges over the past year. The transition from MCC to TNC involved more than a new client type it meant adopting entirely new workflows, systems, and customer expectations. At the same time, the team underwent a leadership change, with a new manager bringing a different style, priorities, and expectations.

This combination led to periods of instability, increased pressure to perform, and frequent changes in internal routines. Despite this, the team managed to remain united, thanks to a strong foundation of peer communication, shared understanding, and mutual respect.

Reflection: The change in structure and leadership could have easily created conflict, but instead, it brought us closer. Everyone had to step up and support each other, and that made us stronger.

5.7 Summary of Key Themes

This case study highlights four main takeaways:

Psychological safety is not just a theoretical concept it's visible in how mistakes are handled and how feedback is given.

Innovation and initiative are supported even when they come from individuals outside formal leadership roles.

Trust in leadership and constant availability build resilience and loyalty.

Calculated risk-taking is encouraged, if it is based on sound judgment and accountability.

The case study of the TNC team at a multinational automotive company provides rich insights into how trust, psychological safety, and openness to innovation manifest in practice within a high-pressure, service-oriented environment. The team's experiences demonstrate

that, even amidst ongoing change, including leadership transitions, restructuring, and shifts in operational focus, the preservation of strong interpersonal bonds and open communication can serve as critical stabilizing forces. These real-life narratives reinforce the survey findings, which highlighted a generally high level of psychological safety among team members, particularly in peer-to-peer interactions. The team's ability to openly admit mistakes, collaborate across functions, and propose improvements despite the constraints of remote work reflects a culture where psychological safety is actively upheld within the team's internal dynamics.

However, the case study also mirrors the survey's findings concerning limitations in trust toward managerial levels and the challenges associated with risk-taking behaviours in hierarchical settings. The examples of team members feeling hesitant to take autonomous decisions, coupled with frustrations about rigid approval processes, reveal that while psychological safety thrives at the team level, it remains fragile when interfacing with broader organizational structures. These patterns align closely with the literature, particularly Edmondson's (1999) emphasis on the role of leadership in reinforcing psychological safety, and Detert and Burris's (2007) findings on the impact of perceived managerial openness on voice behaviours.

Overall, the TNC team case study adds depth and authenticity to the quantitative data, highlighting both the strengths and areas for growth within the team's cultural fabric. It emphasizes the critical role of leadership in bridging the gap between a supportive peer culture and broader organizational trust, ensuring that psychological safety not only exists within the team but is also supported and reinforced by the wider corporate environment. This sets the foundation for the following discussion chapter, where these findings will be critically compared with existing theories and models to draw broader strategic implications.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Results

The findings from the survey and case study collectively provide an understanding of how psychological safety, trust, and risk-taking behaviours are perceived and enacted within the TNC team of a multinational automotive company. Overall, the data suggests that the team operates in an environment characterized by strong interpersonal trust and a shared commitment to mutual support, particularly at the peer-to-peer level. This is evidenced by the high levels of agreement with statements related to feeling comfortable speaking up, admitting mistakes, and suggesting improvements.

The thematic analysis of open-ended responses further reinforces this, with many participants highlighting the team's collaborative spirit and the sense of community, despite working in a fully remote setting.

However, the data also reveals important tensions and areas where psychological safety appears to be constrained, particularly in interactions with leadership and in decision-making scenarios involving risk-taking. A notable proportion of participants expressed feelings of frustration with rigid approval processes and a perceived lack of managerial attentiveness to employee suggestions. This indicates a divergence between the high psychological safety within the team and more cautious or restrained behaviours when it comes to hierarchical dynamics. These patterns suggest that while the team has successfully cultivated a psychologically safe microclimate internally, there are barriers that limit the extension of this safety into interactions with broader organizational structures.

Moreover, the data points to an undercurrent of organizational silence in certain contexts, where employees may hold back ideas or concerns, particularly when the outcomes are

uncertain or perceived as risky. This reflects the classic findings of Morrison and Milliken (2000), who emphasize the prevalence of silence in organizations with unclear or unsupportive leadership communication channels. The case study examples, such as the handling of mistakes and the need for clear escalation protocols, further illustrate how these dynamics play out in day-to-day operations.

Overall, the interpretation of the results indicates that while the team exhibits strong psychological safety within its immediate environment, structural and leadership-related factors may be inhibiting the full realization of a culture that supports open risk-taking and innovation across all levels. These findings will be further explored in the following section, where they will be compared with the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review to identify consistencies, contradictions, and implications for practice.

6.2 Comparison with Literature

The findings from the survey and case study show strong alignment with several key theories discussed in the literature review. Consistent with Edmondson's (1999) model of psychological safety, the results demonstrate that the TNC team exhibits many of the behaviours characteristic of psychologically safe teams, including openness in communication, willingness to admit mistakes, and proactive problem-solving. The team's capacity to maintain these dynamics despite the challenges of remote work further supports Edmondson and Lei's (2014) assertion that psychological safety can be fostered even in high-pressure and virtual environments, if leadership behaviours and team norms support such a culture.

Furthermore, the results reinforce insights from Google's Project Aristotle (Rozovsky, 2015), which identified psychological safety as the most critical factor in high-performing teams. The survey findings suggest that within the TNC team, peer relationships and mutual support

are significant drivers of team effectiveness and morale, aligning with the notion that team climate often outweighs individual skillsets in determining success. Similarly, the team's ability to collaborate across functions and share knowledge reflects the conditions necessary for both incremental and, to a lesser extent, radical innovation, as shown by Amabile and Kramer (2011).

However, the data also highlights some tensions that complicate these positive dynamics. The expressed dissatisfaction with managerial support and the perception that risk-taking is constrained by rigid approval processes reflect the organizational barriers to psychological safety and innovation identified by Detert and Burris (2007) and Morrison and Milliken (2000). These findings illustrate that while the team operates effectively at a micro-level, there are structural and cultural inhibitors at the organizational level that may undermine employee voice and constrain innovation. This is particularly relevant in-service organizations where quick decision-making and frontline autonomy are critical to customer satisfaction and operational efficiency.

Moreover, the findings regarding the team's resilience during periods of leadership transition and operational restructuring mirror Carmeli and Gittell's (2009) work on relational coordination, where strong interpersonal trust and communication act as buffers against uncertainty and change. The team's ability to remain cohesive and maintain psychological safety during such transitions highlights the value of embedded trust networks but also raises questions about how these networks interact with formal organizational processes and leadership hierarchies.

Overall, the findings broadly support the theoretical frameworks explored in Chapter 2, particularly the importance of psychological safety as an enabler of voice behaviour, innovation, and resilience. However, they also reveal contradictions, particularly in the gap

between team-level safety and organizational-level support for risk-taking and decision-making autonomy.

These discrepancies underscore the need for leadership to actively bridge the gap between team culture and broader organizational practices to create a truly integrated environment of psychological safety and innovation.

6.3 Practical Implications

The results of this study carry several practical implications for management teams in service-based, remote, and high-responsibility environments:

Regular One-to-One Meetings

One of the clearest takeaways is the need for more structured, one-on-one interactions between team leaders and their employees. Participants indicated that such touchpoints are currently lacking. Even brief, five-minute check-ins could make a significant difference in building trust, clarifying expectations, and making employees feel valued**.**

Clear Guidelines for Risk-Taking

While employees reported feeling that they wouldn't be punished for making informed decisions, there was also uncertainty about where the line is drawn between acceptable autonomy and situations that require managerial approval.

Organizations should provide clearer frameworks on when independent decision-making is encouraged, and when escalation is necessary which could help reduce hesitation and increase confidence.

Encouraging Innovation through Autonomy

Participants expressed that more freedom to innovate would improve both creativity and job satisfaction. Allowing employees to take ownership of small improvements or pilot ideas promotes a culture of shared accountability and continuous improvement. This is especially relevant in remote settings, where engagement can quickly erode without opportunities to contribute meaningfully.

Trust-Building Across the Team

Though overall team cohesion is high, the mixed responses around trust in leadership suggest a need for more proactive transparency, responsiveness, and involvement from managers. Building trust is especially critical during transitions, such as changes in leadership style, operational focus, or internal restructuring.

6.4 Study Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size, which restricts the ability to generalize the findings to the wider organization or industry. Additionally, the use of self-reported survey data introduces potential bias, as participants may be reluctant to share negative views or may interpret questions differently.

Another limitation is the researcher's dual role as both participant and analyst. While this provided access to valuable insider insights, it also raises the risk of confirmation bias. Care was taken to balance personal experience with objective interpretation, supported by anonymous survey data.

6.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand on these findings by:

1. Conducting similar studies across multiple departments or companies to assess how organizational context influences psychological safety.

2. Exploring longitudinal changes in psychological safety for example, how team culture evolves over time after a management change.
3. Investigating the role of peer-to-peer relationships in remote environments, and how they might substitute or supplement formal leadership.
4. More in-depth interviews or focus groups could also provide deeper insight into why certain employees feel less safe or less heard, adding richness to the quantitative data.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the role of psychological safety in shaping risk-taking and innovation within a team operating in a multinational automotive company. By combining survey results with a case study of a real-life operational support team, the research sought to understand how trust, communication, and team dynamics influence employees' willingness to speak up, suggest ideas, and act with initiative.

The findings revealed a generally high level of psychological safety within the team. Most employees felt comfortable admitting mistakes, asking for help, and proposing improvements. The presence of supportive leadership, strong peer relationships, and a shared commitment to the team's goals enabled team members to navigate a demanding and fast-paced environment effectively even in the face of major structural and managerial changes.

However, the study also identified areas where psychological safety was not consistently experienced. A few participants expressed concerns about not feeling heard or valued by leadership, suggesting that trust can vary between individuals. These insights highlight that psychological safety is not a static trait of a team but a dynamic condition that requires active maintenance.

A particularly powerful takeaway from this research is the strength of team community in a fully remote environment. Despite working from home, participants consistently emphasized the sense of connection, collaboration, and mutual support they experience demonstrating that psychological safety is possible in virtual teams, but requires effort, openness, and communication.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from this study, several practical recommendations can be made for team leaders and organizational decision-makers:

1. Introduce Regular One-to-One Check-Ins

Managers should hold short, regular one-to-one meetings with their team members. Even a 5–10 minute catch-up can provide space for honest feedback, emotional support, and clarification of expectations. This can help build trust, surface hidden concerns, and reinforce the feeling that each team member is seen and valued.

2. Clarify Boundaries for Independent Decision-Making

Employees reported uncertainty about when they could make autonomous decisions and when managerial approval was required. Leaders should provide clear guidelines or examples of acceptable risk-taking to empower informed judgment calls. This clarity would reduce hesitation and improve response times in customer-facing work.

3. Encourage Low-Level Innovation Through Flexibility

Team members often show initiative by making small adjustments or suggesting process improvements. Management should create space for employees to experiment, even informally. Recognizing these efforts and giving employees freedom to solve problems on their own boost's engagement, autonomy, and innovation.

4. Maintain and Reinforce Remote Team Cohesion

While strong community was noted in this remote team, it should not be taken for granted. Continued efforts to celebrate teamwork, hold informal check-ins, and support peer-to-peer communication are essential to keeping morale high and psychological safety intact in virtual settings.

7.3 Limitations

This research has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small, which limits the generalizability of the survey findings. Secondly, all participants were from a single team within one company, which may not reflect broader organizational dynamics. Third, the researcher was also a team member, which brings valuable insider knowledge but also potential bias in interpretation.

Additionally, time and resource constraints limited the ability to conduct more in-depth interviews, which could have added greater nuance to the qualitative analysis.

7.4 Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand on this work by:

1. Conducting comparative research across multiple departments or companies to identify broader patterns
2. Exploring how psychological safety develops over time during periods of change or onboarding
3. Investigating the difference in team dynamics between in-person and remote teams
4. Using larger-scale surveys combined with focus groups or interviews to deepen understanding of individual experiences
5. These directions could build on the foundation laid by this study and offer deeper insight into how psychological safety can be used strategically to support innovation, resilience, and long-term team effectiveness.

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Appendix – Survey Instrument

Closed-Ended Questions

Response format: 4-point Likert Scale

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree 4 = Strongly Agree)

1. I feel comfortable speaking up when I disagree with others on the team.
2. I feel encouraged to ask questions when something is unclear, even if I think I should already know the answer.
3. I trust my team leader to support me when I face challenges at work.
4. When I make a mistake, it is treated as an opportunity to learn rather than a reason for criticism.
5. I feel safe admitting when I've made a mistake.
6. Innovation is something our team is expected to contribute to.
7. I feel comfortable making small changes to how I work if I think it could improve the outcome.
8. If I notice a better solution for a customer issue, I feel confident speaking up about it.

Open-Ended Questions

9. Have you ever held back from suggesting an idea? If so, why?
10. What makes working in our team enjoyable or rewarding?