



## Faith, Trust, and Transformation: A Christian Retrospective on Psychological Safety and Cultural Evolution

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### Abstract

Psychological safety, rooted in trust and open communication, has emerged as a pivotal element in workplace culture in recent decades. This paper examines the evolution of psychological safety from its early stages in the 1960s to its current prominence and future trajectory, while considering its implications through a Christian perspective. Workplaces initially operated under hierarchies that deterred open dialogue and innovation. However, over the past 20 years, organizations recognized the impact of psychological safety on employee well-being, engagement, and performance. This shift, demonstrated by Google's Project Aristotle, emphasized its role in fostering high-performing teams. Psychological safety aligns with Christian principles of love, compassion, and servant leadership, creating safe environments mirroring biblical teachings. It significantly enhances employee well-being, engagement, and performance, enabling teams to learn and grow effectively.

Future workplace trends, including inclusion, ethical leadership, crisis resilience, and purpose-driven cultures, further highlight the synergy between psychological safety and Christian values.

This paper illustrates how psychological safety, interwoven with Christian principles, shapes workplace cultures by promoting trust, unity, and empathy. As organizations move forward, psychological safety will remain pivotal in creating environments conducive to open communication, ethical decision-making, and alignment with shared objectives, echoing timeless biblical teachings.

Keywords: psychological safety, trust, biblical principles, teams, highly effective teams, impact, culture

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Psychological safety is a concept rooted in trust and open communication. It has become a defining component of workplace culture in the past 2 decades. This paper explores the evolution of psychological safety in work environments, tracing its development in the 1960s and projecting its trajectory into the future while considering its implications from a Christian perspective.

Two decades ago, workplaces often operated under hierarchies that discouraged open dialogue, innovation, and risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). Employees hesitated to voice opinions and concerns out of fear of retribution. During this time, the concept of psychological safety was in its infancy, with limited consideration of its impact on workplace dynamics.

Over the past 2 decades, a shift began to occur as organizations recognized psychological safety's significance in enhancing employee well-being, engagement, and performance. Research, such as Google's Project Aristotle, emphasized its role in creating high-performing teams (Edmondson, 1999). Workplaces gradually embraced inclusive leadership styles and empowered employees to express themselves without fear of repercussions. This evolution gained momentum with the rise of remote work, highlighting the importance of trust, empathy, and clear communication (Edmondson & Mortensen, 2021). However, psychological safety is only sometimes the norm in the workplace.

From a Christian perspective, psychological safety aligns with biblical principles of love, grace, and community. The teachings of Christ emphasize compassion, forgiveness, and humility, which provide a foundation for creating safe environments where individuals can freely express themselves. We see this established throughout the Bible with several examples of servant leadership and creating environments of safety. A biblical example is the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 in which a Samaritan (typically seen as an outsider) helps an injured man who is ignored by others. This story emphasizes compassion, empathy, and the importance of helping others despite individual differences.

## History of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety was first explored in the 1960s by Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis, who asserted that psychological safety was needed to help individuals better deal with the uncertainty and angst of organizational change (Edmondson, 2019). Fast forward to 1990, psychological safety was brought forward again by Boston University professor William Kahn, who showed how psychological safety helped cultivate employee engagement (Edmondson, 2019). In 1999, Amy Edmondson (2019) brought psychological safety to the main stage with her research that later influenced Google's Project Aristotle. While there are gaps in the timeline of how much psychological safety was talked about, it was always there, sometimes on the sidelines, other times readily spoken about.

Project Aristotle is a study conducted by Google's researchers between 2012-2014, revealing significant variations in psychological safety among teams within the company, demonstrating its correlation with both team learning behaviors and team performance (Edmondson, 2019). The vastness of Google's reach highlighted the resounding impact of psychological safety. In fact, the study got its name as a tribute to Aristotle's famous words, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Schneider, 2017). Google researchers found that psychological safety was the key component to building effective teams.

## Significance and Impact of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is crucial for creating positive work environments to promote well-being, innovation, productivity, and employee satisfaction. As Project Aristotle confirmed, having an effective team creates more productivity. More research has shown an even broader understanding of psychological safety includes organizational support, safety climate, and performance are related (Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023). Leaders should recognize the significance and impact psychological safety has on the organization and intentionally work on creating that environment for their employees. Several impacts of psychological safety are discussed.

Psychological safety enhances employee well-being. This is regarding their mental and emotional well-being in the workplace. There is reduced stress and anxiety, which results in better overall health. Employees do not fear speaking up, both admitting their errors or calling out issues they see around them. Additionally, Wang et al. (2022) asserted that environments with psychological safety reduce employee burnout and overall stress and ultimately increase employee well-being. Sjoblom et al. (2022) suggested that employee well-being is even more of a concern in the remote working environments that have become so prevalent over the last several years. Furthermore, Sjoblom et al. found a positive correlation between employee well-being and psychological safety.

When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more engaged in their work. They are willing to contribute their best work, which leads to increased productivity and overall job satisfaction. Edmondson (2019) described the changing work environment from routine and predictable to tasks requiring more judgment and decision making. This change requires employees to feel safe to speak up, use their voices, and make the judgment calls needed to move business forward. When psychological safety is actively present, leaders can see increased employee satisfaction and engagement (Edmondson, 2019). Trust is a critical component of employee engagement. Mitterer and Mitterer (2023) asserted the importance of leaders demonstrating integrity and genuine concern for the employees to build deeper levels of trust: “Nothing destroys trust faster than hypocrisy from the top” (p. 31).

Performance and employee engagement are closely tied together. Toth (2022) explained how the highest levels of growth happen in psychologically safe environments because employees feel motivated to perform well and are not afraid to share when they make a mistake. Lastly, psychological safety is a critical component of growth. When employees feel unburdened by the fear of speaking out and making mistakes, and when teams are brought together with various perspectives and cultural backgrounds, we create an environment that fosters growth and learning. These insights can then be applied to work, leading to improved engagement and performance.

## Future Trends Shaping the Cultural Evolution

### *Inclusion and Unity*

Psychological safety is a catalyst for valuing and respecting diverse perspectives and working together in a safe environment. With remote and hybrid work here to stay, the talent pool has grown beyond the once-restricted geographical boundaries. This allows for more diverse groups of individuals to work together. Inclusion and unity are strong components of psychological safety; however, the line becomes blurry with blended working structures. For example, scheduling needs, staffing issues, and coordination of decisions all need to consider another layer of circumstances: the personal lives of employees (Edmondson & Mortensen, 2021). Finding ways to build inclusive working environments while working remotely can be complicated; however, leaders must prioritize this.

Diverse teams are thought to outperform homogenous teams due to the varying levels of perspectives, ideas, and opinions; however, Bresman and Edmondson (2022) showed this is not the case. Differing backgrounds, cultures, and even language barriers often result in clashing working environments. Psychological safety can prevent the frustrations of not speaking up, asking questions, and offering different perspectives. Bresman and Edmondson suggested adjusting the framework to overcome these challenges and build psychological safety in diverse teams, creating inclusion and unity. Framing meetings as an opportunity to share opinions and get advice help change the mindset of employees regarding team meetings as places of updates and decision making. Edmondson (2019) asserted the importance of reframing from a leadership perspective because bosses have complete judgment and authority over one's work; it makes sense to fear them. However, to reframe this, the leader sets the direction and invites input for clarity and improvements. Additionally, employees are seen as key contributors and individuals with significant knowledge and insights (Edmondson, 2019).

We see inclusion and unity established throughout the Bible, such as in Galatian 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free nor is there male and female, for you, are all one in Christ Jesus" (*New International Version [NIV]*, 1984), as well as Romans 2:11, "for God does not show favoritism" (*NIV*, 1984). Moving forward, the Christian message around embracing diversity will resonate with the continued efforts to create inclusive working environments.

### *Ethical Leadership*

Biblical principles of integrity and servant leadership align with psychological safety's emphasis on honest communication and trust building. Servant leadership is geared toward helping employees and guiding them by showing compassion, directing focus on their growth, and building trust (Wang et al., 2022). Paying attention to the needs of employees, allowing them the space to take risks, and providing them with the resources they need creates psychological safety—this is servant leadership.

Servant leadership is deeply rooted in Christian teachings and can be seen throughout the Bible as a model for how leaders should treat others. Philippians 2:3-4 states, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (*NIV*, 1984). Selfish ambition can ruin a team and even organizations. Considering the interest of others as more important than oneself links the leader to the teachings of Christ—the true example of leading with humility. Organizations can integrate these values to foster environments of ethical decision making.

Psychological safety aligns with the concept of servant leadership by fostering leadership that focuses on supporting and empowering employees. Hebrews 13:7 is an excellent example: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (*NIV*, 1984). It is up to leaders to put forth an example and prioritize their followers by creating a psychologically safe environment.

### *Crisis Resilience*

The Christian faith’s emphasis on hope and resilience aligns with psychological safety’s role in navigating crises. Crisis happens all around us far too often. Proverbs 24:16 tells us we will keep getting back up, even after falling seven times. The challenges and troubles we face today are training us to be strong for the more complex situations that may arise in the future. Psychological safety aligns with this level of resilience because of the trust and support employees will see from their leaders and team in their time of need. Philippians 4:16 states, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (*NIV*, 1984). Gube and Sabatini-Hennelly (2022) explained that when leaders acknowledge the multiple connections between psychological safety and resilience, they can model the behaviors that encourage open and honest communication while also setting the expectation to enhance integrity, innovation, and inclusivity.

Gube and Sabatini-Hennelly (2022) asserted that resilience is critical for the survival of organizations; psychological safety is at the core of it all. When employees feel safe to speak out, they can challenge directives, they can have open dialogues around issues that could derail or shut the business down, and leaders will embrace the *what if* questions to ensure a culture of curiosity is consistently setting up the organization to be resilient (Gube & Sabatini-Hennelly, 2022). Adapting and building resilience in the ever-changing *new normal* requires a unique level of human interaction. Future workplaces will prioritize emotional support and collaboration during challenging times.

### *Purpose-Driven Cultures*

A purpose-driven culture begins with creating a culture around people. Purpose-driven cultures encourage employees to bring their authentic selves to work, where they can express their feelings, opinions, and values. Schmit (2023) explained the gap between the organization’s actual culture and the desired one. Purpose-driven cultures require all members of the organization to take responsibility for cultivating the desired culture (Schmit, 2023).

Psychological safety resonates with the Christian notion that work should reflect one's vocation, a calling to serve others, and ultimately bring glory to God.

With purpose-driven cultures, organizations will focus on aligning individual purposes with shared goals. This means recognizing and supporting each employee's unique talents and goals and then finding ways to integrate the individual purposes into the organization's mission and vision. Habakkuk 2:2 states, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it" (*NIV*, 1984). Building the culture is a team effort; everyone must see it clearly and understand its importance. Ensuring individual goals and organizational cultures align enhances employee satisfaction and well-being while driving the organization to have a more significant impact. Organizations will focus on aligning individual purposes with collective goals.

## Conclusion

Psychological safety, deeply rooted in trust and communication, has been brought to the forefront over the last several decades, reshaping workplace culture. From its early explorations in the 1960s to the recent prominence and projected future impact, psychological safety is no longer nice to have; it must be a critical component in all organizations. There is a profound connection between psychological safety and Christian perspectives. This paper explored the importance of fostering an environment of trust, respect, and support, and it was seen how these values align seamlessly with the teachings of love, compassion, humility, and servant leadership found in the Christian faith.

The historical journey of psychological safety emphasizes the shift from hierarchical, closed-off environments to those that encourage open dialogue, innovation, and risk taking. Edmondson (2019) emphasized the importance of fearless communication and its value in crisis situations where decisions must be made quickly, and consequences can be severe. Acts 18:9-10 provides a perfect example of psychological safety:

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (*NIV*, 1984).

The safety from God allows us to find the strength to speak out. The safety provided by leadership in psychologically safe environments removes fear.

The integration of psychological safety and Christian principles is a powerful catalyst for creating inclusive and ethical workplaces and a testament to the transformative potential of faith in our professional lives. It resonates with the pursuit of spiritual and emotional well-being, unity in diversity, ethical decision making, resilience during crises, and the alignment of individual purposes with collective goals. As organizations look ahead, psychological safety will continue to shape workplace cultures, fostering environments of open communication, trust, and empathy. It is a concept that is intensely intertwined with both the evolution of modern workspaces,

including remote and hybrid environments, and the timeless teaching found in the Bible. “Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:9, *NIV*, 1984).

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### About the Author

Dr. Jenipher D. Cornelius received her Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University. She is an adjunct professor with Doane University and CSU Global in the School of Business. Dr. Cornelius works as an organizational change management consultant focusing on both large and small change initiatives. She is also a contributor at Sanctuary Magazine writing on topics around leadership, business, and money. Dr. Cornelius has nearly 20 years of experience in the finance industry before changing careers to teaching and consulting.

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