

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEADER TRANSGRESSION FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF EMPLOYEES WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF SENSORY SENSITIVITY

Milena GOJNY-ZBIEROWSKA

University of Economics in Katowice; milena.gojny@ue.katowice.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-5385-9324

Purpose: The psychological safety of employees is a state that has a positive effect on the efficiency of their work and the effectiveness of the entire organisation. Events bringing a feeling of danger that are outside the control of us as individuals, that is the pandemic and now the war beyond our eastern border, have decreased the sense of safety in whole societies. Such a situation gives rise to the need to identify the conditions that shape psychological safety so that they can be intentionally modelled within the organizations. The purpose of this paper is to present the analysis of the individual conditions that impact the level of psychological safety when facing the transgressive behaviour of the leader.

Design/methodology/approach: This article is theoretical and presents the results of literature analysis.

Findings: The result of the analysis is a proposed relationship between a superior's transgression and an employee's psychological safety, along with the moderating role of the employee's sensory processing sensitivity, and the locus of control.

Practical implications: A proposal has been presented here for reducing the effect of a leader's transgressive behaviour (taking into account the dimensions of severity and frequency) on employees' psychological safety. HRM practices implementing a strategy of inducing psychological safety should take into account protection of employee limits in order to reduce the possibility of transgressive behaviour occurring. It is also important to create optimal working conditions for people with raised sensory processing sensitivity.

Originality/value: The paper addresses the question of individual conditions of a sense of safety based on an identified research gap. Recent years have seen an increase in interest among researchers in the topic of employee psychological safety, its antecedents and its consequences for behaviours within an organisation. The current situation is unprecedented and have decreased the sense of safety so the discussion presented in the paper is original and has a great value.

Keywords: Psychological Safety, Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Transgression, Locus of Control, High Sensory Sensitivity.

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

The two years of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in deterioration in the psychological health of people around the world. Data collected so far indicates an increase in mental health issues, especially neurotic conditions and mood disorders (depression) (anxiety disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress), which are caused by increased fear, and a loss of a sense of safety and control (GUS, 2020; Pierce et al., 2021). The observed continuing distress and anxiety, the feeling of helplessness at the inability to escape, and even panic attacks, despair and a sense of hopelessness constitute acute pandemic stress disorder and are connected to the loss of the psychological safety (Heitzman, 2020). With the ongoing war in progress nearby, it can be assumed that feelings of danger, fear and stress will grow in countries bordering Ukraine. Lack of control over the changing reality, perceived as unsure or threatening, as well as the permanent psychological tension, both require significant adaptative skills and engage defence mechanisms. One of these is the search for a safe place in which people can maintain good, safe interpersonal relations (Heitzman, 2020). A counterbalance to the unpredictable outside world and the resulting sense of danger can be a predictable and safe workplace (Heitzman, 2020).

This article will present an analysis of the current state of knowledge in the field of psychological safety, and the research gap resulting from this analysis. Further research directions will be proposed. Psychological safety is currently a highly relevant topic and is of importance due to its significance for organisations. The research topic is a response to the identified need to reinforce employees' sense of psychological safety in the context of our changing reality and alarming data on its effect on people's mental health. The analysis extends beyond the study of organisations and is based heavily on psychology. The research proposals presented in the article are a development of the theory of the sense of psychological safety, and the resulting development of the general concept related to the psychology of the person in organisations. In addition, the phenomenon of transgression in superior-employee relations is as yet poorly described, and the proposal describing the importance of leader transgression on the feeling of safety contributes to the theory of leadership.

2. Psychological safety of the employee in organisations

In classic needs theories describing the motivating mechanisms of the individual, one of the basic needs identified is that of safety. Satisfying the need for safety creates the conditions for realising needs of a higher order, such as the need for belonging, recognition or self-achievement (Maslow, 1954). Psychological safety is a concept that grew out of psychology

and is used in the field of organisational behaviours, and is attracting ever more attention from management researchers. Psychological safety is a cognitive state that is the result of assessment of the surroundings as accepting and friendly, an environment in which it is safe to take risks, e.g. interpersonal risk, in which making a mistake does not result in social ostracism (Edmondson, 1999). Research into the feeling of safety is on four levels, individual, group, organisational and superior-employee dyads. On the individual level, the majority of research shows the relation between the feeling of safety and organisational behaviours, such as thriving (Jiang et al., 2019), identification with the organisation (Liu et al., 2015), effectiveness (Obrenovic et al., 2020), innovativeness (Sun, Huang, 2019), creativity and knowledge sharing (Wang, Liu, Zhu, 2018). Safety gives employees the courage to undertake activities (Chen et al., 2019), engage in voice behaviours (Xu et al., 2019), come up with ideas (Wang, Liu, Zhu, 2018) and put them into practice (Agarwal, Ferndale, 2017). Similarly to deprivation, the need for safety decreases cognitive abilities and effectiveness of action (Maslow, 1954), and low psychological safety lowers vitality and the learning processes that go to make up thriving at work (Jiang et al., 2019).

The group level emphasises the differences between teams at the level of psychological safety, even within the same organisation. The most frequently cited definition of a feeling of psychological safety in its original version refers to the belief shared by team members in a given group that it is possible to openly express one's opinions and emotions (Edmondson, 1996). The group level is often connected to team atmosphere, team effectiveness (Edmondson, 1999; Akan, Jack, Mehta, 2020), learning as a team (Edmondson, 1999; Jha, 2019), team creativity (Greenbaum et al., 2020), identification with the team (Johnson and Avolio, 2019), and the quality of decisions taken as a team (Zhou, Zhu, Vredenburg, 2020). Aggregation of the feeling of psychological safety at the organisation level enables analysis of its relation with other organisational attributes such as effectiveness (Baer, Frese, 2003), change and culture (Cataldo, Raelin, Lambert, 2009). The feeling of psychological safety is a state that conditions an employee's adaptive mechanisms with regard to changes occurring in the organisation. From an organisational perspective, research has also been conducted into the significance of strategies and organisational practices, for example in the field of human resources management, in building a feeling of psychological safety within an organisation (Agarwal, Ferndale, 2017). Of key importance for an employee's feeling of psychological safety are their relations with their employer, the characteristics of the leader and the style of leadership. Research into subordinate-superior pairs has revealed that the matching personalities of both in terms of high proactiveness leads to a higher level of psychological safety in the employee (Xu et al., 2019). A high level of psychological capital in the leader strengthens the psychological safety of the employee (Wang, Chen, Zhu, 2021), as does the prosocial motivation of the leader, which is an additional predictor of a feeling of safety in the leader themselves (Frazier, Tupper, 2018).

Figure 1 presents a map of the co-occurring keywords that appear most frequently in literature on the topic of the feeling of psychological safety. The graphical representation of the network of connections was created using the VOS Viewer programme. The strength of the connections between the variables is expressed by the distance between them in the figure, and the frequency of occurrence of a given variable by the size of font and the circle indicating it. The lines between the variables indicate the relations between them described in the literature. The closer two values are to one another, the stronger the connection between them (Van Eck, Waltman, 2019). To create the map, words were used that appeared in the title, abstract and keywords found in a selected collection of over 900 articles from the Web of Science database. Effectiveness appears most frequently in relation with psychological safety, and is also in closest proximity. Having equally strong relations with psychological safety are: sharing knowledge, atmosphere, and transformational, ethical and servant leadership. Additionally, leadership styles that are paternalistic, abusive, authentic, inclusive and empowering feature as key variables in the feeling of psychological safety, which shows how important the style of management and type of leadership are in this context. The analysis also shows the connections between psychological safety and learning, innovativeness, creativity and knowledge sharing, that is cognitive activity on the part of employees and whole teams. Organisational culture and atmosphere provide a broader context for psychological safety. The culture can create a safe environment through its component values, norms and rituals, thus strengthening the feeling of safety. Atmosphere, as visible in the connections map, is a dimension in closer relation to the feeling of safety. In the literature, there is the concept of atmosphere of psychological safety, defined as an atmosphere that is conducive to overcoming anxiety and fear of failure (Wang et al., 2019). As shown in research, it is also strongly connected to an atmosphere for taking the initiative (Carmeli et al., 2013). Individual factors that are induced by psychological safety include not only creativity (Liu et al., 2016; Wang, Liu, Zhu, 2018) but, as illustrated in the connections map, also motivation to work, involvement, trust, prosocial behaviour and satisfaction with work.

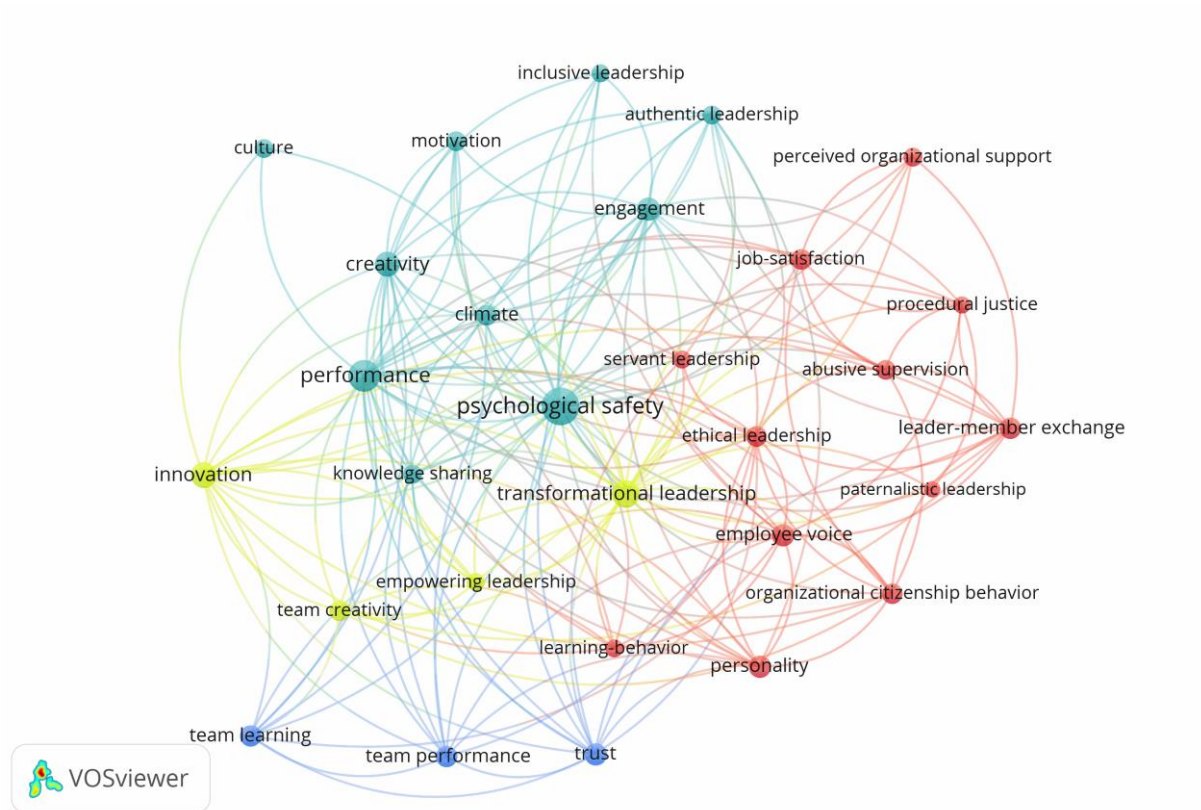


Figure 1. Keyword co-occurrence mapping of the psychological safety in literature.

Source: own elaboration using VOS Viewer software.

3. Relationship between a leader's transgression behaviours and an employee's psychological safety

The majority of research into the effect of a leader on an employee's psychological safety focuses on positive styles of leadership such as authentic, empowering, transformational, ethical and servant. This may at least in part result from the fact that recent years have seen a blossoming of theories in the field of positive research on organisations, also in the theory of leadership. Leader transgression is defined as a (dysfunctional) behaviour contrary to the accepted societal principles, norms and practices in a given organisation (Shapiro et al., 2011). The perception of a leader's behaviour as transgressive or not is linked to the individual character of the relations between the superior and the employee, the conditions of such relations and its assumptions (Epitropaki, 2020, p. 11). The effects of transgression are, among others, the intention to leave, withdrawal (Shapiro et al., 2011), loss of trust towards the leader and damage to employee well-being (Byrne, Barling, Dupre, 2014). There is a lack of research into the effects of transgression itself and its consequences for organisational behaviours. The majority of studies on transgression focus on the importance of the properties of transgression and possible correctional strategies for the leader. The relationship between the

superior and the subordinate is a relationship between two people, in which trust and a feeling of safety are built through mutual respect, support and positive action. For this reason, it can be assumed that transgressive behaviour will decrease this feeling of support.

Proposal 1: A leader's transgressive behaviour decreases the psychological safety of the employee.

From the perspective of the effects of transgression, of key importance are features such as frequency, severity and whether correctional action has been taken by the leader, and if so what action. These properties also have an effect on the superior-employee relationship, on trust in this relationship and whether it will be rebuilt (Byrne, Barling, Dupre, 2014). The greater the severity of the leader's negative behaviour towards the employee, the more often this behaviour occurs, and the more likely that the feeling of safety will be lower.

Proposal 2: Employee psychological safety will decrease along with the severity of a leader's transgressive behaviour.

Proposal 3: Employee psychological safety will decrease along with the frequency of a leader's transgressive behaviour.

4. The moderating role of sensory processing sensitivity and the locus of control

Personality traits and psychosocial competences have an influence on how we interpret the behaviours of others and the reality surrounding us, as well as on how we react in a given situation and how we behave. In their research into the antecedents of psychological safety, Edmondson and Mogelof (2006) discovered that people with a higher level of neuroticism experienced lower psychological safety. Individual differences in perception of the surroundings can have an effect on whether a given behaviour is interpreted as threatening, transgressive or not (Epitropaki et al., 2020). Sensory processing sensitivity is a trait linked to personality conditions of perceiving reality, and is a feature that is relatively long-lasting and at least partly conditioned genetically (Assary et al., 2019). People with high sensory sensitivity are characterised by deeper processing of the stimuli they are exposed to and a lower level of arousal resulting from them. These properties mean a greater sensitivity to aesthetic experiences, art and beauty, but also the undergoing of unpleasant experiences and a lower level of arousal as a result of sensory stimuli. People with a higher level of sensory sensitivity feel overwhelmed by external and internal stimuli much more quickly than others (Aron, Aron, 1997), and are more attentive to subtleties (Graven et al., 2019). Sensory processing sensitivity is connected to neuroticism, that is negative emotionality and introversion (Aron, Aron, 1997).

Sensory processing sensitivity is not a disorder, but in people with high sensitivity, negative stimuli increase the likelihood of anxiety (Meredith et al., 2016), depression (Bakker, Moulding, 2012), problems with regulating emotions (Brindle et al., 2015), a higher level of stress (Bakker, Moulding, 2012), and a lower level of subjective happiness (Sobocko, Zelenski, 2015). For this reason, people with heightened sensory processing sensitivity may on the one hand be more sensitive to a superior's gestures, and more quickly assess them as threatening and exceeding certain limits. On the other hand, such behaviour in a leader may trigger more negative emotions in them than for other employees. In addition, this group of subordinates may have greater difficulties freeing themselves from a bad impression about the employer after their transgressive behaviour or forgetting about it. These three mechanisms provide a basis for:

Proposal 4: The negative relationship between a transgressive superior and the psychological safety of the employee will be intensified the higher the level of sensory processing sensitivity in the employee.

Transgressive behaviour is initiated by the superior, while the employee has no control over the situation. Internal control gives a feeling of agency and subjectivity in relations with others. Research into the importance of the locus of sense of control for the relationship between negative factors and their consequences at the individual level, indicates that it weakens the negative effect, for example, of stress on psychological well-being (Daniels, Guppy, 1994). In confronting a leader's transgression, an employee with internal control has greater possibilities for influencing their emotional state, maintaining a distance and building a feeling of psychological safety based on their own resources. For this reason, a feeling of control can reduce the negative effect of a superior crossing the line, and therefore the last proposal is:

Proposal 5: The negative relationship between a transgressive superior and the psychological safety of the employee will be more intensified for people with an external locus of control.

5. Summary

The article deals with an important and topical issue. The psychological safety of employees is beneficial for organisations and has a positive effect on employee efficiency (Obrenovic et al., 2020), team effectiveness (Akan, Jack, Metha, 2020), as well as the effectiveness of the entire organisation (Baer, Frese, 2003). Although recent years have brought an increase in interest among researchers in the topic of employees' feeling of safety, its antecedents and consequences for behaviours in organisations, it is only the latest world events that have made us aware of its role in the psychological balance and mental health of every individual person. A proposal has been presented here for reducing the effect of a leader's transgressive behaviour (taking into account the dimensions of severity and frequency) on employees' psychological

safety. Two factors that moderate this relationship have also been proposed. The first is sensory sensitivity to the surroundings, which is a trait that has only recently been described, and as research has shown, affects a significant proportion of the population. Research into the distribution of this trait among the population allows estimates to be made that around 20-30% of people have high sensory processing sensitivity (Lionetti et al., 2018; Greven et al., 2019). As a result, on average one in five people belongs to the group with a raised level of this trait. This means that HRM practices implementing a strategy of inducing psychological safety should take into account protection of employee limits in order to limit the possibility of transgressive behaviour occurring and its negative effect on the feeling of safety. It is also important to create optimal working conditions for people with raised sensory processing sensitivity. The second factor is the locus of the sense of control. Employees with internal control will be more resistant to the negative consequences of a superior's transgressive behaviour on the feeling of safety. For this reason, empowering employees can become one of the HRM practices that supports the preserving of psychological safety despite a leader's transgression.

Acknowledgements

The article is the result of work conducted as part of grant number 2017/27/B/HS4/02172 financed by the National Science Centre.

References

1. Agarwal, P., Farndale, E. (2017). High-performance work systems and creativity implementation: the role of psychological capital and psychological safety. *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 440-458.
2. Akan, O.H., Jack, E.P., Mehta, A. (2020). Conrescent conversation environment, psychological safety, and team effectiveness: examining a mediation model. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal*. Vol. 26, No. 1/2, pp. 29-51
3. Aron, E.N., Aron, A. (1997). Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, Vol. 73, No. 2.
4. Assary, E., Vincent, J.P., Keers, R., Pluess, M. (2017). *Gene-environment interaction and psychiatric disorders: review and future directions*. Paper Presented at the Seminars in Cell Developmental Biology.

5. Baer, M., Frese, M. (2003). Innovation is not enough: Climates for initiative and psychological safety, process innovations, and firm performance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 45-68.
6. Bakker, K., Moulding, R. (2012). Sensory-processing sensitivity, dispositional mindfulness and negative psychological symptoms. *Personality and individual differences*, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 341-346.
7. Brindle, K., Moulding, R., Bakker, K., Nedeljkovic, M. (2015). Is the relationship between sensory-processing sensitivity and negative affect mediated by emotional regulation?. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 67, No. 4, pp. 214-221.
8. Cataldo, C.G., Raelin, J.D., Lambert, M. (2009). Reinvigorating the struggling organization: The unification of Schein's oeuvre into a diagnostic model. *The Journal of applied behavioral science*, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 122-140.
9. Chen, S., Jiang, W., Zhang, G., Chu, F. (2019). Spiritual leadership on proactive workplace behavior: the role of organizational identification and psychological safety. *Frontiers in psychology*, Vol. 10.
10. Daniels, K., Guppy, A. (1994). Occupational stress, social support, job control, and psychological well-being. *Human Relations*, Vol. 47, No. 12, pp. 1523-1544.
11. Edmondson, A.C. (1996). Learning from mistakes is easier said than done: group and organizational influences on the detection and correction of human error. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Sciences*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 5-28.
12. Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative science quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 350-383.
13. Edmondson, A.C., Mogelof, J.P. (2005). Explaining psychological safety in innovation teams: Organizational culture, team dynamics, or personality. In: L. Thompson, H. Choi, (Eds.), *Creativity and innovation in organizational teams* (pp. 109-136). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
14. Epitropaki, O., Radulovic, A.B., Ete, Z., Thomas, G., Martin, R. (2020). Leader-follower transgressions, relationship repair strategies and outcomes: A state-of-the-science review and a way forward. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1.
15. Frazier, M.L., Tupper, C. (2018). Supervisor prosocial motivation, employee thriving, and helping behavior: A trickle-down model of psychological safety. *Group & Organization Management*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 561-593.
16. Greenbaum, R.L., Bonner, J.M., Mawritz, M.B., Butts, M.M., Smith, M.B. (2020). It is all about the bottom line: Group bottom-line mentality, psychological safety, and group creativity. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 503-517.

17. Greven, C.U., Lionetti, F., Booth, C., Aron, E.N., Fox, E., Schendan, H.E., ... Homberg, J. (2019). Sensory processing sensitivity in the context of environmental sensitivity: A critical review and development of research agenda. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, Vol. 98, pp. 287-305.
18. Heitzman, J. (2020). Wpływ pandemii COVID-19 na zdrowie psychiczne. *Psychiatria Polska*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp. 187-198.
19. Jha, A. (2019). Financial reports and social capital. *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 155, No. 2, pp. 567-596.
20. Jiang, Z., Hu, X., Wang, Z., Jiang, X. (2019). Knowledge hiding as a barrier to thriving: The mediating role of psychological safety and moderating role of organizational cynicism. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 40, No. 7, pp. 800-818.
21. Liu, W., Zhang, P., Liao, J., Hao, P., Mao, J. (2016). Abusive supervision and employee creativity: The mediating role of psychological safety and organizational identification. *Management Decision*.
22. Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
23. Meredith, P.J., Bailey, K.J., Strong, J., Rappel, G. (2016). Adult attachment, sensory processing, and distress in healthy adults. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Vol. 70, No. 1.
24. Obrenovic, B., Jianguo, D., Khudaykulov, A., Khan, M.A.S. (2020). Work-family conflict impact on psychological safety and psychological well-being: A job performance model. *Frontiers in psychology*, Vol. 475.
25. Pierce, M., McManus, S., Hope, H., Hotopf, M., Ford, T., Hatch, S.L., ... Abel, K.M. (2021). Mental health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: a latent class trajectory analysis using longitudinal UK data. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Vol. 8, No. 7, pp. 610-619.
26. Shapiro, D.L., Boss, A.D., Salas, S., Tangirala, S., Von Glinow, M.A. (2011). When are transgressing leaders punitively judged? An empirical test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 96, No. 2.
27. Sobocko, K., Zelenski, J.M. (2015). Trait sensory-processing sensitivity and subjective well-being: Distinctive associations for different aspects of sensitivity. *Personality and individual differences*, Vol. 83, pp. 44-49.
28. Sun, Y., Huang, J. (2019). Psychological capital and innovative behavior: Mediating effect of psychological safety. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, vol. 47, No. 9, pp. 1-7.
29. Van Eck, N.J., Waltman, L. (2019). *VOSviewer Manual*. Leiden: Leiden University.
30. Wang, J., Long, R., Chen, H., Li, Q. (2019). Measuring the psychological security of urban residents: Construction and validation of a new scale. *Frontiers in psychology*, Vol. 2423.
31. Wang, Y., Chen, Y., Zhu, Y. (2021). Promoting innovative behavior in employees: The mechanism of leader psychological capital. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 3797.

32. Wang, Y., Liu, J., Zhu, Y. (2018). Humble leadership, psychological safety, knowledge sharing, and follower creativity: a cross-level investigation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 1727.
33. Xu, M., Qin, X., Dust, S.B., DiRenzo, M.S. (2019). Supervisor-subordinate proactive personality congruence and psychological safety: A signaling theory approach to employee voice behavior. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 440-453.
34. Zhou, W., Zhu, Z., Vredenburg, D. (2020). Emotional intelligence, psychological safety, and team decision making. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal*.