

## THE ROLE OF ORGANISATION'S PROMOTIONAL AND PREVENTIVE ORIENTATION IN CREATING A SENSE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

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**Purpose:** to determine the relationship between the organisational orientation adopted and the sense of psychological safety among organisational members.

**Design/methodology/approach:** the study was conducted using the Regulatory Orientation Scale questionnaire and a questionnaire to measure Sense of Psychological Safety in Teams based on the A.C. tool. Edmondson. The survey included 205 members of public and private organisations. Responses were assessed on a five-point Likert scale. Correlation analysis was used to identify relationships between organisational orientation and sense of psychological safety.

The survey was conducted in May 2023 using paper and electronic versions of the survey instruments.

**Findings:** there is a clear and statistically significant positive correlation between the adopted promotional orientation of the organisation and the sense of psychological safety of the members of the organisation.

An organisation's prevention-based orientation shows a moderately weaker positive correlation with feelings of psychological safety,

**Research limitations/implications:** inability to fully objectify the research results obtained.

**Practical implications:** The study indicates that in order to foster psychological safety, organisations should promote a promotional orientation, foster an open and diverse organisational culture and exercise restraint in preventive measures based on monitoring compliance with procedures. Monitoring the sense of psychological safety can be used to identify areas for improvement.

**Social implications:** this research can contribute to improving the quality of employees' working lives. By promoting the organisational culture that fosters a sense of psychological safety, organisations can create a more satisfying working environment, which can contribute to the overall employee wellbeing.

**Originality/value:** the research brings new insights into the relationship between organisational orientation and employees' sense of psychological safety. It clearly identifies the relationship between an organisation's orientation (both promotional and preventive) and employees' sense of psychological safety. This is a new insight into the role of organisational culture in shaping employee wellbeing, as it suggests that risk and safety management need not exclude employee initiative, development and creativity. An additional point is that this research focuses on the sense of psychological safety as one of the key conditions for organisational functioning.

**Keywords:** psychological safety, promotional orientation of the organisation, preventive orientation of the organization.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

## Introduction

According to Higgins' regulatory orientation theory, all goal-oriented behaviour is regulated by two different motivational systems - a *preventive* and a *promotional* orientation (Higgins et al., 2001). For an individual, a promotional orientation towards goal attainment is associated with a striving strategy, that is, a developmental orientation, a willingness to take risks and a higher level of creativity; in contrast, a preventive orientation is associated with a desire for a sense of security. The individual undertakes assurance behaviour, monitors mistakes and avoids potential losses. Both orientations lead to different motivational, cognitive, emotional and behavioural consequences (Roczniewska, Retowski, 2014).

The organisation also adopts a specific way of achieving its goals. It may focus on continuous process improvement, standardisation of activities, introduction of procedures to regulate employee behaviour, or it may focus on perceiving new needs of the environment and finding unknown ways to address them. Therefore, it can be said that organisational culture can also be oriented towards prevention or promotion during the strategy implementation.

The strategic orientation adopted by an organisation is one of the conditions shaping certain organisational behaviours (Rutka, Wróbel, 2012). Organisations with a preventive approach to goal attainment require their employees to follow formalised rules, to specialise and fulfil their duties, to avoid risks. The employee is not expected to make independent decisions and go beyond the set scope of duties, rather to obey and fulfil the orders of superiors. Participants are required to ensure that their actions do not generate additional costs in the form of: losses and mistakes.

Promotion-oriented organisations, on the other hand, require participants to creatively implement quite broadly defined processes, to be innovative, to be ready for challenges, to take their own initiatives beyond their defined responsibilities and to continuously develop. The value is in seeking opportunities for the organisation, even if this involves taking risks for the organisation, competition between employees, being proactive and critical of existing solutions.

In the management literature, promotional and preventive targeting have been discussed in the context of marketing strategies (Shao et al., 2015), consumer decision-making (Som, Lee, 2012), managerial behaviour (Ahmadi et al., 2017) and investors in the stock market (Cecchini et al., 2021). It is therefore a construct that is a variable shaping specific organisational activities and processes.

However, other factors (besides strategy) are important for achieving goals, for example, teamwork is becoming increasingly important. Organisations are trying to encourage it among their employees in various ways. Some invest in employee knowledge development or coaching. Others motivate employee teams with different challenges (Steinerowska-Streb, 2020). There are also those that try to create psychological safety in the organisation.

Psychological safety is a major factor influencing how employees perceive the consequences of interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace (Edmonson et al., 2012, 2014). The higher the level of psychological safety, the more willing employees are to collaborate, share ideas, take initiatives and boldly challenge existing organisational assumptions. This is a major construct in the context of organisational management and teamwork, as it affects the efficiency and innovation of work and the level of employee engagement (Kark, Carmeli, 2009). It fosters their creativity, arouses their willingness to share information, and encourages them to identify flaws in the organisation, complete projects or develop a product (Bass et al., 2008; Boucher et al., 2018; O'Donovan, McAuliffe, 2020). It is also linked to organisational learning, influencing an organisation's ability to adapt and innovate (Baer, Frese, 2003).

However, despite its importance, there are very few studies on the factors that shape feelings of psychological safety in the workplace. It is therefore worth investigating whether the adopted strategic orientation of an organisation can influence this important aspect of human performance in the context of organisational management and teamwork.

The aim of this article is to identify the relationship between the adopted organisational orientation and the sense of psychological safety among organisational members.

## **Organisational focus – promotional vs. preventive**

The inspiration for this investigation of the preventive and promotional orientation of organisations comes from Higgins' concept of individual self-regulation, who distinguishes between a promotional orientation towards goal achievement - linked to a strategy of striving, growth orientation, profit focus, risk appetite and higher levels of creativity, and a preventive one - linked to a sense of security, realised through a strategy of caution, monitoring for mistakes and avoiding potential losses (Higgins et al., 2001).

Promotion-oriented people approach tasks with enthusiasm and drive, tend to break existing rules and create new ones, and when faced with ambitious goals, feel eagerness, energy and excitement as well as motivation to work harder. They are more likely to find themes in life for which they are willing to exert increased effort, than those with a preventive orientation, and they are more likely to be reckless and impulsive in their actions, perceiving change as a challenge (Bak, 2008).

Those who prefer a preventive approach, on the other hand, focus on avoiding mistakes when implementing their intentions, follow established rules, and show caution and preparation for action. They are more likely to believe that they are incapable of getting what they want and rarely use solutions that are not accepted by others (Bak, 2008).

The organisation also adopts a specific way of achieving its goals. It may focus on continuous process improvement, standardisation of activities, the introduction of procedures to regulate employee behaviour, or it may focus on perceiving new needs of the environment and finding unknown ways to meet them. Therefore, it can be said that organisational culture can also be oriented towards prevention or promotion during strategy implementation.

An extension of the theory of regulatory focus is the concept of *regulatory fit*, which examines the consequences of consistency and inconsistency between a person's attitude and organisational culture, i.e. the conditions - promotional or preventive - created by the organisation for the realisation of goals (Roczniewska, Retowski, 2014).

These conditions may relate to the nature of the task (e.g. a creative task vs. an analytical task), the designated way of completing the task and the consequences of achieving the goal (Roczniewska, Retowski, 2014).

The promotional environment shaped by the organisation will encourage employees to behave innovatively. Organisations adopting this orientation are constantly looking to introduce new products, better suited to the needs of customers.

Within the framework of its mission or communicated values, such an organisational culture will be characterised by the pursuit of profit and a 'be creative and be prepared to take risks' strategy. This culture is challenging for its participants, as it expects continuous innovation, constant questioning of existing solutions and learning through critical analysis of existing rules. It is a culture that requires employees to have the courage to make changes and managers to agree to employees challenging existing procedures and regulations (Rutka, Wróbel, 2012).

Employees who are highly competent and motivated in their work expect to be able to influence their "fate", to have some autonomy and to be managed in a participatory way.

It seems that the promotional orientation of the organisation will also be reflected in other dimensions. Thus, the organisational structure may be more decentralised, the way power is exercised more relationally, also involving people who are not in the managerial roles in the decision-making process, and the role of the employee imprecisely defined.

When the organisational culture is oriented towards prevention, the fixed procedures and standardisation of activities are crucial, which can foster a strategy of taking care of safety and avoiding mistakes (Roczniewska, Retowski, 2014).

Such an organisation strives to improve its processes through repeatability or replicability and the standardisation of activities. It uses modern technologies that enable it to achieve high efficiency and low costs in the production of services/products. In addition, complex planning and cost control systems are used. This organisational culture promotes a sense of the need to economise and a zero tolerance for waste. A side effect is that the employees become

accustomed to the idea that their main task is to follow procedures rather than to solve problems creatively. When encountering a problem, an employee uses existing solutions developed by the organisation, and is unwilling to question existing rules (Rutka, Wróbel, 2012, pp. 13-15).

## Psychological safety in organisations

Teamwork is an aspect of human activity that is *de facto* unavoidable. Regardless of one's professional path or stage of human development, it is a challenge that everyone has faced at some time or another. Its ubiquity therefore implies the need to explore the various problems and difficulties that inhibit its satisfactory progress.

One psychological variable that touches on the issue of team effectiveness is psychological safety. According to Edmonson et al. (2012, 2014), it is a construct that describes the perception of the consequences of interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace. The higher its level, the more willing team members are to share their ideas, take initiative, point out problems that they feel are impeding progress on a collaborative project and have the courage to question the assumptions on which their team functions. Actions associated with interpersonal risk are, for example, revealing one's ignorance, asking someone for help, raising ideas that differ from those of the others. The risks arising from such situations take four possible forms (Edmondson, 2003): being seen as *ignorant*, as someone *incompetent*, as a *negative* or an *intruder*.

Initially, a sense of psychological safety was linked to organisational change. It was argued that psychological safety was necessary for people to feel secure and be able to change their behaviour in response to changing organisational challenges (Schein, 1993). Psychological safety was believed to help people overcome the defensiveness or fear of learning that occurs when presented with data that contradicts their expectations or hopes. With psychological safety, individuals can focus on collective goals and problem prevention rather than self-protection.

We can talk about psychological safety at the individual, organisational and group level. At the individual and group level, psychological safety is associated with an individual's engagement in creative work (Kark & Carmeli 2009), knowledge sharing (Siemsen et al., 2009; Collins, Smith 2006), speaking up and challenging the *status quo* (Siemsen et al., 2009; Liang et al., 2012).

At the organisational level, it is linked to *organisational learning*. It has been noted that positive subjective experiences of relationships at work are central to a sense of psychological safety and thus to organisational learning. Psychological safety also mediated the relationship between failure-based learning and high-quality relationships (Baer, Frese, 2003).

Research has also found that psychological safety positively correlates with firm performance, moderating the relationship between process innovation and firm performance (Baer, Frese, 2003), and influences learning, experimentation and the creation of new practices (Tucker et al., 2007; Bradley et al., 2012). These findings corroborate other research, according to which a psychologically safe environment enables divergent thinking, creativity and risk-taking and motivates engagement in exploratory and exploitative learning (Choo, 2007).

It can be said that research on psychological insecurity carried out at the level of management and quality sciences is mainly conducted in 4 areas. These concern:

1. the essence of psychological safety, e.g. concept, determinants, measurement,
2. areas of psychological safety in organisations, e.g. organisational level, group level, individual level),
3. the impact of psychological safety on the organisation, e.g. productivity, innovation, creativity, team member behaviour, team effectiveness, learning through failure, information sharing, trust,
4. mechanisms underlying psychological safety in organisations, e.g. personality trait activation theory, social information processing theory, social exchange theory, resource behaviour theory, implicit voice theory (Steinerowska-Streb, 2020).

There is little research that seeks to identify the determinants of psychological insecurity. On the national scale (in Poland), the relationship between authentic leadership and subordinates' sense of psychological safety has been investigated. It has been found that psychological safety may be higher if the supervisor behaves according to the characteristics of authentic leadership (Glinska-Neweś et al., 2018). Employees then feel that they can raise difficult issues, ask others for help, and that their individual skills and talents are valued and used.

In such a situation, it seems reasonable to investigate whether there is a relationship between the adopted strategic orientation of the organisation and the sense of psychological safety among the participants in the organisation.

## **Research method**

Taking into account the research findings on the association of psychological safety with process innovation (Baer, Frese, 2003), experimentation and the creation of new practices (Tucker et al., 2007; Bradley et al., 2012) and creativity and risk-taking (Choo, 2007), it was hypothesised that higher psychological safety should positively correlate with an organisational promotional orientation, while lower psychological safety should correlate with an organisational preventive orientation.

To measure the regulatory orientation of an organisation, the questionnaire prepared by M. Roczniowska and S. Retowski questionnaire of the Organisational Regulatory Orientation Scale were used. The accuracy of the scale was confirmed in correlation studies (Roczniowska, Retowski, 2014), which showed a significant relationship between organisational preventiveness and bureaucratisation and organisational promotiveness - with innovation using the scale created by Zeitz (1984). A separate study demonstrated the diagnostic accuracy of this tool (Roczniowska, Retowski, 2014a).

The Organisational Regulatory Orientation Scale contains 2 subscales, each containing 5 statements on organisational promotability (e.g. 'In this organisation, a willingness to take on challenges is promoted') and 5 statements on organisational preventability (e.g. 'In this organisation, compliance with existing procedures and rules is controlled').

To measure the sense of psychological safety in the team, the questionnaire of A.C. Edmondson, validated in Polish conditions by I. Steinerowska-Streb (Steinerowska-Streb, 2022). This tool contains 7 questions, e.g. "If you make a mistake in this team, it is often used against you" or "In this team, members are easily able to discuss difficult issues and problems together".

Responses in relation to the components found in both tools were placed on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

Spearman rank correlation analysis was used to identify the relationship between organisational orientation and sense of psychological safety.

The study (research sample) involved 205 people, employed in Polish public (61 people) and private organisations (144 people), in various roles: managerial (36 people) and non-managerial (169 people). The survey was developed in paper and electronic versions on the Qualtrics platform. The information about the survey was disseminated via social media and, in the case of the paper version, by direct verbal invitation. The survey was conducted in May 2023. SPSS software was used to calculate the results.

## Results

The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test the normality of the distribution of organisational orientation and sense of psychological safety. The test proved the non-normality of the distribution of the studied variables. The results obtained are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.***Results of normality tests for the distribution of the variables under study*

|                               | Shapiro-Wilk |     |           |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-----|-----------|
|                               | statistics   | df  | Relevance |
| Preventive orientation        | .953         | 205 | p <.001   |
| Promotional orientation       | .967         | 205 | p <.001   |
| Sense of psychological safety | .948         | 205 | p <.001   |

Source: own elaboration.

Spearman's rank correlation was used to analyse the relationship between organisational orientation and sense of psychological safety. The results obtained from the correlation analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.***Correlations between the promotional and preventive orientation of the organisation and feelings of psychological safety (n = 231)*

|   | Sense of psychological safety |                  |
|---|-------------------------------|------------------|
|   | Spearman's rho coefficient    | Relevance        |
| <b>Promotional orientation of the organisation</b>  | <b>0.64</b>                   | <b>p&lt;0.01</b> |
| A willingness to take on challenges is promoted in this company (organisation).                     | 0.58                          | p<0.01           |
| In this company (organisation), opportunities for employee development are provided.                | 0.56                          | p<0.01           |
| This company (organisation) provides opportunities to achieve one's aspirations                     | 0.54                          | p<0.01           |
| Creativity (e.g. new ideas, products, procedures, etc.) is promoted in this company (organisation). | 0.51                          | p<0.01           |
| In this company (organisation) there is space for employee initiatives                              | 0.57                          | p<0.01           |
| <b>Preventive orientation of the organisation</b>   | <b>0.36</b>                   | <b>p&lt;0.01</b> |
| In this company (organisation) everything is done to avoid job losses                               | 0.19                          | p=0.03           |
| In this company (organisation), it is common to control how employees fulfil their duties           | - 0.04                        | p=0.48           |
| In this company (organisation), measures are taken to ensure the occupational safety of employees   | 0.44                          | p<0.01           |
| In this company (organisation) a lot is done to exclude mistakes in the work                        | 0.37                          | p<0.01           |
| In this company, compliance with existing procedures and rules is controlled.                       | 0.22                          | p<0.01           |

Source: own elaboration.

## Discussion

The analysis shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the adopted promotional orientation of the organisation and members' sense of psychological safety ( $\rho = 0.64$ ). Significance at the  $p < 0.01$  level means that this relationship is statistically significant, suggesting that organisations that promote challenge readiness, employee



development and the creation of space for employee creativity and initiative tend to develop a higher sense of psychological safety among their employees.

It is worth noting that the relationship between prevention-based organisational orientation and sense of psychological safety is moderately positive ( $\rho = 0.36$ ). Significance at the  $p < 0.01$  level suggests that loss-focused organisations also have an impact on increasing feelings of psychological safety, albeit with less strength than organisations with a promotional orientation.

The sense of psychological safety is mainly undermined by the tendency of the organisation to minimise losses and the excessive control of employees in following procedures. Although some actions taken as part of a preventive approach may improve psychological safety, for example, attempts to eliminate errors and actions to ensure the professional safety of employees, the relationship is not as strong as that created by actions taken as part of an organisational promotional approach.

According to the concept of psychological safety in an organisation, when an employee feels psychologically safe, his or her confidence increases that the work group or team will not punish him or her for truthfully expressing his or her thoughts. With psychological safety, therefore, the employee's fears of being threatened with embarrassment, ridicule or rejection when they talk about their doubts, questions or mistakes are reduced (Edmondson, 1999). Consequently, the employee is inclined to seek feedback intensively, to share information.

The study described in this article provides evidence of the relationship between organisational orientation and feelings of psychological safety. The results obtained are corroborated by, among others, the research conducted by Baer and Freses (2003). Their study also found a positive effect of organisations that promote innovation and creativity on employees' motivation and sense of security.

Studies carried out by Tucker et al. (2007) and Bradley et al. (2012) also support the results obtained regarding the existing positive correlation between an organisation's promotional orientation and sense of psychological safety, as these authors noted that an environment perceived as psychologically safe can stimulate employees to experiment and create new solutions.

Choo's (2007) research, suggesting that a psychologically safe environment fosters creativity and risk-taking, also highlights the importance of psychological safety in organisations, particularly in the context of creating new solutions and innovations.

Complementing the existing literature research, it shows that organisations with a promotional orientation appear to have a stronger effect on feelings of psychological safety compared to organisations with a preventive orientation.

In the light of these results, it can be said that the creation of favourable conditions, which derive from the organisation's beliefs regarding the achievement of goals, the perception of the employee and their organisational role, and the quality of the supervisor-employee relationship, plays an extremely important role in shaping the sense of psychological safety.

The organisation could therefore enhance psychological wellbeing by promoting an organisational culture that encourages acceptance of diversity, encourages the individual to challenge the established status quo, treats each employee as a full member of the team. The organisation could also create space for the sharing of ideas and individualised development. Last but not least, it is important to provide the right conditions in which employees can perform their duties responsibly and effectively.

Overall, these results suggest that organisations that promote employee development, creativity and initiative tend to create a more conducive working environment, which may be more likely to result in a higher sense of psychological wellbeing in employees. However, a preventive orientation also plays a role, albeit a slightly smaller one. It is important to understand these relationships so that organisations can consciously shape their organisational culture to improve the wellbeing and sense of security of their employees.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the analysis show that there is a clear and statistically significant positive correlation between the adopted promotional orientation of an organisation and the sense of psychological safety of the members of the organisation. This means that in organisations where employees' willingness to take on challenges is promoted, investment is made in developing their skills and space is created for employees' creativity and initiatives, employees feel a higher level of psychological safety.

An organisation's prevention-based orientation shows a moderately weaker positive correlation with feelings of psychological safety, suggesting that there is a relationship between organisations focusing on minimising losses and ensuring the occupational safety of employees and feelings of psychological safety, albeit to a lesser extent than organisations with a promotion-based orientation.

The conclusion is that organisations that promote employee development, creativity and initiative tend to create a more conducive working environment, which can influence a higher sense of psychological safety in employees. However, a preventive orientation also plays a role, albeit to a lesser extent. Understanding these relationships is crucial for organisations to consciously shape their organisational culture and improve the wellbeing and sense of security of their employees.

Organisations should therefore strive to create a sustainable organisational culture that takes into account both promotional aspects and selected preventive measures. Such an approach can contribute to more sustainable management.

## Managerial implications

Several suggestions can be made on the basis of the research carried out.

Firstly, it would be useful to promote a promotional orientation that encourages employees to challenge themselves, invest in developing their skills and create space for creativity and initiative. Management could be more focused on developing the potential of employees and supporting their active participation in the life of the organisation.

Secondly, it is crucial for managers to do more to shape an organisational culture that accepts diversity, encourages challenging the established status quo and treats employees as full members of the team.

Thirdly, it is worth balancing a preventive orientation. While some preventive action is also important in fostering a sense of psychological safety, management should not over-focus on minimising losses and over-controlling compliance with existing organisational procedures. Instead, organisations should seek to strike a balance between ensuring occupational safety and encouraging employee development, initiative and creativity.

A final important issue is the monitoring of the sense of psychological safety, which can help organisations identify areas for improvement.

In conclusion, the study can help managers to shape a more effective organisational culture and promote employees' sense of psychological safety. The implications suggest that organisations should invest in employee development, create an environment that fosters initiative and creativity, and ensure a balance between prevention and promotion in risk management and occupational safety.

## Future research

Future research may focus on more specific aspects related to the organisational determinants shaping employees' sense of psychological safety and their impact on organisational effectiveness.

Firstly, research can focus on the role of managers' characteristics and behaviours in shaping employees' sense of psychological safety.

It would also be useful to identify and analyse differences between types of organisations (public vs. private) in the level of psychological safety and to identify the reasons for the differences and adapt action strategies.

Another area could be the study of the impact of cultural diversity in international organisations on psychological insecurity. Research in these areas could provide more detailed and contextualised information on the role of psychological insecurity in organisations and how

organisations can shape and support it for the benefit of their employees and the effectiveness of their operations.

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