RESEARCH

# Exploring the Utility of Psychological Safety in the Armed Forces

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological safety is a concept that has become extremely popular in the management and leadership literature over the past several years. Despite its rising prominence, the term can be misleading, and it is not clear if it holds promise for those leading in the armed forces. This article clarifies the concept of psychological safety and highlights its importance to teams and organizations that operate in contexts like the military. The authors also review antecedents to psychological safety – with a focus on how military leaders can facilitate psychological safety in the teams and organizations they lead. Finally, psychological safety is not a panacea. In fact, high psychological safety in a military context could produce unintended negative outcomes. Therefore, the authors offer suggestions for military leaders to consider when focusing on psychological safety in their formations and propose areas for future research involving psychological safety in the armed forces and other similar organizations.

*Keywords:* Psychological Safety, Leader Development, Leadership, Organizational Culture, Military Teams

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Over the past several years, the concept of psychological safety has gained increased coverage in academic literature. First explored by Schein and Bennis in 1965, Amy Edmondson's work brought the concept into the spotlight among leadership and management scholars, most notably with her book *The Fearless Organization* (2018). In fact, a search of the term "psychological safety" in Google Scholar for the time period of 2018–2023 yields over 79,000 entries—many of which extoll the benefits of high levels of psychological safety in organizations. However, despite the concept's demonstrated utility in a number of organizational settings (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017), it is not immediately clear if psychological safety holds promise for those leading in the armed forces. The military context is unique in many ways, and outcomes noted in some research studies may not generalize to military organizations (Darr, 2011; Wong et al., 2003). Furthermore, there are some who feel the military is becoming too "soft" (Hsia, 2010). For those individuals, the idea of fostering psychological safety in military organizations may seem ill-advised. We submit that these misgivings are largely misplaced, resulting from a misconception about what psychological safety actually entails and a lack of understanding about the maturing body of research on the topic. Research does suggest that the positive outcomes associated with psychological safety can be nuanced, especially in hierarchical organizations (like the military), but given the armed forces' intense focus on innovating to stay ahead of potential threats, desire to overcome recent recruiting and retention issues (Thomas, 2022; Cohen, 2023), concern with high rates of suicide and other mental health concerns among service members (Khahil, 2022; Perez, 2023), as well as other leadership challenges (e.g., counterproductive or toxic leadership), and given consistent positive outcomes noted in the corpus of psychological safety-focused research, we suggest military leaders embrace the goal of improving psychological safety in their organizations—with some caveats.

This paper will clearly define the concept of psychological safety—detailing what it is and what it is not. We then outline the various positive outcomes shown to result from psychological safety, emphasizing those that suggest promise for leaders in the armed forces. Next, we highlight findings that those leading in the military and similar contexts should keep in mind—noting that psychological safety is not a panacea. We go on to discuss antecedents to creating a psychologically safe culture and provide suggested actions that military leaders may take to foster psychological safety in their formations. Finally, we offer several suggestions for future research.

## Psychological Safety–What It Is and What It Is Not

There can be some confusion about what psychological safety entails. Even psychological safety scholars like Edmondson (2022) acknowledge that the term can be misunderstood outside of academic circles. While the term itself may mislead some initially, the definition of psychological safety is not hard to understand. Put simply, psychological safety is a shared belief among members of a group that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). In other words, individuals in groups with high levels of psychological safety feel like they will not be chastised, ridiculed, or embarrassed for speaking up. Those working in organizations with cultures that feature high levels of psychological safety are comfortable voicing ideas, asking questions, expressing concerns, or even admitting mistakes without fear that they will be met with humiliation or punishment. Contrary to what some may initially believe, psychological safety is *not* about creating safe spaces or coddling a softer generation, nor it is about consensus decision making or political correctness (Clark, 2021). According to David Altman from

the Center for Creative Leadership, "Psychological safety at work doesn't mean that everybody is nice all the time. It means that you embrace the conflict and speak up, knowing that your team has your back, and you have their backs." Psychological safety is not a shield from accountability, and it does not require leaders to protect those they oversee at all costs. Standards still matter in a psychologically safe team. If someone fails to perform, psychological safety does not mean they are immune to judgment or repercussions. In fact, studies show that in organizations with high levels of psychological safety, performance may actually suffer unless a sense of accountability exists (Eldor et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2022).

## Benefits of Psychological Safety

The purported benefits of psychological safety are widespread. Psychological safety has been linked empirically to positive outcomes in direct, mediating, and moderating roles at the individual, group, and organization levels of analysis (Newman et al., 2017). Some of the individual behaviors noted to emerge when people feel psychologically safe include voicing ideas and making suggestions, seeking feedback, asking questions, admitting mistakes, providing honest feedback, collaborating with teammates, and experimenting or trying new approaches (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023). Psychological safety has also been shown to aid in new team member learning during onboarding, as well as to trust and increased individual job satisfaction (Lyman et al., 2020; Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023). There is also emerging work that suggests psychological safety might be linked to helping individuals cope with stress and strain (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023).

At the group and organizational levels, elevated psychological safety is associated with fostering innovation and creativity (Agarwal & Farndale, 2017; Greenbaum et al., 2020; Gu et al., 2013). Research also reveals that by creating an organizational culture where open, authentic communication is accepted, psychological safety facilitates increased job engagement and satisfaction and creates an inclusive team climate (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023). Psychological safety has also been found to act as a mediating variable in reducing turnover in teams (Chen et al., 2014).

Regardless of the level of analysis, psychological safety is linked to a number of positive outcomes of interest to leaders—at least leaders in most contexts. Research shows that psychological safety often serves as a mediator between various leader behaviors and a number of positively viewed outcomes (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023). However, those leader behaviors may be more or less effective depending on the context in which a leader finds him/herself operating.

## Psychological Safety in the Military

### *Contextual Discussion*

A common concern with many research studies is generalizability—or how useful a study's findings are to a broader context. When it comes to leadership-related research, there are often questions about whether theories that are supported by data from non-military samples will apply or manifest in military organizations. Some theories, like transformational leadership, do apply, regardless of context (Wong et al., 2003). However, there are examples (e.g., some personality measures) that do not generalize to military populations as they do in non-military research samples (Darr, 2011). We submit that psychological safety is one of those concepts which does hold in the military context - for two primary reasons. First, psychological safety *has* been studied in a military context. For example, Wermser et al. (2016) considered psychological safety in the military with regard to integration efforts, while Hedlund and Osterberg (2013) examined psychological safety in military units with an eye toward group learning behavior. The UK's Ministry of Defence (2022) has also examined psychological

safety in its ranks. And more recently, Lobato et al. (2023) studied psychological safety in military units as it relates to reducing work stress.

Second, some of the non-military research samples used in the maturing body of psychological safety research share similarities with military teams. The masculine, hierarchical, high-power distance culture that characterizes many military organizations is not limited to the armed forces. Surgical teams, where a great deal of the current body of psychological safety research has occurred, share some of these same characteristics (Jones et al., 2018). Furthermore, the life-or-death stakes that often accompany military missions are not limited to those serving in camouflage. Many types of teams and organizations operate in extremis environments (police officers and firefighters being two of the most obvious), and the benefits of psychological safety have been demonstrated in these groups (Brinke, 2017; Gong et al., 2020). Additionally, psychological safety's positive impact on High Reliability Organizations (HRO) has been shown in several studies (Cartland et al., 2022), and at least some military elements can be considered HROs—known for their ability to operate effectively in high-risk contexts by preventing avoidable crises and maintaining resilience when challenges arise (Coutu, 2003; Malish & Sargent, 2019). Finally, while it does not provide empirical support for the idea that psychological safety produces positive outcomes in a military context, U.S. Army doctrine makes mention of psychological safety—which implies endorsement of psychological safety as a concept that military leaders might consider beneficial and incorporate into their plans to lead their formations effectively.[1]

*Apparent Benefits*

Given the above, we wish to highlight several specific outcomes noted to result from high levels of psychological safety—outcomes that could potentially address several recent leadership challenges facing those leading in the military. First, psychological safety facilitates candid, upward-directed communication (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), which, military leaders seeking innovative input from their formations might encourage. Similarly, high levels of psychological safety facilitate information sharing and the flow of information (Swain, 2018)—which can reduce the occurrence of groupthink, helping teams in life-and-death situations adapt and remain agile, ultimately saving lives (Roberto, 2002).[2] Psychological safety has also been linked to reduced instances of burnout and higher levels of job satisfaction (Swendiman et al., 2019), which could prove helpful in addressing the recruiting and retention challenges the military currently faces. In that same vein, Edwards et al. (2021) found that psychological safety was negatively associated with burnout, while Chen et al. (2014) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between mentoring and turnover.

Psychological safety also appears to offer promise in addressing another major issue of concern for military leaders. Research suggests that psychological safety may be key in helping reduce instances of self-inflicted harm, a predictor of suicide (Seager, 2009). In one study of veterans, psychological safety was identified as being something that could assist in helping creating an atmosphere where people could "let their guard down"—enabling them to share their issues and seek help (McDonald et al., 2023).

1 In a discussion on empathy on page 4–9, Army Field Manual 6–22 (2022) includes a table focused on assessing empathy that directs leaders to "Review command climate survey results to see what members think." And then asks, "Do they feel psychologically safe and protected?" And while ADP 6–22 (2019) does not use the actual term psychological safety, when discussing teamwork on page 1–5, the manual states, "teamwork increases when teams operate in a positive, engaging, and emotionally safe environment." It goes on to state that, "A safe environment occurs when team members feel they can be open and not threatened by unwarranted criticism"—which meets the definition of psychological safety.

2 A postmortem analysis of a tragedy on Mount Everest on May 10, 1996, where five climbers and their two team leaders perished suggests that low psychological safety led to an unwillingness to question team procedures and exchange ideas openly, which prevented the groups from reviewing and improving their plans as conditions changed (Roberto, 2002).

Military leaders are also struggling to address instances of sexual assault and harassment and equal opportunity issues in the ranks. Weeding out these behaviors requires a culture shift (Hlad, 2022)—which may entail encouraging military personnel to be "upstanders" (Spain et al., 2023). Creating a psychologically safe environment might facilitate more people acting in this manner by reducing barriers to speaking up.

Finally, psychological safety—or the actions that can lead to an organizational culture that fosters a sense of psychological safety—may be the same actions that counteract the effects of toxic leadership. Toxic leadership can lead to increased turnover intention, lack of commitment, and psychological stresses such as anxiety, burnout, depression, and employee silence (Wolor et al., 2022). Creating psychological safety in organizations directly addresses these negative outcomes that are noted to result from toxic leadership.

### *The Potential Downsides*

Much of the extant literature extolls the benefits of psychological safety, but there is growing evidence that suggests psychological safety is not a panacea. Leaders should be aware that there are aspects of psychological safety which can lead to deleterious outcomes. Pearsall and Ellis (2011) found that high psychological safety, in instances where perceptions of interpersonal risk are low, created conditions in which teams high in utilitarianism were more likely to engage in unethical behavior. Furthermore, recent work has shown that high levels of trust can lead to lower levels of team performance due to lower levels of monitoring within autonomous teams (Langfred, 2004). As psychological safety can lead to increased trust, it is possible that increasing psychological safety in teams that operate with high levels of autonomy could negatively impact team learning and performance (Newman et al., 2017). For an organization that is looking to create adaptive, agile organizations, this could be an unintended negative outcome. Furthermore, psychological safety has been shown to encourage risk-taking behavior in organizations focused on innovative work operating in dynamic environments (Andersson et al., 2020) and to reduce the fear of failure (Deng et al., 2019). While the military is striving to innovate, a lack of a healthy fear of failure in situations where failure can result in the loss of life could prove disastrous. Additionally, a study by Deng et al. (2019) found that in some situations, psychological safety resulted in a reduction in the motivation to work. No one wants an unmotivated soldier, sailor, marine, airman, or guardian! Finally, Eldor et al. (2023) found a curvilinear relationship between the level of psychological safety on a team and performance, with a negative relationship emerging between higher levels of psychological safety and outcomes when people were performing routinized tasks.

A final factor military leaders should keep in mind is the concept of unity of command. While encouraging input or creating a culture where soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and guardians are not fearful of speaking up, there can be no question of who is in charge within a given military unit. The military is hierarchical, and ultimately, one decision-maker assumes risk. Psychological safety can help ensure that the decision maker (e.g., commander) gets accurate information and can leverage the different perspectives and benefits of a diverse team, but a culture that promotes high psychological safety could potentially create the false impression that decisions can be debated and may degrade good order and discipline in a unit. That said, leading in a hierarchy does not mean one must lead with an authoritarian style—this reduces psychological safety (Remtulla et al., 2021).

While the risk of these negative outcomes may be low, leaders should be aware of them, or they risk achieving unintentional, and perhaps disastrous, outcomes. Addressing some of these issues could prove challenging—but leadership is not easy. With this in mind, we provide some practical advice for military

leaders interested in fostering psychological safety in their formations.

## Creating Psychological Safety in the Military

Several actions have been shown to foster a culture that includes elevated levels of psychological safety. However, it should be noted that fostering psychological safety in the military may be more difficult than in other dissimilar organizations. Appelbaum et al. (2016) found that power distance was negatively related to psychological safety, so it is more challenging in organizations with high power distance (like the military) to foster a sense of psychological safety. Anicich et al. (2015) and Remtulla et al. (2021) similarly found that aspects of hierarchical cultures (like in the military) can make creating a sense of psychological safety difficult; difficult—but certainly not impossible. What follows are several specific things military leaders can do to foster psychological safety cultures in the groups they lead.

### *Be Competent*

Castro et al. (2018) found that leaders who were perceived as competent enhanced psychological safety in the groups they led. Remtulla et al. (2021) similarly found that perceived lack of knowledge was a barrier to fostering psychological safety.

### *Role Model Humility*

Humble leadership leads to psychological safety (Norcross, 2019; Swain, 2018; Walters & Diab, 2016). Humble leaders engage in several specific behaviors that, when taken as a whole, foster psychological safety; these behaviors include admitting shortcomings and weaknesses and a demonstrated openness to learning, which includes a tendency to listen to or accept advice and feedback from others (Swain & Korenman, 2018). Relatedly, Coutifaris and Grant (2021) found that leaders who have the humility to share feedback—who openly discussed criticisms and feedback that they personally received—role-modelled behavior that subordinates then emulated, which facilitated a feeling of psychological safety.

### *Accept Honest Failure*

We are not saying leaders should "embrace failure." In the military, failure could very easily mean a loss of life. We are also not suggesting leaders "celebrate failure." Failing is not a cause for celebration. Accepting honest failure means leaders should not adopt a zero-defect mentality where individuals are chastised or frightened to acknowledge or discuss mistakes. Amy Edmondson's book *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well* (2023) highlights, among several things, that teams that can discuss mistakes learn from them—and can avoid potentially catastrophic outcomes later. The military regularly conducts After Action Reviews (AARs), where team members share lessons learned from recent training events. Leaders can use forums like AARs to signal to their teams that acknowledging failure and discussing mistakes is acceptable, contributing to a culture of psychological safety.

### *Take Steps to Ensure Equal Voice*

Military leaders can search for ways to reduce hierarchical boundaries to encourage all members to share perspectives, problems, and solutions. Creating an environment where people feel comfortable speaking up means leaders need to ensure people are given the opportunity to speak up. To provide opportunities that promote the sharing of problems and solutions, military leaders should utilize town halls, open door policies, command climate surveys, and sensing sessions. When appropriate, leaders should withhold their own thoughts and opinions, which are often heard by subordinates as "*the* way" as opposed to "*a* way."

### *Measure Psychological Safety*

Another step leaders interested in fostering psychological safety can take is to measure psychological safety in their organizations. Many military leaders already

conduct periodic command climate surveys or sensing sessions, incorporating questions focused on assessing psychological safety can not only help leaders gauge where they may need to focus their efforts but can also act to signal the importance of the concept to members of the team. Commonly used measures to assess psychological safety include Liang et al.'s (2012) five-item scale, Carmeli et al.'s (2010) five-item scale, and Baer and Frese's (2003) seven-item scale. Edmondson's seven-item scale is as follows (Gallo, 2023)

- If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
- Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
- People on this team sometimes accept others for being different.
- It is safe to take a risk on this team.
- It is not difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
- No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
- Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Creating a sense of psychological safety is not easy. In one study, it is estimated that only about 26% of leaders develop the skills needed to create psychological safety in their teams (Carucci, 2023). Being competent, role modeling humility, taking steps to ensure equal voice in the group, and periodically assessing psychological safety can help—but the actions must not simply be performative (Carucci, 2023). Inconsistency in things like leader humility can negatively impact the intended outcome (Rego et al., 2021).

It was mentioned previously in this paper but bears mentioning again—leaders intent on fostering psychological safety in their teams must be clear on what psychological safety is and what it is not. The concept of psychological safety is *not* a shield from accountability. Leaders should *not* be fearful of enforcing standards for fear of negatively impacting psychological safety—a lack of accountability in the misguided attempt to maximize psychological safety can lead to negative outcomes (Eldor et al., 2023).

Furthermore, military leaders focused on increasing psychological safety in their units should be prepared for skepticism and resistance. As discussed earlier, some may perceive psychological safety as incompatible in a military setting. It is not, but creating a sense of psychological safety in an organization where it may not exist is nothing less than culture change—and changing organizational culture can be challenging. Kotter (1995) provides some advice for leading culture change that leaders may find helpful.

## Future Research Discussion

There is reason to believe that military organizations can reap some of the positive outcomes associated with high psychological safety, but existing research suggests there may be some downsides that leader should keep in mind. While psychological safety has been linked to overcoming barriers associated with hierarchy (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023), it is not clear if this comes at the expense of some of the positive aspects of hierarchical cultures (Anicich et al., 2015). Future studies could explore this potential "dark side" to psychological safety in more detail. Researchers could examine the number of disciplinary infractions across organizations and explore the concern that efforts to foster high psychological safety might lead soldiers to be less likely to hold teammates accountable for poor performance. Future work might also explore if those who feel greater sense of psychological safety might be more likely to challenge their superiors and to feel less constrained by the chain of command—which could potentially have a deleterious impact on good order and discipline. Research may also examine readiness statistics or unit/branch-specific performance metrics to address the concern that high-psychological safety environments may make soldiers feel less accountable

for their actions, making them less motivated to meet high standards of performance.

Finally, future research may examine the relationship between trust and psychological safety specifically in the military context. Trust and psychological safety are conceptually different (Edmondson, 2004), yet closely related. Some studies suggest that psychological safety leads to trust (Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023), while others claim trust leads to psychological safety (Basit, 2017). Given the importance of trust in the military (Sweeney et al., 2009), future research to determine the directionality of this relationship could be beneficial.

## Conclusion

Psychological safety appears to offer promise for those leading organizations in the armed forces, especially given some of the challenges the military is facing today. Psychological safety has been linked to a number of positive organizational outcomes tied to individual and team performance, innovation, creativity, and employee satisfaction. It has also been linked to outcomes positively associated with conditions that foster upstander and support-seeking behaviors, which may help military leaders reduce harmful behaviors that destroy teams. That said, military leaders should keep in mind some potential negative outcomes or unintended consequences associated with psychological safety. Military leaders should ensure they strike a balance between creating a supportive environment that encourages open communication and feedback while also emphasizing the importance of following orders and maintaining a strong sense of discipline and accountability. As discussed, psychological safety is not about coddling soldiers, airmen, guardians, sailors, or marines. Psychological safety is about removing barriers that can hinder the flow of information and creating a culture that facilitates open, candid discussion and learning focused on successful mission accomplishment.

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