

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

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Iryna B. Volevakha¹, Nataliia V. Kolomiets², Tetiana V. Kukhar¹¹ACADEMY OF THE STATE PENITENTIARY SERVICE, CHERNIHIV, UKRAINE²CHERNIHIV POLYTECHNIC NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, CHERNIHIV, UKRAINE**ABSTRACT****The aim:** To reveal the organizational factors of psychological safety in the workplace.**Materials and methods:** Methods of psychological survey, statistical assessment and analysis of the received data were used.**Results:** Psychological safety is regarded in the paper as a state of preservation of mind that involves maintaining a balance between the negative effects of the environment and a person's resilience, that is, the ability to overcome such effects. In the structure of the psychological safety of the organization member three components were identified and explored: cognitive, emotional and "confidence in the future". The results of the survey study confirmed that such organizational factors as level of organizational culture, working team cohesion, working team self-organization, management style of the immediate supervisor, work autonomy, role ambiguity have positive effect on psychological safety.**Conclusions:** The results imply the importance of purposeful implementation of company policies aiming to improve the revealed factors: providing autonomy to employees and work groups within the organization, establishing clear job descriptions, work performance requirements and interaction principles, improving works design, internal communications.**KEY WORDS:** worker psychological safety, corporate culture, work autonomy, team cohesion, role ambiguity, team self-organization

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INTRODUCTION

The mental state of employees of the organization, their feeling protected from various negative influences, is a necessary guarantee of successful professional duties performance, realization of their creative potential, and ensuring a strong desire to continue working and developing in the organization. Hence, forecasting external and internal threats and risks, regulating the conditions and factors of the organizational environment to minimize risks, and creating conditions for the formation of a feeling of psychological safety are important tasks of every modern organization.

In order to build an optimal organizational environment purposefully in which the potential of employees can be fully realized for the benefit of the organization, managers need to have a clear understanding of the factors that affect the psychological safety of employees and, consequently, their efficient performance at workplace. Psychological safety is associated with improved team performance [1, 2], job involvement [3, 4], sharing information and knowledge [5].

It also should be noted that psychological safety is a basic human need and it should be a priority and integral part of organization policy, based on the principles of humanism and the value of human life quality. Feeling safe at the workplace reduces risks of employees' burnout that in turn may

have a significant effect on various mental health disorders occurring [6]. All these factors justify the importance of research aimed to determine the socio-psychological factors of psychological safety.

THE AIM

The aim of the research is to reveal the organizational factors of psychological safety in the workplace, i.e. to answer the question what characteristics of inner organizational environment influence employees' perceptions of feeling safe at workplace.

MATERIALS AND METHODS**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In building a model of psychological safety, the approach of I. Baeva (2006) was followed, who considers psychological safety as a state of preservation of mind that involves maintaining a balance between the negative effects of the environment and a person's resilience, that is, the ability to overcome such effects [7].

Thus, in the structure of the psychological safety of the organization member three components were identified.

The cognitive component includes beliefs of employees arising from the perception and intellectual processing of information about:

1. parameters of the professional environment in terms of real and potential risks and threats that cause, or may cause, feeling not safe.
2. own abilities to cope with the risks and threats of the professional environment. That is, self-assessment of own professional and social competence, flexibility in responding to difficult circumstances, and self-confidence in situations of professional activity.

At the heart of the emotional component is a feeling of being protected from the threats that come from the professional environment. It is the result of perception of the situation and cognitive processing of information about the state and threats of the environment, as well as about his coping abilities. The resulting assessment has emotional shades and can be characterized by dichotomies such as “safe-dangerous”, “good-bad”, “comfortable-uncomfortable” etc.

Psychological safety in the workplace should be considered both in terms of current professional situation and also worker’s expectations for the future. In order to feel safe, it is not enough to perceive the environment as safe and the own ability to cope with all the challenges successfully today, but also the confidence that the current state of affairs will be maintained tomorrow is important. So, we include “*confidence in the future*” component to the model of psychological safety.

PARTICIPATION

The research involved 322 representatives who were selected randomly from 29 different organizations of two types: 169 employees of educational organizations (schools and universities) and 153 employees of business organizations (enterprises, banks, etc.). The distribution by sex is as follows: 287 women, 135 men. The minimum length of service in the organization – 1 year, the maximum – 41 years.

TOOLS

The participants were offered the research questionnaire consisting of two sections: section A which focused on biographical information: age, gender, years of service, years of service in the current organization, type of organization and section B which consisted of such measuring scales:

1. “*Questionnaire of personal psychological safety of organization member*” that was constructed according to the model of psychological safety described above on the basis of “*Psychological safety of the educational environment scale*”. Respondents’ assessments of the level of psychological safety were assessed on ten components: “general assessment of safety at work”, “relationship with the management”, “relationship with the colleagues”, “job tasks complexity and volume”, “working conditions”, “reward”, “ability to cope with troubles caused by the management”, “ability to cope with troubles caused by the colleagues”, “ability to cope with the job tasks”, “confidence in the future”.

On the basis of the literature analysis we hypothesise that

the following factors of the organization inner environment influence the psychological safety of employees: level of organizational culture, working team development, management style of the immediate supervisor, work autonomy, role ambiguity. The following Surveys (2-6) were aimed to measure such factors.

2. Survey “*Assessment of the level of corporate culture*” [8].
3. Survey “*Pulsar*” – the socio-psychological level of a working team development is assessed by its member based on its main socio-psychological states: readiness for activity, orientation, self-organization, activity, cohesion, integrity [8].
4. *The Blake Mouton Managerial Leadership Grid. Employee Questionnaire*. Two behavioural dimensions – “concern for people” and “concern for results” of the participants’ immediate supervisors were explored [9].
5. “*Work Autonomy Scale*” [10].
6. “*Six-item role ambiguity scale*” [11].

Influence of the selected organization’s characteristics on psychological safety of employees was checked by using statistical method of regressive analysis. Impact of the type of organization on the psychological safety of participants was analyzed by comparing the results of two samples – members of educational institutions and members of business organizations by using Mann-Whitney U-test.

RESULTS

The empiric research data analysis showed the influence the number of organizational factors on the psychological safety of the employees (table I).

“Emotional safety” measures to what extent an employee regards his work as a source of trouble, if he is likely to experience anxiety, sadness and discomfort during performing of professional duties. It was found out that the employees are more likely to feel safe in the organizations with characteristics such as: less “role ambiguity” ($\beta=0,545, p\leq 0,001$), higher “corporate culture level” ($\beta=0,231, p\leq 0,002$) and higher “team cohesion” ($\beta=0,149, p\leq 0,026$).

The component of psychological safety “relationship with the management” is based on the employees’ perception of level of pressure and coercion from the management. The tension is higher among the employees who think that their organizations have high “team cohesion” ($\beta=-0,387, p\leq 0,001$), lower “team activity” ($\beta=0,312, p\leq 0,003$), lower “level of corporate culture” ($\beta=0,293, p\leq 0,02$) and their managers demonstrating less “concern for people” ($\beta=0,301, p\leq 0,001$).

“Relationship with the colleagues” (trusting one’s colleagues, perceiving them as those who don’t bring threats and troubles) has one predictor – “role ambiguity” ($\beta=0,219, p\leq 0,008$).

Both components of psychological safety “job tasks complexity and volume” (from the point of view of causing employees feeling significant discomfort) and “ability to cope with the job tasks” has influence of the parameter of “team self-organization” ($\beta=0,314, p\leq 0,001$) and ($\beta=0,235, p\leq 0,003$), respectively.

Table I. The revealed affecting factors influencing the psychological safety components

The psychological safety components	The affecting factors revealed
Emotional safety	Role ambiguity
	Corporate culture level
	Team cohesion
	Type of organization
Relationship with the management	Team cohesion
	Team activity
	Level of corporate culture
	Concern for people
Relationship with the colleagues	Role ambiguity
	Type of organization
Job tasks complexity and volume	Team self-organization
Ability to cope with the job tasks	Team self-organization
Working conditions	Level of corporate culture
Ability to cope with troubles caused by the management	Level of corporate culture
Confidence in the future	Autonomy
	Type of organization

“Working conditions” (confidence that the workplace has safe and healthy conditions) and “ability to cope with troubles caused by the management” (communication with the supervising managers as a source of stress, having problems in establishing a normal working relationship with management) have also one and the same for both of them predictor – “level of corporate culture” ($\beta=0,356, p\leq 0,006$) and ($\beta=0,335, p\leq 0,001$), respectively.

Higher “confidence in the future” is predicted by higher “autonomy” rates ($\beta=0,238, p\leq 0,01$).

As for the components: “reward” (level of concern about the low amount of payment for the work) and “ability to cope with troubles caused by the colleagues” – no contributors were found.

By comparing the results of two samples – members of educational institutions and members of business organizations – significant differences in three components of psychological safety were revealed. Indexes of “emotional safety” ($p\leq 0,01$), “relationship with the colleagues” ($p\leq 0,05$) are significantly higher in the sample of the teachers and professors, and “confidence in the future” ($p\leq 0,01$) is higher in business organizations employees.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that a number of explored organizational factors affect workers’ perceptions of safety.

General assessment of the level of their psychological safety (“emotional safety”) is influenced by role ambiguity. In our opinion, such result can be explained by the fact that the working environment with clear requirements, duties and responsibilities of employees reduces such potential threats to psychological safety as uncertainty and likelihood of role conflicts, both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Also

we revealed statistically the significant positive impact of a high level of corporate culture development on this component. By high level of corporate culture the authors of the test mean a good works organization, developed internal communications, the use of various methods of positive incentives for personnel, and a high level of morality. The positive influence of higher team cohesion can be explained by the fact that in a highly cohesive work groups with a strong desire of its members to work together employees receive emotional support from colleagues and friendly attitude towards themselves; active exchange of knowledge and mutual assistance between members in such groups also remove threats to feeling safe and promoting the job satisfaction that is proved by the other researches [12, 13].

Interestingly, a high level of “team cohesion” turned out to have a negative influence on “Relationship with the management” – employees of highly cohesive teams are more inclined to feel a higher level of pressure and coercion from the management. Presumably, this can be explained by the greater desire of high cohesive teams to defend their interests before the leadership and even by trying to take over some of the powers. In contrast, members of teams with a high “team activity” feel less threatened by management. Obviously, this is due to their acceptance of the organization’s goals and an interest in performing effectively, that aligns with the intentions of the leaders. The positive influence of the supervisors’ management style in the part of “Concern for people”, in our opinion, was quite expected – the leader’s neglect of the interests of employees usually causes tension in relations at the “boss-subordinate” level. On the contrary, it was proved that job satisfaction has been associated with employees who perceive their managers as supportive and caring [14]. The positive influence of “level of corporate culture” on both “relationship with the management” and “ability to cope with troubles caused by the management” should also be noted. As already discussed, a high level of corporate culture development contributes to “emotional safety”, i.e. feeling safe in general. Organizational culture is usually treated as a product, first of all, of the leaders’ activities, therefore, such managers are perceived by employees positively and they are more likely to build productive relationships with subordinates. The research data show that organizational culture is significantly positively correlated with leadership behaviour and job satisfaction [14].

The results of the research show that employees of organizations with a clearer distribution of roles and responsibilities state a lesser threat to their psychological safety from the colleagues. We think, this can be explained by the fact that a higher definition of roles reduces the likelihood of conflicts between employees, which may arise as a result of diverging expectations and real practice.

Perception of the complexity and volume of the work tasks as causing less significant discomfort and higher estimation of one’s ability to cope with the job tasks are more likely to occur in the members of working groups with high rates of “team self-organization”, i.e. the ability to organize its work itself without the intervention

of higher authorities. This can be explained by the fact that the “self-organized team” creates an acceptable and understandable job design for its members itself. In the decision-making process methods of performing tasks, algorithms of interactions are being worked out, the experience and knowledge of employees are shared. The result is that the complexity and volume of the tasks causes less discomfort for the self-organized team members.

“Working conditions” (confidence that the workplace has safe and healthy conditions and the work shall not cause loss of health) is contributed by “level of corporate culture”. In organizations with a high level of corporate culture, as a rule, sufficient attention is paid to ensuring a safe working environment for employees. M. Aluko (2003) measures culture against the ability of the organization to guarantee, among the other their needs, job security of the employees [15].

Employees with a higher degree of autonomy are more confident in their ability to cope with future challenges in the professional environment. Since they have a greater freedom in planning, organizing and controlling their work and are accustomed to relying primarily on their own strengths, as a result, they value themselves higher as professionals and, therefore, are more confident in their professional future.

The statistically significant differences of the results of the two types organizations representatives, in our opinion, can be explained as follows:

- “emotional safety” – the business environment is less stable, the number of challenges and adverse situations that arise during a given period of time and can affect the sense of safety in organizations of these type is higher;
- “relationship with the colleagues” – a higher level of internal competition between employees of business organizations. In some of them, maintenance this kind of competition may even be part of the adopted personnel policy;
- “confidence in the future” – the differences can be explained by the influence of the crisis of recent years in the field of education in Ukraine and it affects organizations of the participating teachers and professors.

Similar results of contributing of the described factors to psychological safety were received by other researchers: good interpersonal relationships [3, 4, 16, 17, 18], various workplace contexts [6, 11], team characteristics [1], leaders’ behaviour and supportive management style [3, 18, 20, 21], role ambiguity [22], job autonomy and communication quality [21], job security [23].

CONCLUSIONS

Psychological safety of organization member is considered by the authors as the feeling of being protected from the threats of the professional environment. The source of this feeling is an estimation of the professional environment threats’ intensity (strength) and one’s ability to cope with them. The findings of this research reveal a number of organizational factors that have statistically significant relationships to the employees’

perception of safety. The results imply that the psychological safety of the employees can be improved by implementation the following organizational policies:

- 1) providing autonomy to employees and work groups within the organization in making decisions regarding planning and organization of their work, the choice of methods for completing tasks, encouraging self-organization, internal cohesion and leadership within work groups;
- 2) establishing clear job descriptions, work performance requirements and interaction principles inside the organization;
- 3) correcting of management style of those chiefs who demonstrate lack of concern for personnel;
- 4) developing corporate culture components such as works organization, internal communications, positive incentives, morality.

The further prospects of research are seen in conducting empirical research of the other factors that potentially affect the psychological safety, adding to the sample the representatives of other types of organizations.

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ORCID and contributionship:

Iryna B. Volevakha: 0000-0002-7525-0878 ^{A, D, F}

Nataliia V. Kolomiets: 0000-0002-5770-4805 ^{B, E}

Tetiana V. Kukhar: 0000-0002-2352-323X ^{B, D, E}

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR**Iryna B. Volevakha**

Academy of the state penitentiary service

34 Honcha st. 14000 Chernihiv, Ukraine

tel: +380663031812

e-mail: volevalha_iryna@ukr.net

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