

Chameleons or peacocks? Professionalism and psychological safety in culturally diverse teams

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Key digested message

The role psychological safety plays in effective team relationships is overlooked in virtual team research. Cultural diversity often does not feature in the conceptualisation of virtuality. Thus the complexity of virtual team working remains obscure. ‘Professionalism’ – a form of organisational socialisation and assimilation – makes or breaks psychological safety, particularly for ethnic minority employees, who experience intense conflict between their social identity and organisational expectations. Is it better to ‘blend in’ for survival and safety – like a chameleon – or can you afford to stand out – like a peacock?

The impact of psychological safety

PSYCHOLOGICAL safety is the freedom to voice one’s beliefs and ideas without the fear of negative consequences to one’s career or personality (Edmondson, 1999). It needs to be culturally contextualised. Cauwalier et al. (2016) found that lowered psychological safety in Thai teams drove more learning than in corresponding American teams. Additionally the disparity of knowledge and experience in Thai teams impeded collaboration, rather than assisting learning as discovered in the American teams.

Furthermore, pro-diversity workspaces enable psychological safety (Guchait et al., 2016), and are especially important for minorities, who perform much better in such a space (Singh et al., 2013). Nationality culture, often the dominant feature of individual identity, determines a person's characteristic traits, style of communication and its content. However, these differences operate at a subconscious level, and often remain unacknowledged. Thus, it is critical to understand how the breadth of cultural differences influences a person's experience of psychological safety.

Virtuality is multidimensional, although much of the existing literature on virtual work does not focus on cultural diversity. Gibson et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis discovered that only 39 per cent of studies included nationality or culture as a part of their conceptualisation of virtuality, and remarkably, only 4.6 per cent of studies included nationality or culture in their empirical analyses.

Relationships and processes need to be studied in virtual team research, although research has focused mainly on trust (Goh & Wasko, 2012) with little attention paid to the construct of psychological safety. Psychological safety remains to be explored for all its nuances and subtle variations across culture in virtual teams.

This study sought to explore how culturally diverse virtual employees experience psychological safety.

Methodology

Eight participants working in a virtual team, across different organisations and with a mix of diversity of nationality or ethnicity, took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand how employees interpret events and behaviours and the impact it has on their outlook whilst providing a framework of safety and sense of agency when speaking of uncomfortable experiences.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. This methodology highlights the voice of participants and takes into account how social and cultural factors influence a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Key findings

1. Psychological safety is a dynamic and relational experience with cognitive and emotional dimensions, ultimately rooted in the individual. Context is vital to understanding what it means for a person to feel psychologically safe and unsafe.

Participants who felt equipped to navigate the workplace experienced psychological safety. They comfortably concealed aspects of themselves and felt being their 'true' self at work was not a liberating experience.

From the employee perspective, psychological safety is not about unfiltered self-expression. Rather, it is about being psychologically savvy.

2. Employees experience conflict between their need for psychological safety and the organisational norms of professionalism.

Professionalism pertains to the social etiquette at work; rules on behaviour, communication, displays of emotion and appearance. Employees assumed a work-oriented self or corporate personality. Emotional neutrality, objectivity, diplomacy, serious, competent, and reserved were some of the words commonly used to describe professionalism.

Employees either overplayed their professional role or concealed 'unprofessional' parts of themselves that they perceived would not be accepted.

3. Employees from minority ethnic backgrounds feel less psychologically safe when their social identity is at odds with organisational professionalism norms. For example, in order to come across more professional, they assimilated to fit in with their environment and refrained from discussing hip-hop music or speaking in slang.
4. Minority ethnic employees who feel an affinity to professionalism in the workplace experience greater psychological safety and demonstrate their own unconscious bias towards the dominant professional culture.

Cultural diversity issues are generally seen through the lens of professionalism, rather than attributed to ethnic or nationality culture.

Discussion

Employees experience tremendous pressure to craft and cultivate a 'good' professional image, otherwise known as impression management (IM). IM strategies such as displays of personal competence, technical capability and social dexterity are used to influence how others perceive a person (Roberts, 2005). This may reflect organisational expectations about occupational behaviour (Kahn, 1990). But it creates a false persona, and in some cases, causes painful emotional dissonance and lowered self-esteem.

The pressure to conform is amplified greatly by the current discourse on 'organisational professionalism' which values logical, managerial, and commercial thinking and behaviour (Evetts, 2009). It encourages conformist behaviour as a way to overcome professional uncertainty. Group cohesiveness in this case may be counterproductive, as it reduces people's willingness to contradict and challenge the professional views of their colleagues as well as minimising variance in cultural differences in communication and work styles.

The social nature of identity means that what others expect and value can deeply affect one's preferred professional image. Social identity-based impression management (SIM) is the strategy aimed at enhancing one's professional image by influencing others to form a favourable impression of one's social identity (Roberts, 2005). Employees used de-categorisation or assimilation strategies to enhance their psychological experience of safety. De-categorisation involves enhancing one's professional identity and limiting socially individuating information and assimilation involves distancing oneself from one's social-identity group and associating with a group regarded as 'good'. Repressing group identity behaviours among minorities could lead to them acting unnaturally and negatively impacting their wellbeing.

Jodi-Ann Burey's TED Talk (2020) on the myth of bringing your authentic self to work encapsulates minority ethnic employees' experience of professionalism:

'...people like me... contort ourselves into this caricature of what some call professionalism, and what we call a distorted elaboration of white cultural norms and the standards that meet the comforts of those who hold social and institutional power. That's professionalism.'

Recommendations

For Minority Ethnic employees:

- Minority groups can utilise more effective IM strategies to achieve personal power, career growth and social endorsement at work and subsequently feel psychologically safer. IM understanding is helpful for employees who are increasingly self-managing their careers and relying on networking to secure employment opportunities. However, for others, this can pose internal conflict and emotional dissonance, especially, if they

feel the need to repress group identity behaviours. Employees need to be supported to make conscious and informed decisions about the impact of the work environment on their identity, health, and career development.

For managers:

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution to developing a psychologically safe team. Leaders need to understand how organisational norms implicitly discourage certain behavioural styles or silence certain voices amongst minority employees. Additionally, they need to be willing to develop their reflective capacity in order to acknowledge their own blind spots. Subtle differences in communication, speech, and attitudes towards work styles, are some of the aspects of unconscious bias masquerading as professionalism in organisations.
- Line managers need to be enabled to develop their role more broadly as a team coach. Given psychological safety is a dynamic and relational process, cultivating such an environment will rely on the leader's ability to initiate dialogue, collective reflection, and even empathic challenge. The leader's ability to move the team beyond taskwork and get 'under the surface' of complex and sensitive relational issues affecting team performance is critical to psychological safety.

For organisations:

- Modern organisations face new challenges that have no standard solutions; organisational life is rife with uncertainty and anxiety. Psychological safety is not simply removing threat; it makes the individual resilient to face threats without feeling threatened (Kahn, 2001). Therefore, organisations must cultivate 'safe uncertainty' and 'authoritative doubt'. Safe uncertainty is the ability to stay comfortable with uncertainty, and authoritative doubt, a belief made of both expertise and self-doubt (Mason, 2015). This is more about 'how to be' than 'how to'. Organisations must use an inside-out approach, which is holistic and intuitive, rather than piecemeal and linear. This approach is particularly useful in two areas of organisational life that have come to prominence since the pandemic: diversity and inclusion, and workforce wellbeing.
- Organisations must embrace diversity if they are committed to changing the systemic causes that hinder psychological safety. The focus of the problem should shift from the individual facing the problem to the organisational structures generating the problem. Commitment to the practice of allyship is critical (Nixon, 2019); acknowledging one's privilege, unlearning assumptions that inhibit change, and working with those who do not share the privileges.
- Organisations should also look at changing environmental factors that affect wellbeing and effectiveness at work. This is in contrast to interventions that focus on helping the individual cope and 'fit in' with their environment. These interventions assume that the onus of change is on the employee. Addressing the root causes rather than the symptoms is the key. Organisations need to ask themselves if they are ready and willing to engage with the deep psychological work required for systemic change.

The author

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ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

Each issue we'll list three common acronyms or abbreviations in use in psychometric circles. Feel free to send in suggestions!

CYP	children and young people
MTL	mental time line
EAL	English as an additional language