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Psychological Safety, Voice, and Inclusion Across Unequal Organizational Power

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly invite employees to question decisions, report risks, and contribute ideas, yet these invitations operate inside unequal distributions of authority, status, resources, and credibility. This integrative review examines how psychological safety, employee voice, and inclusion connect when openness is filtered through organizational power. It combines conceptual reviews, meta-analytic evidence, qualitative and quantitative studies, longitudinal and multilevel research, and methodological guidance without treating unlike designs as directly commensurable. The synthesis distinguishes interpersonal permission from actual speaking, speaking from managerial endorsement, and participation from consequential influence. Evidence converges in suggesting that psychological safety can reduce anticipated interpersonal risk and that hierarchy shapes whether voice is attempted, heard, or rewarded. However, findings also reveal conditional status benefits, strategic silence, diffusion of responsibility, selective endorsement, and differences across occupations and cultures. These tensions indicate that formal openness may be genuine, uneven, or symbolic. The article proposes a Power–Safety–Voice–Inclusion Framework in which unequal power conditions interpersonal permission, voice pathways, evaluative responses, and access to influence, while recursive relationships remain propositions requiring testing. The contribution is a bounded conceptual integration rather than a validated causal model or managerial prescription. Limitations include heterogeneous measures, substantial cross-sectional evidence, context-specific samples, and incomplete multilevel and cross-cultural testing. Stronger longitudinal, experimental, comparative, and process designs are needed to establish temporal ordering, transferability, and the conditions under which openness becomes consequential inclusion.

Keywords: Psychological safety, Openness within unequal organizations, Psychological safety as interpersonal permission, Employee voice under hierarchical power, Multilevel and cross-cultural implications, Research agenda

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Introduction

Organizational openness is often described as a climate in which employees can raise concerns, exchange information, and challenge established practices. That framing becomes incomplete when the authority to define acceptable speech, allocate attention, and act on employee input remains uneven. Psychological safety is associated with learning, information sharing, performance, and engagement, while its literature remains heterogeneous across constructs, levels, and designs; voice and silence likewise reflect related but distinct judgments about risk, efficacy, and consequence [1-3]. Openness therefore cannot be inferred from the visible presence of meetings, surveys, reporting channels, or invitations to speak. The central question is whether employees possess interpersonal permission and realistic pathways for their contributions to matter.

Inclusion further complicates this problem. Workplace inclusion concerns belonging, access, recognition, and treatment within organizational systems rather than demographic presence alone [4]. Employees may be welcomed socially yet excluded



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from agenda setting, information, sponsorship, or decisions. Conversely, they may be invited to contribute but experience unequal scrutiny, repeated nonresponse, or pressure to translate concerns into forms preferred by higher-status actors. This review consequently treats inclusion as access to participation and influence, not simply as representation or a favorable perception.

Leadership can signal that employees belong and that their distinct perspectives are valued, but such signals do not by themselves redistribute authority or guarantee consequential influence [5]. A manager may solicit ideas while retaining opaque endorsement criteria; a team may normalize candor while organizational systems discourage escalation; and a formal consultation process may display participation without changing decisions. These distinctions make unequal power integral rather than peripheral to the analysis of safety, voice, and inclusion.

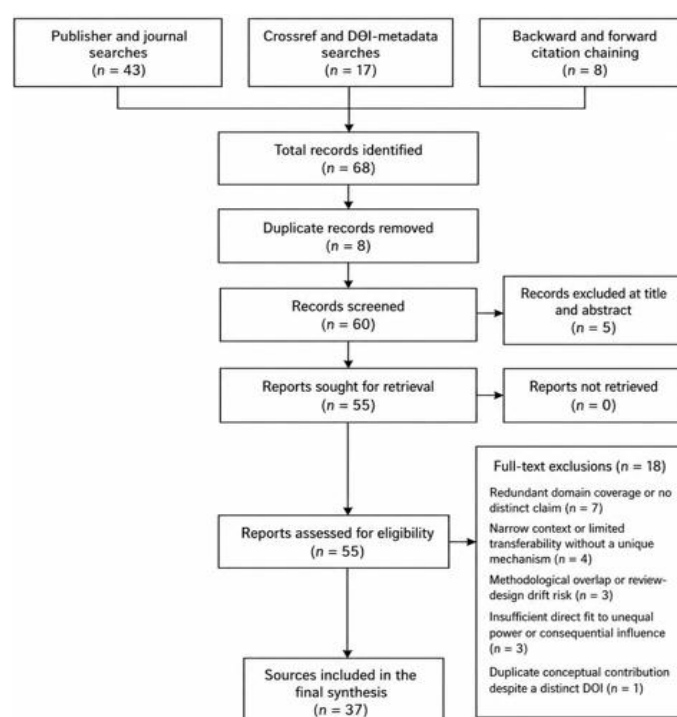
This article presents an integrative review of heterogeneous organizational evidence. Its objective is to explain where findings converge, conflict, or remain incomplete and to organize them through an original Power–Safety–Voice–Inclusion Framework. The proposed synthesis separates formal permission from enacted safety, voice behavior from silence, endorsement from implementation, and participation from influence. It also identifies managed openness and symbolic participation as conditions in which organizations display receptiveness while preserving unequal control over interpretation and action. The framework is intended to guide empirical testing and conceptual comparison; it does not establish causal validation, universal applicability, or an implementation-ready design.

Integrative review method

The review used an integrative design to combine theoretical, methodological, quantitative, qualitative, longitudinal, cross-sectional, and multilevel scholarship while preserving differences in what each design could establish. Integrative reviewing was appropriate because the focal constructs span individual perceptions, interpersonal exchanges, team climates, leader judgments, and organizational participation arrangements. The method followed transparent question framing, targeted discovery, eligibility assessment, extraction, critical comparison, and concept-centric synthesis rather than statistical aggregation [6].

Information sources comprised publisher and journal searches, Crossref and DOI-metadata searches, and backward and forward citation chaining from anchor publications. Search concepts combined psychological safety, voice, silence, inclusion, participation, hierarchy, power, status, leadership, endorsement, culture, and multilevel measurement. Eligibility required peer-reviewed journal evidence with a verifiable DOI, relevant journal standing, direct fit to at least one review question, and sufficient information for claim-level extraction. PRISMA-compatible reporting was used to make record movement visible without redefining the work as a systematic effectiveness review [7].

Figure 1 reports the verified flow of records through identification, duplicate removal, screening, full-text assessment, exclusion, and final inclusion for this integrative review article.



PRISMA-compatible reporting is used as a transparency device and does not change the declared review design or imply exhaustive coverage.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Evidence Identification and Selection

Search reporting recorded source yields, query families, eligibility decisions, duplicate handling, and citation-chaining routes so that the selection process remained auditable [8]. Screening proceeded through title-and-abstract review followed by full-text assessment. Extraction covered context, unit of analysis, design, construct definition or measure, antecedent, mechanism, moderator, outcome, level, principal finding, limitation, transferability boundary, and the exact claim permitted. Relevance appraisal emphasized direct construct fit, methodological adequacy for the assigned claim, and avoidance of inference beyond the reported design.

Synthesis proceeded by comparing evidence within and across psychological safety, voice, inclusion, managed openness, power, and cultural context. Convergent patterns were retained alongside conflicting or design-dependent findings; reviews supported field framing, whereas primary studies supported specific mechanisms and boundaries. Review methodology was treated as an independent scholarly design requiring explicit contribution logic rather than as a preliminary summary exercise [9]. No pooled effect was calculated, no quality score was invented, and unlike evidence was not treated as quantitatively commensurable.

Psychological safety as interpersonal permission

Psychological safety is best understood here as interpersonal permission to ask questions, admit uncertainty, report problems, or challenge prevailing views without anticipating disproportionate relational punishment. It is not equivalent to comfort, agreement, low standards, or assured influence. Field-level synthesis identifies psychological safety as a climate or perception concerning interpersonal risk; healthcare evidence further associates it with leadership, relationships, hierarchy, workload, and safety priorities, while nurse research links inclusive leadership with voice and error reporting partly through psychological safety [10-12]. These findings converge on the relevance of relational conditions, but the mediation evidence remains cross-sectional and cannot establish a universally ordered causal chain.

The construct also has a temporal and interactional character. Team-learning research indicates that effective learning can depend on the rhythm and arrangement of interaction rather than on a static climate score alone [13]. Psychological safety may therefore fluctuate across episodes, topics, speakers, and targets. An employee can feel able to admit uncertainty to peers yet remain unwilling to challenge a senior decision maker. Similarly, a team may support local candor while escalation beyond the team remains risky. Such variation cautions against transferring individual perceptions directly to team or organizational claims.

Across the evidence, psychological safety appears relevant to information sharing and learning-related behavior, but heterogeneity in measures, designs, and contexts constrains causal interpretation [1]. Safety may enable voice by lowering anticipated interpersonal cost; it does not ensure that the employee has access to a forum, that the contribution will be endorsed, or that action will follow. Power also shapes whose discomfort is treated as legitimate and whose challenge is categorized as constructive. Psychological safety is thus a necessary component in some openness pathways, but it is not a sufficient indicator of inclusion or influence [10].

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for psychological safety, voice, and inclusion across unequal organizational power.

Table 1. Review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for Psychological Safety, Voice, and Inclusion Across Unequal Organizational Power.

Evidence domain or review construct	Review question	Extraction fields	Appraisal or relevance criterion	Synthesis role	Main limitation	Interpretation boundary
Integrative review design	How can unlike evidence be combined transparently?	Source, design, eligibility, extraction, limitation	Explicit method and claim fit	Establishes review procedure	Guidance is not substantive evidence	Transparency does not establish exhaustiveness
Psychological safety	What constitutes interpersonal permission?	Definition, level, context, risk condition	Separates safety from comfort or consensus	Defines the enabling climate	Construct and level heterogeneity	Association is not guaranteed voice
Safety-voice pathway	When does permission support speaking?	Antecedent, mediator, episode, outcome	Temporal and relational plausibility	Connects safety with behavior	Cross-sectional or context-specific evidence	Mediation is not causal proof
Employee voice	How are speaking and silence distinguished?	Voice form, silence motive, target, consequence	Behavioral and conceptual precision	Prevents bipolar treatment	Contextual variation	Speaking is not influence

Inclusion	Does participation provide access and recognition?	Belonging, uniqueness, access, treatment	Distinguishes representation from inclusion	Connects participation with power	Mainly conceptual evidence	Leader signals are not structural access
Proposed cross-domain synthesis	How might power condition safety, voice, and inclusion?	Level, mechanism, moderator, uncertainty	Explicit supported–proposed distinction	Organizes testable relationships	Not empirically validated as a whole	No universal prescription or outcome claim

Note. Evidence-derived entries cite approved sources. The cross-domain architecture, synthesis roles, and decision boundaries are original integrative classifications.

Employee voice under hierarchical power

Employee voice is discretionary communication intended to improve practices, prevent harm, or challenge existing arrangements. Promotive voice advances ideas, whereas prohibitive voice identifies problems or risks. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that these forms share some antecedents yet have distinguishable relationships and consequences [14]. Voice should therefore not be reduced to a single amount of speaking, and silence should not be treated as its simple opposite. Employees may speak on one issue, remain silent on another, or select targets and timing strategically.

Hierarchy changes both the cost and the meaning of voice. Multi-study evidence suggests that voice can enhance social status when observers interpret it as constructive, agentic, and appropriately communal [15]. The qualification is crucial: status benefits are evaluative outcomes, not inherent properties of speaking. The same message may be praised as initiative when voiced by one employee and interpreted as disloyalty, incompetence, or overreach when voiced by another. Identity-linked expectations, expertise, prior standing, and the evaluator’s interests can therefore separate voice behavior from favorable consequence.

The hierarchy-of-voice framework further proposes that the relative ranks of speaker and target shape motivation, message construction, interpretation, and response [16]. Upward voice exposes lower-power employees to dependency and retaliation concerns; downward voice can carry authority but may suppress correction; and lateral voice may bypass blocked escalation while lacking decision authority. Middle positions complicate these pathways because actors translate concerns upward while enforcing expectations downward. Formal channels cannot remove these relational asymmetries when higher-status recipients retain control over credibility and action.

Contextual voice efficacy helps explain why nominal opportunity does not consistently become speech: employees assess whether a particular message, directed to a particular target under particular conditions, can produce a worthwhile effect [17]. Low perceived efficacy may yield silence even when interpersonal fear is limited, whereas high concern may generate voice despite risk. Voice and silence must therefore remain analytically distinct [3]. For this review, hierarchical openness is credible only when employees can raise relevant issues and when evaluation, endorsement, and follow-through are not predictably restricted by rank alone.

Inclusion as access to participation and influence

Inclusion is not secured by representation, cordial treatment, or an invitation to attend. Diversity scholarship distinguishes workforce heterogeneity from the organizational conditions through which people gain belonging, recognition, and access to resources. Inclusive leadership research similarly emphasizes enacted practices that sustain belonging and value distinctiveness, while participation research shows that inclusion depends on whether heterogeneous interests can enter deliberation and shape its direction [18-20]. These perspectives converge on a consequential definition: inclusion involves access to participation and a credible possibility of influence, not merely visibility.

This distinction reveals why psychological safety and inclusion overlap without becoming interchangeable. An employee may feel safe enough to offer an idea yet remain outside the networks, information flows, or decision forums in which it could matter. Another employee may be formally represented but experience greater scrutiny or weaker attribution of competence. Evidence linking gender dissimilarity with reduced social inclusion and absenteeism illustrates a relational pathway, although its bounded context does not establish a universal causal effect of difference [21]. Inclusion therefore requires attention to who can participate, how contributions are evaluated, and whether organizational responses alter opportunities or decisions. The evidence also differs in what it treats as the outcome of inclusion. Some work emphasizes perceived belonging or valued uniqueness, whereas the present synthesis additionally asks whether employees obtain information, agenda access, and a response trace showing what happened to their input. These are not interchangeable indicators. Positive belonging may coexist with limited authority, while influence on one decision may occur without durable social inclusion. A stronger evidence base would connect perceptions, observable participation, recipient evaluation, and subsequent allocation decisions across time. Until then, consequential inclusion should be treated as a proposed analytic standard rather than a validated composite measure.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in psychological safety, voice, and inclusion across unequal organizational power.

Table 2. Cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in Psychological Safety, Voice, and Inclusion Across Unequal Organizational Power.

Construct, mechanism, or relationship	Representative context	Evidence design	Convergent evidence	Conflicting evidence	Methodological concern	Review interpretation
Psychological safety and voice	Organizational and healthcare teams	Reviews and cross-sectional mediation	Relational conditions matter	Safety does not ensure response	Level and temporal ambiguity	Enabling condition, not sufficient cause
Safety as process	Innovation teams	Longitudinal process study	Safety is situated	Static measures may miss episodes	Context specificity	Treat safety as variable across topics and targets
Voice form and hierarchy	Multiple occupations	Meta-analysis and theory	Hierarchy conditions speaking	Effects are not uniform	Construct and rank heterogeneity	Separate message, speaker, target, and response
Voice and status	Multi-study settings	Multi-study evidence	Evaluation mediates consequences	Identical voice may be judged differently	Observer and identity effects	Speaking is not inherently rewarded
Inclusion and participation	Diverse work settings	Reviews and mixed methods	Invitation alone is insufficient	Influence is rarely measured directly	Conceptual and measurement variation	Define inclusion as access plus consequential possibility

Note. Evidence-derived entries cite the supporting sources. “Review interpretation” entries are original bounded synthesis and do not rank evidence or imply causal validation.

Managed openness and symbolic participation

Managed openness describes arrangements in which organizations invite employee input while retaining asymmetric control over what becomes visible, legitimate, or actionable. Information redundancy can create a voice-bystander effect: when several people know about a problem, each may assume that another will raise it, allowing silence to coexist with formal reporting opportunity [22]. This mechanism challenges explanations that locate silence only in individual fear or indifference. Organizational design can diffuse responsibility even when employees recognize the issue.

Voice also varies with resource state and timing. Daily evidence indicates that depletion may sometimes activate speaking while simultaneously imposing costs that affect endorsement, making uniformly positive assumptions about openness untenable [23]. Strategic silence can increase the value attached to later voice in some settings, suggesting that frequency is not equivalent to influence [24]. These findings describe conditional adaptation; they do not justify exhausting employees, withholding information, or normalizing coerced silence.

Managerial response provides a further gate. Evidence on mixed messages shows that managers may solicit voice yet withhold endorsement depending on message framing, perceived threat, or their interpretation of the speaker [25]. Endorsement itself remains different from implementation. Symbolic participation arises when organizations publicize consultation but leave evaluative criteria opaque, repeatedly disregard input, or grant access without decision relevance. The proposed category is therefore not a measured organizational type. It is an analytic warning that psychological permission, observable speaking, managerial endorsement, and consequential change should be assessed separately.

Managed openness may also be partly functional: leaders face competing demands, limited resources, and low-quality proposals. Nonimplementation does not by itself prove symbolism. The stronger diagnostic pattern is repeated decoupling between invitations and responses, especially when it tracks rank, identity-linked status, or topic sensitivity. Longitudinal process evidence is needed to distinguish reasoned nonadoption from patterned exclusion and to examine whether ignored voice predicts later silence, withdrawal, or alternative routes of influence.

Proposed power–safety–voice–inclusion framework

The proposed framework begins with unequal organizational power rather than assuming a level communicative field. Power includes formal rank, control over valued resources, expertise, network position, and identity-linked status. Middle-power actors are especially important because they face simultaneous upward dependency and downward responsibility, potentially producing vertical code-switching, role conflict, and behavioral inhibition [26]. These conditions may alter what employees perceive as safe, which voice route they select, and how recipients classify their contributions.

Figure 2 presents the original conceptual synthesis for power–safety–voice–inclusion framework, showing how the article’s principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

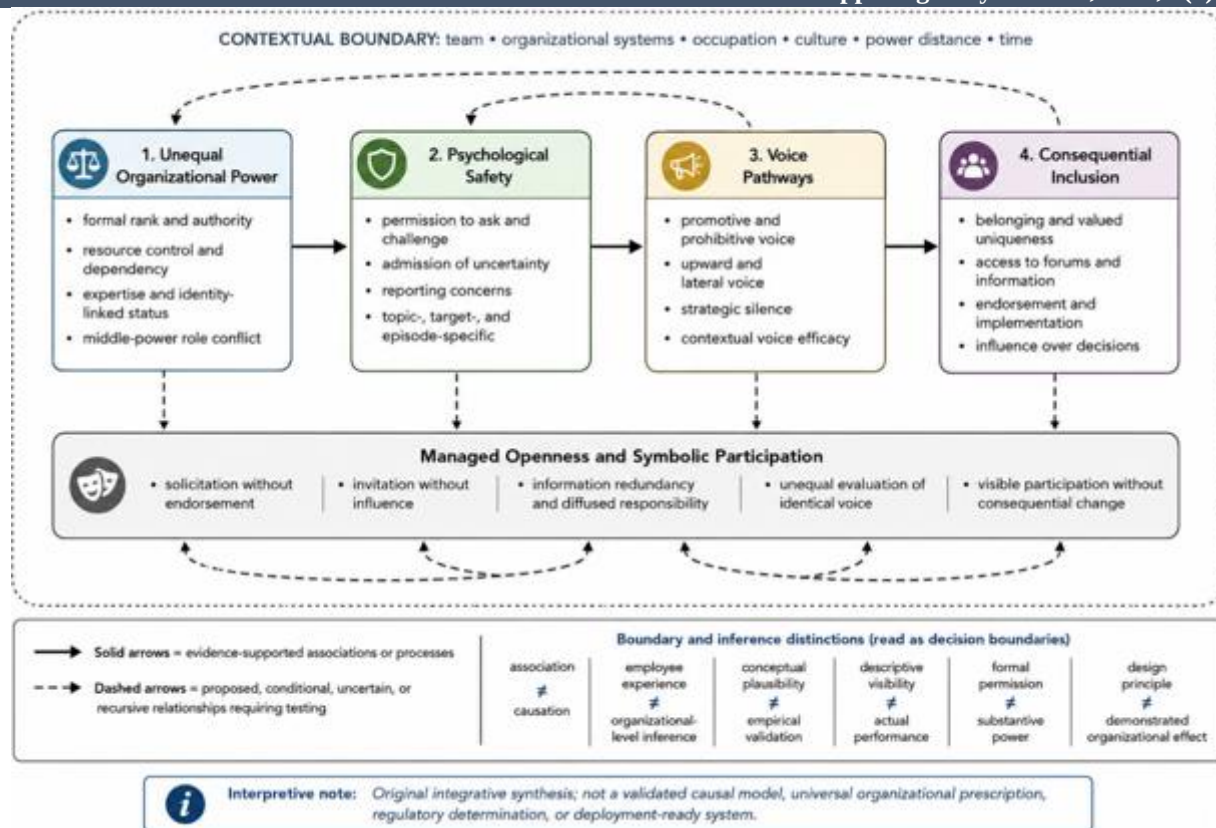


Figure 2. Power–Safety–Voice–Inclusion Framework

The framework proposes four linked stages. Unequal power conditions interpersonal permission; psychological safety affects whether concerns are voiced or withheld; voice travels through upward, lateral, promotive, prohibitive, or strategically silent pathways; and organizational responses determine whether participation becomes consequential inclusion. Research on low-power actors cautions against extrapolating from high-power behavior because durable dependency and structural constraint may change available action [27]. Social-alignment theory further suggests that power can support association or dissociation depending on motives and hierarchical relations [28].

The final transition is evaluative rather than automatic. Voice type and speaker gender can shape status and leader-emergence consequences, indicating that comparable participation may produce unequal returns [29]. Solid relationships in the framework represent evidence-supported associations or processes; dashed feedback paths are original propositions. These include the possibility that consequential inclusion strengthens later safety, that repeated nonresponse accumulates into silence or exit, and that middle-power actors translate or distort concerns across levels. None is validated as a complete causal chain. The framework instead identifies distinct observations and decision boundaries that future research can challenge.

The framework also imposes a decision boundary between legitimate filtering and unequal exclusion. Organizations cannot adopt every suggestion, and disagreement with an employee does not demonstrate suppression. Evaluation becomes power-relevant when criteria are inaccessible, responses are inconsistent across comparable contributions, or rejected input leaves no traceable explanation. Testing this boundary requires matched-message designs, decision records, and attention to who bears the cost of repeated nonresponse. The framework therefore directs analysis toward response processes rather than presuming that either acceptance or rejection is intrinsically inclusive.

Multilevel and cross-cultural implications

Psychological safety is often measured as an individual perception or aggregated team climate, whereas voice, endorsement, implementation, and inclusion can occur at different levels. Cross-level inference is unsafe when researchers observe employee perceptions but conclude that an organization is open. A team may support questioning while senior governance remains inaccessible, and an organization may advertise participation while local supervisors discourage it. Research should therefore specify the actor, target, forum, response, and level at which each construct is measured.

Cultural and institutional settings also shape perceived risks, legitimate targets, and acceptable forms of expression. Cross-cultural voice scholarship indicates that national and institutional contexts can influence how speaking is interpreted, but culture should not be treated as a fixed national essence [30]. Cross-national validation shows that silence motives differ across countries, supporting attention to measurement equivalence while leaving occupational, legal, and institutional confounding unresolved [31].

Routes of voice may change when hierarchy blocks direct escalation. A qualitative hospital case found that difficulties in upward voice could redirect concerns laterally, illustrating adaptation within a specific professional and national setting [32]. Leadership expectations may also influence employee voice through a Pygmalion mechanism, although such relationships remain conditional on design, context, and temporal ordering [33]. These findings support contextualized explanation rather than universal cultural prescriptions.

Table 3 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for evidence limitations, unresolved questions, and future research priorities.

Table 3. Evidence limitations, unresolved questions, and future research priorities.

Context or level	Moderator or boundary condition	Organizational implication	Alternative explanation	Transferability limit	Uncertainty	Research need
Individual perception	Dependency and anticipated consequence	A single climate score may conceal risk	Personality or prior experience	Occupation and rank	Temporal direction	Repeated episode-level measurement
Dyad and hierarchy	Speaker–target rank	Examine recipient power	Message quality or relationship history	Hierarchical form	Causal mechanism	Crossed speaker–target designs
Team	Interaction rhythm and leadership	Track enacted response, not climate alone	Task interdependence	Innovation-team evidence	Stability over time	Longitudinal multilevel process studies
Organization	Solicitation, endorsement, implementation	Audit response pathways	Resource constraints or proposal quality	Governance systems differ	Symbolism versus justified nonadoption	Decision-trace and comparative case research
Country and institution	Cultural norms, law, power distance	Avoid universal communication templates	Institutional and occupational confounding	Within-country heterogeneity	Measurement equivalence	Multicountry longitudinal replication
Voice route	Blocked upward access	Study alternative pathways	Professional networks	Single-case setting	Effect on eventual influence	Network and escalation-path analysis

Note. Evidence patterns are source-based. Organizational implications and research needs are proposed synthesis, not validated interventions or ranked priorities.

Research agenda

Research should first separate voice from silence rather than positioning them as opposite ends of one scale. Meta-analytic and panel evidence indicates that perceived impact relates more strongly to voice, whereas psychological safety relates more strongly to silence [34]. Future studies should model both decisions, identify the target and issue, and test whether prior response changes later safety, efficacy, and route selection.

Second, temporal and multilevel designs are needed. Structural-equation evidence among nurses links voice, silence, perceived impact, psychological safety, and burnout but cannot establish direction from cross-sectional data [35]. Communication openness may statistically connect psychological safety with nurse and patient-safety outcomes, yet cross-sectional mediation remains vulnerable to common-method and reverse-direction explanations [36]. Preregistered panel, experience-sampling, intervention, and decision-trace studies should test ordering without assuming it.

Third, framework tests should include power strata, identities, and response stages. Two-wave multilevel evidence associates leader affective presence, team psychological safety, and proactive problem prevention while showing that affective effects are not uniformly simple [37]. Stronger studies should compare low-, middle-, and high-power actors; measure solicitation, speaking, endorsement, implementation, and influence separately; and test cultural and occupational transferability. The framework should be refined or rejected when these pathways fail, reverse, or depend on unanticipated conditions.

Fourth, research should examine negative cases and failed pathways. Studies often begin with reported safety or observed voice and then search for favorable outcomes. Designs should also sample teams with formal channels but persistent silence, employees whose accepted proposals do not improve inclusion, and organizations where low psychological safety coexists with effective protected reporting. Such cases can reveal substitute mechanisms, threshold assumptions, and conditions under which the framework does not travel.

Conclusion

This integrative review reframes organizational openness as a power-conditioned sequence rather than a generalized climate of candor. Psychological safety concerns interpersonal permission, voice concerns communicative action, and inclusion concerns access to participation with a credible possibility of influence. These domains may reinforce one another, but none

can serve as a proxy for the others. Formal invitations, visible speaking, or favorable climate scores do not establish that contributions are endorsed, implemented, or consequential.

The proposed framework identifies unequal power, interpersonal safety, voice pathways, organizational response, and consequential inclusion as analytically separate stages. It also identifies managed openness and symbolic participation as possibilities when invitations are decoupled from response. The synthesis remains bounded by heterogeneous measures, substantial cross-sectional evidence, context-specific studies, and incomplete multilevel and cross-cultural testing. It offers propositions and decision boundaries rather than causal validation or a universal organizational design. Its principal implication is scholarly: claims about openness should specify who can speak, to whom, about what, with what anticipated risk, through which route, and with what observable consequence.

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