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Rebuilding Psychological Safety After Remote Work Became Routine

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Abstract

Remote work has shifted from an exceptional response to an established feature of organizational life, yet many practices for sustaining psychological safety remain anchored in assumptions of physical proximity, visible participation, and spontaneous interaction. This narrative review examines how psychological safety may erode and be rebuilt when remote interaction becomes routine. A structured narrative-review approach was used to integrate evidence concerning psychological safety, remote-work design, employee voice and silence, technology-mediated trust, managerial listening, and temporal team processes. The literature indicates that remote work does not exert a uniform effect on psychological safety or trust. Instead, reduced contextual cues, fragmented collaboration, channel constraints, monitoring practices, and ambiguous nonparticipation can interact with work design, prior relationships, managerial conduct, and employee circumstances. Digital silence cannot be interpreted solely from observable inactivity because non-expression may reflect fear, low perceived influence, workload, reflection, technological constraints, or channel mismatch. Trust is similarly differentiated across coworkers, supervisors, teams, and organizations. The review proposes that managerial listening should be evaluated through attention, interpretation, acknowledgment, explanation, and follow-through rather than the mere provision of voice channels. Its original contribution is a temporal synthesis in which repeated voice, silence, reception, and response episodes may gradually update expectations about interpersonal risk. The available evidence supports conditional design principles rather than a universal repair protocol. Longitudinal, multilevel, multisource, and experimental research is required to test the proposed relationships, distinguish alternative explanations, and determine when remote-work practices stabilize, weaken, or restore psychological safety.

Keywords: Literature boundaries, Trust fragility in technology-mediated relationships, Research gaps and future directions, Rebuilding, psychological, Safety

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Introduction

Psychological safety after remote work normalization

Psychological safety concerns whether people perceive that questions, concerns, mistakes, disagreement, and incomplete ideas can be expressed without disproportionate interpersonal cost. It is therefore more specific than general comfort, job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, or the absence of conflict. Meta-analytic evidence associates psychological safety with employee voice, learning behavior, performance-related outcomes, and work attitudes while also showing that its antecedents and consequences vary across analytical levels and organizational conditions [1]. When remote work was temporary, organizations could treat diminished informal contact, awkward virtual meetings, and delayed communication as exceptional



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disruptions. Once remote and hybrid arrangements became routine, however, these conditions became part of the ordinary environment in which employees decide whether speaking is useful, safe, and consequential.

Prevailing accounts often frame the problem too narrowly. Some assume that physical distance inevitably weakens safety, whereas others treat technological access, meeting frequency, or flexible work policy as sufficient substitutes for relational interaction. Neither position adequately distinguishes individual perceptions from team-level inference, voice opportunity from consequential influence, or visible participation from meaningful contribution. The psychological-safety literature itself contains variation in definitions, measurement levels, research designs, and causal interpretation, with much evidence relying on cross-sectional or self-reported relationships [2]. Rebuilding psychological safety after remote work normalization consequently requires more than increasing communication volume. It requires examination of how employees interpret digital interaction, how silence is produced and observed, how trust is updated across relational targets, and how managers respond when employees take interpersonal risks.

Remote work changes the conditions under which these processes occur rather than generating one predetermined outcome. Work-design evidence identifies interacting demands and resources affecting remote effectiveness; large-scale collaboration data indicate that remote transitions can alter communication networks and media use; and research on remote-worker wellbeing reports both benefits and costs across contexts [3–5]. These findings justify an integrative narrative review rather than a simple erosion thesis. The article examines digital silence, trust fragility, managerial listening, and temporal safety repair as connected but nonidentical domains. Its principal contribution is an original synthesis in which communication conditions influence voice or silence episodes, managerial reception shapes perceived response quality, and repeated experiences update expectations about future participation. This synthesis is intended to organize interpretation and research questions; it is not presented as a validated causal model.

Narrative review approach and literature boundaries

The article used a structured narrative-review approach designed to clarify constructs, compare heterogeneous evidence, preserve contradictions, and develop an evidence-bounded conceptual integration. Narrative reviewing is appropriate where a field spans different theories, methods, levels of analysis, and outcome definitions, provided that the review purpose and methodological choices are made explicit [6]. The guiding questions concerned how digital silence should be distinguished from observable nonparticipation, why trust may become fragile in technology-mediated relationships, how managerial listening can function as a psychological-safety signal, and how repeated interaction may contribute to safety erosion or repair. Searches combined title variants with concepts relating to psychological safety, remote and virtual work, employee voice, organizational silence, trust, listening, inclusive leadership, communication quality, work design, monitoring, temporal dynamics, and longitudinal measurement.

Sources were identified through publisher and DOI-indexed searches and citation chaining. Eligible articles were peer-reviewed journal publications with verifiable DOIs and direct relevance to at least one planned construct, relationship, methodological decision, table element, limitation, or research priority. Conference papers, books, reports, preprints, duplicate versions, ineligible publication years, sources without sufficiently verifiable journal standing, and articles with only broad or incidental relevance were excluded. Records were deduplicated by DOI and title before title-and-abstract screening. Full reports were then assessed for claim specificity, study design, unit of analysis, contextual transferability, methodological limitations, and contribution beyond already retained evidence. Review guidance emphasizes that literature reviews should disclose their search logic, boundaries, evaluative criteria, and synthesis procedure rather than treating literature collection as an unreported preliminary activity [7].

The search captured 70 records: 52 through publisher and DOI-indexed searches and 18 through citation chaining. Removal of 22 duplicates left 48 unique records for screening. Six were excluded during title-and-abstract screening, leaving 42 reports sought and retrieved for eligibility assessment. Twelve reports were excluded after full-text assessment: four because relevant publication-year Q1 status was not sufficiently verified, four because direct article-specific fit was insufficient, and four because their evidentiary contribution was redundant. Thirty sources were retained for the narrative synthesis. PRISMA-compatible reporting is used here to make those selection decisions visible, not to claim systematic exhaustiveness or pooled evidence estimation [8]. **Figure 1** reports the verified flow of records through identification, duplicate removal, screening, full-text assessment, exclusion, and final inclusion for this narrative review article.

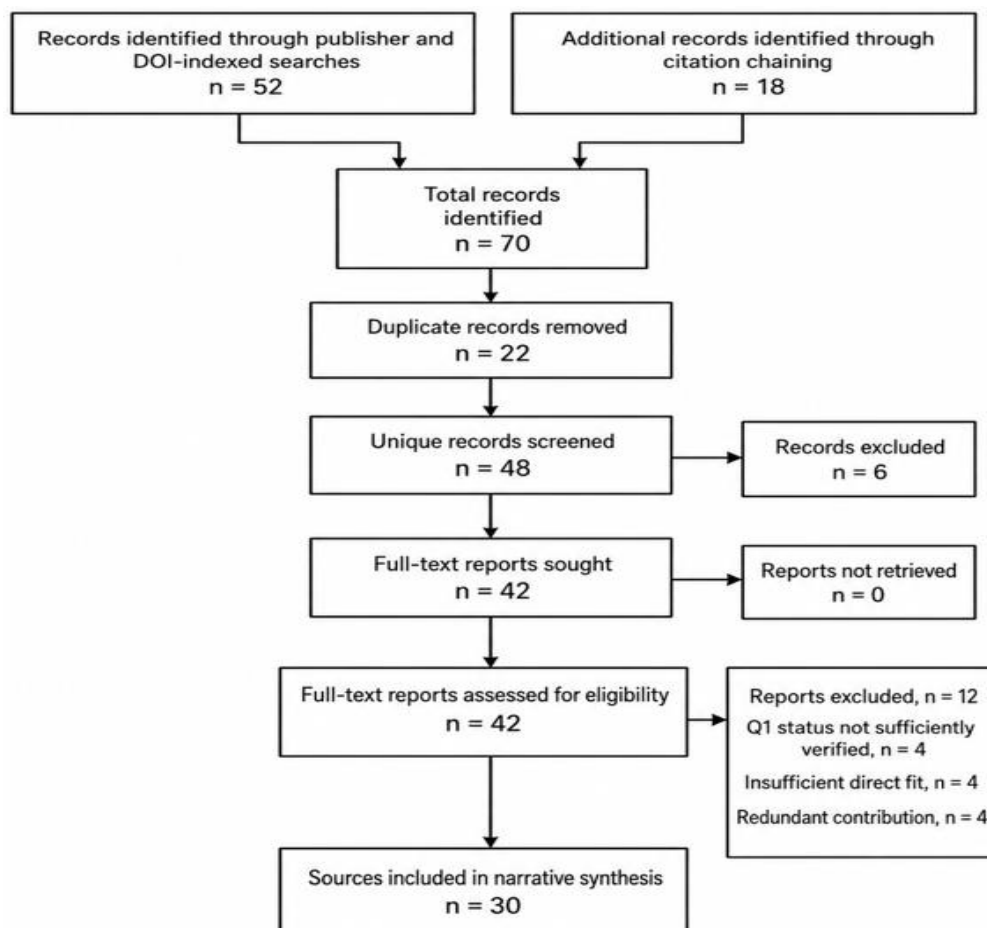


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Evidence Identification and Selection

Digital silence in routine remote interaction

Employee voice involves deliberate communication of suggestions, concerns, questions, or challenges intended to affect work, whereas silence concerns the withholding or non-expression of potentially relevant information. Although related, they should not be treated as opposite ends of one scale. Voice and silence can arise from different motives, expectations, and assessments of likely consequences [9]. This distinction becomes especially important in routine remote interaction because observable inactivity is multiply interpretable. A muted microphone, delayed message, camera-off state, short written response, or absence from an optional discussion may reflect fear, but it may also reflect workload, technological difficulty, reflective processing, communication preferences, meeting design, time-zone separation, disability accommodation, or uncertainty about whether contribution is expected.

Evidence supports caution against inferring psychological safety directly from digital activity. Voice and silence show distinct relationships with perceived impact, psychological safety, and burnout; technology-mediated collaboration offers both enabling and constraining affordances; and organizational silence research identifies heterogeneous motives and contextual antecedents [10–12]. Remote platforms can widen access by allowing asynchronous contribution, written reflection, and participation across locations. The same platforms can remove incidental exchanges, narrow social cues, formalize contact, and make interruption or disagreement feel unusually visible. Collaboration records may therefore show reduced cross-group or spontaneous interaction without revealing whether employees intentionally withheld information. Likewise, high message volume may coexist with little challenge, uncertainty disclosure, or upward communication.

For this review, **digital silence** denotes the withholding, non-expression, or reduction of work-relevant communication within technology-mediated interaction, interpreted only after considering opportunity, motive, channel, timing, audience, task context, and prior response history. The definition prevents three errors. First, it separates silence from mere absence of observable activity. Second, it distinguishes inability to contribute from a decision not to contribute. Third, it recognizes that employees may speak frequently about coordination while withholding concerns carrying interpersonal or career risk. An evidence-bounded assessment should therefore examine whether an appropriate channel existed, whether the employee expected attention or influence, whether previous contributions received acknowledgment, and whether the communication environment imposed unusual visibility or response costs. This taxonomy is an original organizing proposal rather than a validated measurement instrument.

Trust fragility in technology-mediated relationships

Trust fragility refers here to the susceptibility of relational expectations to revision when interactions provide limited, delayed, or ambiguous evidence about another party's competence, intentions, reliability, or care. Trust is not a single undifferentiated property. Employees may hold different expectations toward coworkers, direct supervisors, teams, senior management, and the organization as an institution, and these expectations may develop at individual, dyadic, and collective levels [13]. A missed response from a colleague, an unexplained managerial decision, and an organization-wide remote-work policy therefore represent different trust-relevant events. Treating them as equivalent can obscure whether a problem concerns interpersonal coordination, supervisory credibility, team norms, or organizational justice.

Technology-mediated relationships may be more interpretively fragile when contextual cues are scarce, response delays are unexplained, and informal corrective interactions are limited. Yet virtuality does not exert one fixed effect. Its consequences interact with work design, including task interdependence, autonomy, role clarity, support, and the configuration of communication demands [14]. A highly interdependent team with unclear ownership and weak asynchronous practices may experience silence or delay as unreliability. A team with explicit responsibilities, suitable documentation, and established relationships may interpret the same delay as normal autonomy. Trust fragility is therefore conditional on how technological distance combines with task structure, relational history, communication norms, and opportunities to clarify ambiguous events.

Communication evidence further challenges the assumption that more interaction necessarily rebuilds trust. Communication quality, information elaboration, and fit with task requirements are generally more informative than frequency alone [15]. Repeated meetings may increase fatigue without resolving uncertainty, while concise acknowledgment and dependable follow-through may provide stronger relational evidence. Moreover, within-person research conducted during remote work found no uniform erosion of workplace trust: greater remote-work intensity was associated with higher organizational trust, while corresponding increases were not observed for supervisor or coworker trust [16]. The finding may reflect organizational care, autonomy, health protection, or unmeasured contextual influences and does not establish a causal benefit of remote work. It nevertheless contradicts a universal decline thesis and reinforces the need to distinguish trust targets, settings, and alternative explanations. **Table 1** organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for rebuilding psychological safety after remote work became routine.

Table 1. Review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for Rebuilding Psychological Safety After Remote Work Became Routine.

Evidence domain or review construct	Review question	Eligible evidence type	Extraction fields	Appraisal or relevance criterion	Synthesis role	Main limitation	Interpretation boundary
Psychological-safety foundation	What does psychological safety represent, and at what level may it be inferred?	Meta-analysis, integrative review, primary organizational research	Definition; measure; level; antecedent; outcome; context	Construct is distinguished from trust, comfort, satisfaction, and conflict avoidance	Establishes the interpersonal-risk foundation [1]. Identifies measurement and causal limitations [2].	Substantial heterogeneity in designs, measures, and levels	Evidence does not show that remote work itself causes psychological-safety decline
Structured narrative-review boundaries	How can a transparent review be conducted without claiming exhaustive coverage?	Review-methodology and reporting-guideline articles	Review purpose; source strategy; eligibility logic; extraction procedure; synthesis method	Method matches the narrative-review purpose and makes selection decisions visible	Supports structured narrative synthesis [6]. Supports transparent review decisions [7]. Supports flow reporting [8].	Methodological guidance cannot ensure retrieval completeness	PRISMA-compatible reporting does not convert the article into a systematic review
Digital silence	When does reduced digital participation represent intentional withholding rather than another form	Voice and silence research; qualitative digital-work studies; reviews	Motive; opportunity; channel; timing; audience; response history; task context	Evidence distinguishes voice from silence and does not infer motive from activity traces alone	Defines digital silence and organizes alternative explanations [9]. Separates voice and silence empirically [10].	Remote-specific evidence is limited, and many studies use self-report or crisis-period samples	Low digital activity alone does not establish fear, disengagement, or low psychological safety

	of nonparticipation?				Identifies digital affordances [11]. Preserves motive heterogeneity [12].		
					Provides multilevel trust distinctions [13].		
Trust fragility	Which trust target is changing, and what interaction supplies the evidence for that update?	Multilevel trust reviews; virtual-team research; communication studies; longitudinal surveys	Trust target; level; cue; interaction history; work design; communication quality	Coworker, supervisor, team, and organizational trust are separated	Identifies virtuality–design interactions [14]. Distinguishes communication quality from frequency [15]. Preserves contradictory remote-work evidence [16].	Trust measures, remote-work conditions, and analytical levels differ substantially	Remote work does not inherently erode or strengthen every form of trust
Managerial listening	What makes an opportunity to speak a credible signal that contribution will be considered?	Listening reviews; leadership theory; voice meta-analysis; response studies	Access; attention; interpretation; acknowledgment; explanation; follow-through	Evidence concerns reception and response, not channel availability alone	Will distinguish speaking opportunity from consequential reception; proposed review sequence	Much listening evidence is not specific to normalized remote work	Listening may signal safety but does not prove employee-perceived safety or influence
Temporal erosion and repair	How do repeated interaction episodes update expectations about future interpersonal risk?	Longitudinal research; dynamic team studies; emergent-state reviews; mixed-method team research	Event sequence; timing; prior state; response; trust update; later participation	Study design can support temporal interpretation and separates change from stable between-person differences	Will support a proposed Routine-Remote Psychological Safety Repair Cycle	Few studies directly observe remote voice–response episodes across several waves	The proposed cycle is an integrative heuristic, not a validated causal trajectory
Work-system design	Which technological and organizational conditions alter participation costs and relational interpretation?	Work-design reviews; field experiments; monitoring reviews	Autonomy; demands; interdependence; visibility; camera expectations; monitoring purpose; employee control	Implication is linked to a demonstrated mechanism and bounded by context	Will translate evidence into conditional design principles	Evidence rarely tests complete psychological-safety repair systems	Principles are design considerations, not universally effective prescriptions
Research agenda	What evidence could test, refine, challenge, or reject the proposed synthesis?	Virtual-work reviews; interdisciplinary agendas; contextual telework studies	Level; time horizon; work arrangement; occupation; country; alternative explanation; outcome source	Proposed research design addresses temporal precedence, multilevel inference, and confounding	Specifies longitudinal, multisource, experimental, and cross-context tests	Crisis-era findings may not transfer to normalized remote work	Future evidence must establish boundaries rather than assume one universal remote-work effect

Managerial listening as a psychological safety signal

Providing a digital channel for employee voice does not establish that employees will be heard. Workplace listening involves attention, comprehension, interpretation, and a response that demonstrates that the speaker's meaning was considered [17]. In remote settings, these elements are often separated across meetings, messages, documents, and delayed decisions. Employees may therefore evaluate listening through observable signals: whether managers acknowledge receipt, ask clarifying questions, preserve the substance of concerns, explain decisions, and follow through consistently.

Inclusive leadership theory suggests that leaders can support participation by communicating both belonging and respect for distinctive perspectives [18]. Yet inclusion cannot be inferred from invitations to attend meetings or complete surveys. A manager may solicit ideas while privileging highly visible contributors, avoiding difficult concerns, or transferring responsibility for unresolved problems to employees. Remote psychological safety consequently depends not only on formal voice access but also on whether interaction practices make disagreement, uncertainty, and challenge consequentially legitimate.

Managerial responses should also distinguish among forms of voice. Promotive voice proposes improvement, whereas prohibitive voice identifies risks or harmful practices; their antecedents and consequences are not identical [19]. Nonendorsement is also not necessarily damaging when managers provide respectful and sufficiently sensitive explanations. Evidence indicates that such explanations can preserve voice safety and support later expression [20]. The proposed listening sequence—access, attention, interpretation, acknowledgment, response, and follow-through—should therefore be treated as an evaluative framework, not as a validated intervention or proof that employees experienced influence.

Temporal processes of safety erosion and repair

Psychological safety is often measured as though it were stable, but team learning and emergent relational states can follow heterogeneous trajectories. Their development may depend on the sequence, timing, and rhythm of interaction rather than the isolated presence of desirable practices [21–23]. A single supportive meeting may coexist with a longer history of ignored concerns, while one poor response may be repaired when later conduct supplies credible contrary evidence. Cross-sectional scores cannot adequately represent these updating processes.

Evidence from agile software teams further suggests that psychological safety may reflect interacting individual, team, and leadership practices rather than one antecedent or intervention [24]. Remote arrangements add temporal complexity because contributions and responses can occur asynchronously. Delayed acknowledgment may be interpreted differently depending on established norms, task urgency, managerial reliability, and prior relationships. Safety erosion may therefore be gradual, episodic, or domain-specific rather than uniform across all interactions.

This review proposes a Routine-Remote Psychological Safety Repair Cycle: communication conditions shape a voice or silence episode; managerial reception shapes perceived response quality; response or nonresponse updates trust; and updated expectations influence later participation. Trust targets must remain analytically distinct [13]. Listening provides a possible relational signal within the cycle [17], while sensitive explanations after nonendorsement illustrate one possible repair process [20]. The cycle is an original integrative heuristic and does not establish the order, strength, duration, or causal sufficiency of these transitions. **Table 2** organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in rebuilding psychological safety after remote work became routine.

Table 2. Cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in Rebuilding Psychological Safety After Remote Work Became Routine.

Construct, mechanism, or relationship	Representative context	Reported finding	Evidence design	Convergent evidence	Conflicting evidence	Methodological concern	Review interpretation
Psychological safety and participation	Organizational teams	Psychological safety is associated with voice and learning-related outcomes [1].	Meta-analysis	Reviews identify broad relevance across work settings [2].	Effect magnitude and meaning vary by measure and level.	Predominantly nonexperimental evidence	Psychological safety is relevant to participation but should not be inferred directly from activity levels.
Voice versus silence	Employee communication	Voice and silence show distinct correlates [10].	Meta-analytic and panel evidence	Silence reviews report heterogeneous motives [12].	Observable nonparticipation can arise without intentional withholding.	Self-report and construct inconsistency	Silence should be assessed through motive, opportunity, and context.
Digital affordances and participation	Enforced remote knowledge work	Technology can support continuity while constraining spontaneous interaction [11].	Qualitative study	Remote collaboration patterns also changed in behavioral trace data [4].	Digital tools may widen access for some employees.	Crisis-period and setting-specific evidence	Technology creates conditions for participation; it does not determine psychological safety.

Virtuality and work design	Virtual and distributed teams	Virtuality interacts with autonomy, interdependence, support, and task design [14].	Integrative review	Remote-work effectiveness is similarly work-design dependent [3].	Effects differ across occupations and arrangements.	Inconsistent virtuality definitions	Remote work should not be treated as a uniform exposure.
Communication quality versus quantity	Work teams	Communication quality and elaboration are more informative than frequency alone [15].	Meta-analysis	Listening research emphasizes comprehension and response [17].	Frequent interaction may still be superficial or fatiguing.	Performance outcomes dominate the evidence	Meeting or message volume is an inadequate proxy for safety.
Remote work and trust	Remote employees	Remote-work intensity did not uniformly erode trust and differed by trust target [16].	Four-wave within-person survey	Trust theory distinguishes individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels [13].	Reduced cues may still create ambiguity under some conditions.	Observational pandemic context	Trust fragility is conditional and target-specific.
Managerial response and future voice	Employee suggestion episodes	Sensitive explanations after nonendorsement can support later voice [20].	Multistudy empirical research	Listening theory identifies acknowledgment and response as relationally meaningful [17].	Explanation without follow-through may lack credibility.	Remote and team-level repair were not directly tested	Response quality may support repair but does not demonstrate durable safety restoration.
Temporal safety erosion and repair	Teams and repeated interaction	Team states may stabilize, fluctuate, deteriorate, or recover [23].	Longitudinal-literature review	Team learning depends partly on temporal arrangement [21].	No universal trajectory has been established.	Sparse waves and inconsistent intervals	Proposed synthesis: repeated voice-response episodes may update future risk expectations.

Implications for managers and work-system design

Rebuilding psychological safety should be treated partly as a work-system design problem. Work design shapes autonomy, demands, interdependence, feedback, social contact, and access to information [25]. Managers should therefore examine whether remote routines create suitable channels for questions, disagreement, and uncertainty; whether response responsibilities are visible; and whether synchronous and asynchronous practices match task and relational needs. These are diagnostic considerations rather than a universally effective intervention package.

Visibility should also be separated from contribution. A within-person field experiment found that camera use in virtual meetings increased fatigue, with implications for participation and engagement [26]. Camera-off behavior should not automatically be interpreted as silence, withdrawal, or poor performance. Organizations should require visible presence only when a defensible task or interaction need exists and should consider accessibility, self-presentation demands, meeting purpose, and alternative participation routes.

Electronic monitoring presents a related boundary. Monitoring systems differ in purpose, intensity, transparency, data type, employee control, and connection to evaluation, and their consequences are correspondingly context-dependent [27]. Monitoring should not substitute for managerial trust or relational knowledge. Organizations should make its necessity and use intelligible, separate availability from performance, limit unnecessary surveillance, and provide routes for contesting inaccurate interpretations. These principles require local evaluation and do not establish implementation readiness.

Research gaps and future directions

Virtual-work research remains fragmented across individual, team, technological, leadership, and organizational traditions [28]. Psychological-safety research would benefit from designs that connect these levels rather than attributing digital silence or trust change solely to employee attitudes. Studies should distinguish fully remote, hybrid, and colocated arrangements; separate trust targets; and measure actual communication conditions alongside psychological interpretations.

Pandemic-era scholarship also identifies interacting concerns involving wellbeing, inequality, leadership, careers, teamwork, and organizational change [29]. Future research should move beyond early crisis conditions through three-or-more-wave studies, event-contingent sampling after voice or response episodes, and multisource designs linking employee perceptions,

managerial behavior, and communication traces. Experiments could vary acknowledgment, response delay, explanation quality, channel synchronicity, or monitoring transparency while assessing both benefits and adverse effects.

Remote-work adjustment is conditional on individual, job, organizational, and environmental circumstances [30]. Cross-national and occupational replication is therefore essential. Research should test measurement invariance and alternative explanations involving workload, status, personality, disability, caregiving, prior relationships, task interdependence, meeting overload, and surveillance. Validation of the proposed repair cycle would require temporal precedence, within-person analysis, direct observation of managerial response, credible control of confounding, and evidence that competing models fit the data less well.

Conclusion

Remote-work normalization has not produced one universal psychological-safety problem. It has changed the interactional conditions through which employees judge whether speaking is safe, useful, and consequential. This narrative review distinguishes digital silence from observable inactivity, separates trust across relational targets, and conceptualizes managerial listening as a sequence extending from access to follow-through. Its principal contribution is a proposed temporal cycle in which repeated voice, silence, reception, and response episodes may update expectations about future interpersonal risk. The synthesis preserves contradictory evidence and locates responsibility in both managerial conduct and work-system design. It remains an evidence-bounded conceptual contribution rather than a validated causal model, universal prescription, or implementation-ready framework.

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