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Voice Permission without Voice Power in Hierarchical Organizations

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly encourage employees to speak up, raise concerns, question assumptions, and contribute ideas, yet permission to speak does not necessarily confer the power to shape decisions. This Critical Viewpoint Article examines that gap by distinguishing psychological safety, voice opportunity, managerial reception, consequential influence, and implementation as analytically separate organizational achievements. It argues that psychological safety is indispensable for understanding interpersonal risk but insufficient for explaining whether voiced input gains access to authority, resources, advocacy, or decision processes. The article proposes three original concepts: managed vulnerability, referring to conditions in which organizations invite employee exposure while regulating the channels and consequences of that exposure; consequential influence, referring to the capacity of voiced input to affect what happens next; and performative safety, referring to a mismatch between visible permission to speak and reliable downstream influence. These concepts are integrated in a proposed Safety–Power Reconnection Framework that treats voice as a process extending beyond expression to reception, endorsement, influence, implementation, and accountable feedback. The argument emphasizes hierarchical power differentials, manager threat, voice channel, status, and response capacity as conditions that may alter this process. The framework is conceptual rather than validated. It does not imply that every voiced proposal should be adopted, that nonimplementation demonstrates suppression, or that psychological safety produces organizational performance. Its contribution is to reconnect interpersonal safety with structural questions of power while preserving clear empirical and conceptual boundaries.

Keywords: Psychological safety under hierarchy, Managed vulnerability, Voice without consequential influence, Organizational costs of performative safety, Permission, Power

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Introduction

Employee voice is widely treated as an important organizational mechanism for surfacing concerns, correcting errors, improving practices, and challenging assumptions. Yet contemporary voice scholarship also makes clear that speaking up is not a single event with a uniform meaning or consequence. Research distinguishes different forms of voice and silence and continues to identify unresolved questions concerning what happens after employees decide to speak [1]. A critical problem follows: organizations can create visible opportunities for speaking while leaving unchanged the structures that determine whose input is heard, endorsed, resourced, escalated, or implemented. The existence of a voice channel therefore cannot, by itself, establish that employees possess meaningful influence over subsequent organizational action.



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Meta-analytic evidence shows that employee voice and psychological safety each possess established but distinguishable nomological structures rather than constituting interchangeable indicators of an open organization [2, 3]. Voice can be promotive, prohibitive, challenging, supportive, frequent, selective, or silent, while psychological safety concerns the perceived interpersonal consequences of taking risks in social interaction. Treating these constructs as equivalent risks converting a condition that may make speaking possible into an assumption that speaking will matter. That analytical shortcut obscures the organizational mechanisms positioned between expression and action, particularly managerial evaluation, access to authority, advocacy, resourcing, and implementation.

Recent conceptual syntheses increasingly situate speaking safety and voice within relational, contextual, and hierarchical conditions rather than treating them as context-free employee attributes [4, 5]. Hierarchy matters because employees and managers do not enter voice episodes with equal decision rights, control over resources, status protection, or authority to enact change. A supervisor may genuinely welcome criticism yet remain constrained by higher-level priorities; conversely, a nominally open organization may permit expression while concentrating consequential authority in ways that make many contributions practically inert. Voice therefore operates within a social hierarchy that can shape both the risks of speaking and the organizational fate of what is said.

The most direct reason to separate permission from power is that perceived impact and psychological safety are not interchangeable antecedents of voice and silence. Evidence indicates that perceived impact is more strongly associated with voice, whereas psychological safety is more strongly associated with silence [6]. This distinction suggests that employees may ask at least two different questions: “Can I speak without interpersonal punishment?” and “Will speaking make any difference?” The first concerns interpersonal permission and risk; the second concerns anticipated consequence. A theory of organizational voice that answers only the first question risks overstating what psychological safety can explain.

This article therefore advances a Critical Viewpoint rather than a review, empirical test, or managerial guideline. Its purpose is to reconnect psychological safety with the power structures that shape whether voice acquires consequence after it is expressed. The argument introduces three proposed analytic constructs—managed vulnerability, consequential influence, and performative safety—and integrates them in a proposed Safety–Power Reconnection Framework. These concepts are not presented as validated measures or causal mechanisms. They are intended to organize distinctions that are often blurred when organizations equate invitation with influence, listening with endorsement, or endorsement with implementation.

The central claim is deliberately bounded. Voice power does not mean that employees should determine every decision, that managers must accept every proposal, or that disagreement indicates suppression. Organizations face legitimate feasibility, legal, strategic, technical, and resource constraints. The critical issue is narrower: whether organizational arrangements that celebrate speaking also provide credible pathways through which voiced input can be evaluated, advocated, resourced, explained, and, where appropriate, implemented. The gap between permission and power is therefore not a claim about managerial bad faith; it is a conceptual problem concerning how interpersonal safety intersects with hierarchical authority.

Psychological safety under hierarchy

Psychological safety is best treated as a construct concerning the perceived interpersonal consequences of taking social risks rather than as a synonym for empowerment, influence, agreement, or authority. The literature has developed psychological safety across individual, team, and organizational settings, but systematic synthesis also cautions against assuming that the construct has identical meaning or effects across contexts [7]. For the present argument, psychological safety addresses whether employees perceive that speaking, questioning, admitting uncertainty, or challenging prevailing views is interpersonally tolerable. It does not, without additional evidence, establish that their contribution can alter a decision or command resources.

This distinction becomes especially important when psychological safety is analyzed above the individual level. Longitudinal evidence at the organizational level indicates that psychological safety may interact with accountability conditions rather than operating as an independently sufficient predictor of beneficial outcomes [8]. The implication is not that safety is undesirable. Rather, organizational climates combine multiple expectations: employees may need permission to raise concerns and clarity that concerns will be examined, responsibilities assigned, and decisions justified. A climate that lowers interpersonal risk but leaves responsibility for response ambiguous may therefore differ materially from one that couples safety with accountable action.

Hierarchy further conditions how psychological safety is produced and sustained. Experimental and field evidence shows that leader behavior can alter perceived power differentials, which in turn relate to psychological safety and subsequent voice [9]. Such findings support treating hierarchy as more than a static background variable. Power differences may be made more or less salient through leader behavior, interaction patterns, and organizational routines. The proposed viewpoint therefore treats psychological safety under hierarchy as relational: employees interpret not only whether a leader appears approachable, but also whether speaking changes their exposure to someone who retains formal evaluative and resource authority.

Cultural and group-level conditions introduce another boundary. Power-distance orientation does not operate in isolation; its association with employee voice can depend on activated mood and group voice climate [10]. This matters because hierarchical restraint should not be attributed solely to individual cultural preference. Employees may respond to combinations of personal orientation, local norms, leadership signals, and observed consequences. The same formal invitation to speak can therefore carry different meanings across groups, occupations, and national contexts, making universal claims about hierarchy particularly risky.

The proposed interpretation is consequently narrower than a claim that hierarchy negates psychological safety. Hierarchical organizations can support genuine interpersonal safety, and employees may speak even where authority remains unequal. The critical distinction is that safety concerns exposure to interpersonal risk, whereas power concerns capacity to shape organizational consequence. Psychological safety may facilitate the first transition—from concern to expression—without guaranteeing later transitions from expression to endorsement, influence, or implementation. The evidence therefore supports separating safety from power while leaving open how strongly each matters across particular organizational settings.

Managed vulnerability

Organizations rarely encounter voice as unstructured expression. Speaking occurs through meetings, surveys, suggestion systems, reporting channels, one-to-one conversations, digital platforms, and informal interactions, each of which shapes visibility, audience, timing, and response. Multilevel evidence indicates that favorable voice climates and manager openness can coexist with implicit theories that discourage speaking and contribute to silence [11]. Formal openness therefore does not erase the informal rules employees use to judge whether a concern is appropriate, credible, dangerous, premature, disloyal, or futile.

This tension is especially visible when voice moves from private to public channels. Evidence across correlational and experimental studies shows that managers can respond differently to public versus private voice, in part because public voice can evoke image threat [12]. The important implication is not that public voice is inherently problematic or that private channels are always superior. It is that organizational permission is partly structured by where, before whom, and under what visibility conditions an employee speaks. A nominal right to raise concerns may thus coexist with strong channel-dependent variation in how those concerns are received.

The form of the message also matters. Research indicates that voice directness, politeness, and the credibility of the voicer shape managerial endorsement [13]. This finding demonstrates that voice reception is not determined solely by the substantive existence of a concern. Employees often must translate concerns into interactionally acceptable forms, and managers assess both content and messenger. Such filtering can be legitimate when it improves clarity or discourages hostile communication, but it can also mean that voice systems reward forms of expression that are easier for authority holders to process.

Solicitation adds a further complication. Evidence suggests that when managers explicitly solicit voice, they may attribute less proactivity to the employee and thereby alter the reward consequences associated with speaking [14]. Invitation, in other words, does not necessarily preserve the same meaning of voice as unsolicited initiative. This does not show that solicitation is exploitative. It does show that organizations can encourage employees to expose ideas or concerns while retaining discretion over how that exposure is interpreted, rewarded, and acted upon.

To capture this pattern, this article proposes the construct of managed vulnerability. Managed vulnerability refers to organizational conditions in which employees are invited or permitted to expose concerns, uncertainty, dissent, or improvement ideas while the organization continues to regulate the channel, timing, style, audience, recognition, and downstream consequences of that exposure. The construct is an original analytic proposal, not an established scale. It is intended to connect evidence on openness, channel visibility, message form, and solicitation without implying a single intentional managerial strategy.

The concept also requires a strong boundary. Managed vulnerability should not be inferred merely because some employee suggestions are rejected. Organizations must filter ideas, allocate scarce resources, protect confidentiality, and reconcile competing priorities. The proposed category becomes analytically useful only when researchers ask how permission and exposure are structured relative to response and influence. A psychologically safe meeting may still offer meaningful participation; a highly managed channel may still produce substantive change. What remains uncertain is when organizational control over expression primarily supports coordination and when it systematically limits whose vulnerability can become consequential.

Voice without consequential influence

Speaking is only the beginning of a longer organizational process. Managerial endorsement itself is selective, and evidence shows that managers respond differently to promotive, prohibitive, and mixed forms of voice depending on how messages fit their processing and regulatory orientations [15]. This creates an important distinction between expression and reception. An employee may successfully overcome interpersonal risk, articulate a concern, and still encounter a target who does not endorse

the message. Such nonendorsement may reflect bias or threat, but it may also reflect disagreement, ambiguity, competing priorities, or assessments of feasibility.

Even rejection is not necessarily the final organizational outcome. Longitudinal process evidence shows that initially rejected voice can survive through collective cultivation, with peers helping ideas regain attention and move toward implementation [16]. This finding highlights that voice can travel through social systems rather than only through a single employee–manager dyad. Advocacy, coalition building, translation, timing, and persistence may all matter after the first response. It also cautions against coding every initial managerial rejection as definitive evidence of voicelessness.

Recent construct development sharpens the downstream distinction further by defining voice implementation separately from appreciation and endorsement [17]. Implementation concerns effort by a target to enact or advocate for a voiced suggestion rather than merely recognizing it or expressing support. This separation is crucial for the permission–power argument because organizations can create positive interpersonal experiences around speaking while stopping short of allocating resources, changing routines, escalating issues, or authorizing action. Listening and endorsement may therefore be meaningful but incomplete indicators of consequential influence.

Theoretical work on managerial voice implementation similarly argues that endorsement does not automatically produce action. Motivation to implement, felt obligation, perceived behavioral control, and social-network conditions can shape whether managers carry endorsed ideas forward [18]. These propositions remain theoretical and should not be treated as validated causal effects. Nevertheless, they identify a useful organizational problem: even supportive managers may lack the authority, resources, network position, or confidence needed to move voice beyond approval.

The present article therefore proposes consequential influence as a distinct bridge between reception and implementation. Consequential influence refers to the capacity of voiced input to obtain advocacy, decision access, authoritative consideration, resources, or other organizational support sufficient to affect what happens next. It is broader than managerial endorsement but narrower than generalized empowerment. The construct is proposed rather than validated, and it should not be inferred simply from employees' perceptions that speaking is safe.

Recent work therefore supports distinguishing the initial expression or endorsement of voice from the downstream social and managerial processes through which an idea may progress toward implementation [16–18]. **Table 1** organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for voice permission without voice power in hierarchical organizations.

Table 1. Core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for Voice Permission Without Voice Power in Hierarchical Organizations.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Psychological safety	Perceived interpersonal safety for taking speaking-related risks.	Employees may withhold concerns because exposure feels unsafe.	Not authority, agreement, impact, or implementation.	Upstream permission condition.	Effects vary by level and context.	Safety does not demonstrate influence.
Voice permission	Formal or enacted indication that speaking is allowed or invited.	Opportunity may exist without downstream response.	Permission is organizational opportunity; safety is experienced interpersonal risk.	Proposed first organizational gate.	Permission can be unevenly enacted.	A channel does not prove consequence.
Managed vulnerability	Proposed: employee exposure is permitted while channel, style, audience, and consequences remain regulated.	Explains invitation alongside controlled reception.	Not identical to manipulation, silence climate, or psychological safety.	Proposed mechanism between permission and reception.	Not directly validated.	Does not imply deliberate exploitation.
Managerial reception and endorsement	Recognition, evaluation, or support directed toward voiced input.	Spoken ideas may be filtered before action.	Different from listening alone and from implementation.	Intermediate response stage.	Depends on content, target, and context.	Endorsement is not influence by itself.
Consequential influence	Proposed: capacity of voiced input to gain advocacy, decision access, resources, or authoritative consideration.	Bridges speaking and organizational consequence.	Broader than endorsement; narrower than generalized empowerment.	Central proposed bridge.	Requires operationalization and testing.	Cannot be inferred from safety alone.
Voice implementation or enactment	Target or collective effort to put voiced input into practice.	Prevents endorsement	Downstream from appreciation and endorsement.	Observable downstream process.	Feasibility may legitimately constrain action.	Implementation does not prove objective idea superiority.

		being mistaken for change.				
Performative safety	Proposed: mismatch between visible permission signals and reliable downstream influence.	Identifies possible decoupling between speak-up symbolism and consequence.	Not equivalent to low safety, hypocrisy, silence, or failed implementation.	Proposed critical diagnostic category.	No validated measure is claimed.	Nonimplementation alone cannot establish performativity.

Note. Evidence-derived constructs and relationships are distinguished from original proposed synthesis. The table does not rank constructs, imply causal sequencing, or establish validated thresholds or organizational effects.

Organizational costs of performative safety

Voice systems are often evaluated by whether employees have opportunities to contribute, yet opportunity alone says little about the burdens or consequences attached to participation. Evidence from a nationally representative UK employee sample suggests that organizational voice and employee-focused voice have different associations with innovative behavior and burnout, including a positive association between organizational voice and burnout in that study [19]. Because the design is cross-sectional, it does not establish that voice causes exhaustion. It nevertheless challenges an uncomplicated assumption that more organizational voice is uniformly beneficial and supports examining what employees are asked to contribute, for whose benefit, and with what resources or response.

Speaking also has immediate social and affective consequences. Experimental and daily dyadic evidence indicates that promotive and prohibitive voice can generate different combinations of pride, anxiety, withdrawal, and citizenship-related responses after employees speak [20]. These findings matter because a permission-based account may terminate analytically at expression: once employees have spoken, the system appears successful. A power-sensitive account instead asks what employees experience after exposure and whether organizational actors share the work created by voice. Employees may have to justify, repeat, translate, defend, or socially repair a contribution even when speaking was formally encouraged.

The costs of weak voice systems can also appear through silence. Five-wave longitudinal evidence indicates that acquiescent silence, a form associated with resignation or futility, predicted later reductions in organizational identification and subsequent instigated workplace incivility in the studied sample [21]. The result should not be generalized to every form of silence, and it does not establish that failed psychological safety caused incivility. It does, however, show why futility deserves analytical attention alongside interpersonal fear. Employees can refrain from speaking not only because expression feels dangerous, but because they may judge expression unlikely to produce worthwhile consequence.

Collective settings create another complication. Field and experimental evidence on the voice bystander effect indicates that information redundancy can diffuse individual responsibility to speak, such that employees may remain silent when they believe others possess the same information [22]. Silence can therefore emerge even without an individually hostile manager or an obviously unsafe climate. Responsibility for surfacing a problem may become distributed so widely that no one experiences sufficient obligation to act. This mechanism reinforces the need to distinguish interpersonal permission from organizational arrangements that allocate responsibility for raising, receiving, escalating, and resolving concerns.

This article proposes performative safety as a critical category for situations in which visible signals of openness, invitation, listening, or speak-up opportunity are stronger than reliable pathways to consequential influence. Performative safety is not equivalent to hypocrisy, deliberate deception, low psychological safety, or any single failed implementation. An organization may sincerely solicit voice and still lack response capacity or sufficiently distributed authority. The construct therefore concerns a possible mismatch between the symbolic visibility of permission and the practical architecture of consequence. Its value must be established empirically rather than assumed from organizational rhetoric.

A central boundary follows. Declining an employee proposal can be substantively justified by evidence, legality, feasibility, strategy, timing, costs, competing stakeholder interests, or superior alternatives. A credible voice system cannot promise adoption. What it can potentially make visible is the pathway by which input was considered, who possessed authority, why escalation did or did not occur, and whether nonimplementation generated accountable feedback. The relevant organizational cost is therefore not disagreement itself. It is the possibility that repeated invitation without intelligible consequence teaches employees that exposure is expected while influence remains structurally uncertain.

Reconnecting psychological safety with power

Reconnecting psychological safety with power requires examining the authority holder as well as the speaker. Evidence shows that leaders may respond less favorably to voiced ideas when those ideas create power threat, while high-quality leader-member exchange can buffer aspects of that response [23]. This does not mean that every negative managerial evaluation is defensive. It establishes a narrower point: the hierarchical recipient is not a neutral transmission mechanism. Voice reaches an actor whose status, authority, relationships, incentives, and perceptions may affect whether an idea receives support. Psychological safety centered exclusively on employee willingness can therefore miss a consequential part of the voice process.

Status and identity can also condition the conversion of expression into enactment. Observational evidence from traditionally male-dominated military teams found that the enactment of token female members' voice depended on contextual conditions including leaders' beliefs about women's capability, with task complexity also shaping consequences [24]. The setting is highly specific and should not be generalized mechanically. Yet the study illustrates an important theoretical distinction: allowing someone to speak is different from incorporating what that person says into collective action. Formal equality of opportunity can coexist with unequal conversion of voice into enacted influence.

Horizontal relationships may partly alter this conversion. Experimental and field-intervention evidence shows that peer amplification can improve recognition, status, and perceived idea quality for a voicer [25]. Amplification therefore offers a plausible pathway through which colleagues help a contribution become more socially visible. However, recognition and status are not the same as formal authority or implementation. Peer support may increase the probability that an idea receives attention without changing who controls budgets, approves changes, assumes legal responsibility, or authorizes execution. The distinction prevents social validation from being mistaken for structural redistribution.

Structural empowerment provides a more explicit bridge. In-depth case evidence from Dutch home care shows how structural empowerment, psychological safety, and top-management commitment can operate together within a decentralized organizational arrangement [26]. Because this is case evidence, it cannot establish that the same configuration will work across settings or that structural empowerment causes resilience universally. Its relevance is conceptual: psychological safety can coexist with arrangements that distribute influence, information, and decision capacity rather than merely encouraging employees to speak upward. This makes power architecture an organizational-design question rather than an implied by-product of interpersonal openness.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for reconnection of psychological safety with power, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

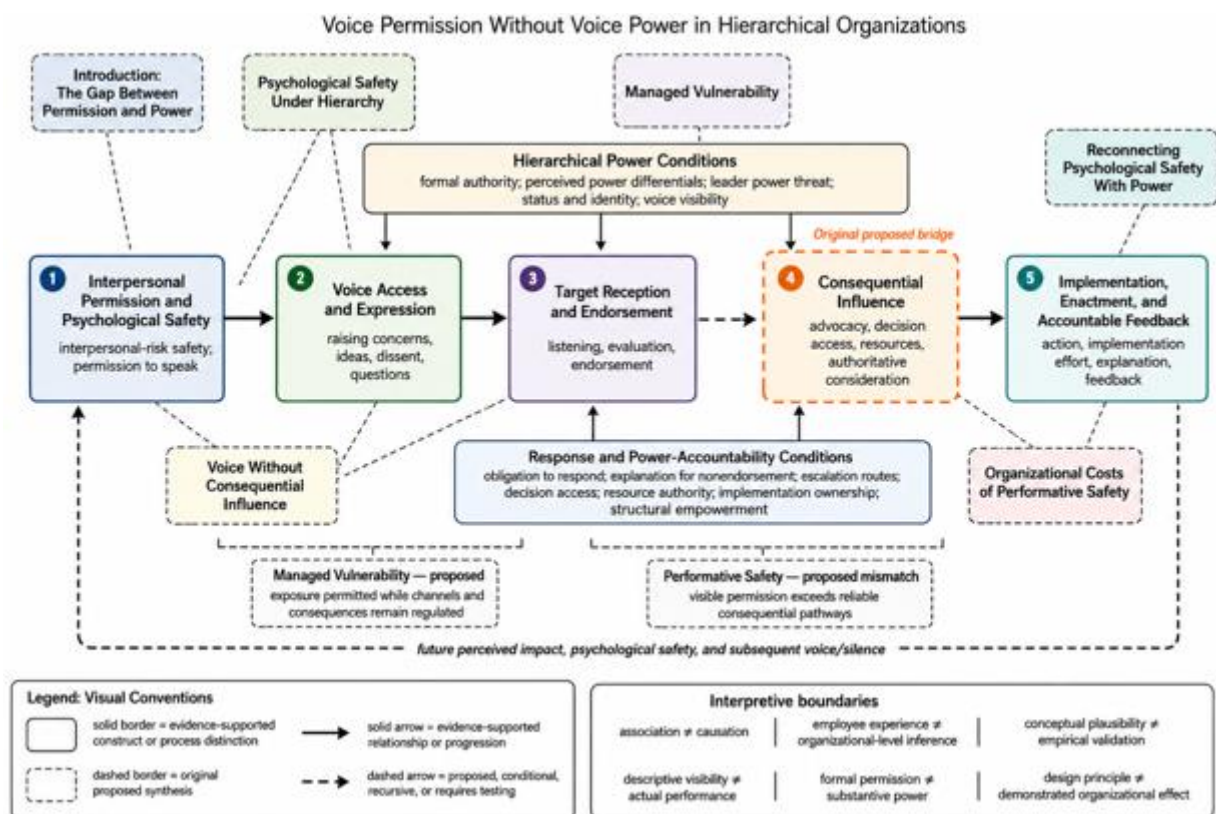


Figure 1. Reconnection of Psychological Safety With Power

The proposed Safety–Power Reconnection Framework organizes these distinctions as five analytically separate stages: interpersonal permission and psychological safety; voice access and expression; target reception and endorsement; consequential influence; and implementation, enactment, and accountable feedback. The first three draw on established literatures, while consequential influence is an original proposed bridge. It asks whether voiced input obtains advocacy, access to decision authority, resources, or serious consideration capable of affecting what happens next. The framework does not require every stage to occur linearly, and feedback may alter future expectations of both safety and impact.

Two conditioning layers constrain the proposed sequence. Hierarchical power conditions include formal authority, perceived power differentials, leader power threat, status and identity, and voice visibility. Response and power-accountability

conditions include obligation to respond, explanation for nonendorsement, escalation routes, decision access, resource authority, implementation ownership, and structural empowerment. Managed vulnerability may arise when exposure is permitted while these downstream conditions remain tightly regulated. Performative safety may arise when highly visible permission signals are not matched by reliable consequential pathways. Both relationships remain proposed and require direct empirical testing.

The framework is therefore diagnostic rather than prescriptive. It does not define an optimal amount of hierarchy, specify a universal decision-right distribution, or imply that employee preferences should override managerial accountability. Its primary decision principle is conceptual: claims about a “safe voice climate” should identify which stage is being observed. Evidence that employees speak cannot establish endorsement; evidence of endorsement cannot establish influence; and evidence of influence cannot establish beneficial implementation. Research that traces these stages longitudinally, across levels, and through observable decision processes would be required to test whether the proposed reconnection improves explanation beyond established voice and psychological-safety models.

Conclusion

This Critical Viewpoint Article has argued that organizational permission to speak and organizational power to shape consequence should not be treated as equivalent. Psychological safety provides an essential account of interpersonal risk, but it does not by itself explain who controls attention, evaluation, escalation, resources, decision rights, or implementation. Hierarchy therefore belongs inside the analysis of voice rather than outside it as contextual background.

Three proposed concepts sharpen this distinction. Managed vulnerability describes conditions in which organizations permit employee exposure while continuing to regulate the terms through which that exposure is expressed and received. Consequential influence identifies the missing bridge between reception and action: whether voiced input obtains sufficient advocacy, decision access, resources, or authoritative consideration to affect what happens next. Performative safety identifies a possible mismatch between visible permission and dependable downstream influence. None of these concepts is presented as validated, and none should be inferred from a single rejected idea, a single silent employee, or the mere presence of hierarchy.

The proposed Safety–Power Reconnection Framework integrates these ideas while preserving distinctions among interpersonal safety, expression, endorsement, influence, implementation, and accountable feedback. Its contribution is not a claim that organizations should eliminate hierarchy or implement every employee proposal. Legitimate disagreement, feasibility constraints, competing responsibilities, and bounded authority remain central decision conditions. The framework instead reframes the evaluative question: not simply whether employees are allowed to speak, but how voiced input travels through structures of authority after speaking occurs. Testing that proposition will require longitudinal, multilevel, process-sensitive evidence capable of observing both employee experience and downstream organizational response.

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