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# Managed Openness and the Performance of Psychological Safety

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**Abstract**

Organizations increasingly display openness through listening campaigns, speak-up channels, inclusive leadership language, and psychological-safety initiatives. Yet visible opportunities to contribute do not establish that employee concerns shape decisions, receive reasoned responses, or alter organizational practice. This Critical Viewpoint Article examines that gap by distinguishing the performance of psychological safety from the organizational conditions through which voice becomes consequential. It develops an original, non-validated synthesis—the proposed Performative-to-Substantive Openness Transition Framework—organized around four governance gates: credible invitation, usable access, accountable response, and consequential influence. The argument connects the rhetoric of openness, voice opportunities without influence, symbolic listening and managed dissent, and consequences for trust and participation. Psychological safety is treated as an enabling interpersonal condition rather than proof of organizational responsiveness or performance. The framework proposes that repeated response histories may calibrate employee expectations about whether speaking is worthwhile, thereby shaping subsequent participation, but this recursive relationship requires empirical testing. The article advances decision principles for distinguishing legitimate nonadoption from merely symbolic acknowledgment, including transparent authority, reason-giving, traceable issue handling, and context-sensitive escalation. Its claims remain bounded by voice quality, feasibility, hierarchy, culture, institutional context, job insecurity, resource constraints, crisis conditions, and technology-mediated work. The contribution is therefore conceptual and critical rather than causal, prescriptive, or implementation-ready. Longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and process-oriented research is needed to test, refine, or reject the proposed relationships.

**Keywords:** The rhetoric of openness, Voice opportunities without influence, Symbolic listening and managed dissent, Consequences for trust and participation, Openness, Performance

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## Introduction

Psychological safety has become a prominent vocabulary for describing workplaces in which interpersonal risk-taking is less threatening. Its appeal is understandable: employees who anticipate humiliation, retaliation, or relational damage are unlikely to disclose uncertainty, challenge assumptions, or report emerging problems. Yet the construct is frequently stretched from an enabling perception into a broad organizational performance claim. Meta-analytic and review evidence supports meaningful associations with voice, learning, engagement, and performance-related outcomes, while also documenting heterogeneity in definitions, measures, levels of analysis, and research designs [1-3]. These findings justify psychological safety as an important condition of organizational life, but they do not establish that a visible speak-up climate automatically produces influence, better decisions, or improved organizational results.

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The central problem is not whether psychological safety matters, but how organizations convert—or fail to convert—felt permission into consequential participation. Performance rhetoric often compresses several distinct stages: an employee perceives that speaking is interpersonally tolerable; a channel is available; a concern reaches an appropriate recipient; the recipient evaluates it; reasons are provided; and some traceable consequence follows. These stages are neither identical nor assured. Evidence that psychological safety may have nonlinear relationships with performance further unsettles the assumption that more safety necessarily produces better outcomes under all conditions [4]. Psychological safety can coexist with weak accountability, diffuse responsibility, low-quality voice, overconfidence, or limited follow-through. Treating it as an unqualified performance asset therefore risks substituting visibility and sentiment for process evidence.

A temporal perspective adds another constraint. Longitudinal research indicates that psychological safety is helpful conditionally rather than uniformly, and that its usefulness depends on when, where, and for whom it operates [5]. This article accordingly asks what happens after employees are invited to speak. It is a Critical Viewpoint Article: a focused, evidence-informed, non-empirical argument rather than a systematic review, empirical test, managerial guideline, or validated intervention. Its purpose is to identify a neglected governance problem—managed openness—and to propose a framework for examining the distance between organizational invitations to voice and the influence that voice can reasonably exercise. "Managed" does not necessarily mean manipulative; it denotes that organizations structure, filter, prioritize, route, and authorize participation through formal and informal arrangements.

The principal contribution is the proposed Performative-to-Substantive Openness Transition Framework. The framework distinguishes four analytically separate governance gates: credible invitation, usable access, accountable response, and consequential influence. It treats psychological safety as an enabling context that may support entry into the process, not as evidence that later gates have been crossed. Performative openness describes the risk that visible invitations or channels become proxies for responsiveness. Substantive openness describes a normative aspiration in which voice is received, evaluated, and answered through transparent authority and traceable reasoning, whether or not a suggestion is adopted. These categories and relationships are original proposed constructs. They organize critical inquiry but do not constitute a validated causal model, universal prescription, or claim that all dissent should determine decisions.

The argument proceeds through four connected domains. The rhetoric of openness concerns the signals through which organizations present speaking as welcome. Voice opportunities without influence separates channel availability from perceived and realized impact. Symbolic listening and managed dissent examine how acknowledgment, endorsement, implementation, and hierarchy shape what happens after voice is expressed. Consequences for trust and participation concern how response histories may alter future expectations and behavior. The article then develops a transition logic and governance implications while retaining alternative explanations and decision boundaries. Throughout, individual perceptions are separated from team or organizational inference, formal policy from enacted practice, descriptive visibility from performance, and conceptual plausibility from empirical validation.

## *The rhetoric of openness*

The rhetoric of openness comprises organizational language, symbols, policies, and leadership signals that depict contribution, disagreement, and problem disclosure as legitimate. Such rhetoric can be substantively important. Inclusive leadership may communicate belonging and value for uniqueness; cultural and institutional settings shape what voice means and whether it is considered appropriate; and voice and silence can coexist as strategic, selective, or constrained responses rather than simple opposites [6-8]. These insights support a cautious interpretation: openness rhetoric can create conditions under which participation becomes more credible, but its presence does not establish that employees possess usable access, that recipients are receptive, or that expressed concerns will influence decisions. The proposed category therefore evaluates alignment between declared openness and enacted response rather than assuming that organizational language is intrinsically deceptive.

This distinction matters because "voice" is not a unitary behavior. Contemporary scholarship differentiates motives, targets, content, channels, timing, and consequences, showing that employees may speak to improve practices, prevent harm, protect identities, satisfy role expectations, or influence relationships [9]. An organization may welcome incremental suggestions while discouraging prohibitive voice that questions priorities, authority, or ethical acceptability. It may solicit ideas through surveys but restrict direct challenge in meetings. It may celebrate individual candor while rendering collective or representative channels marginal. Consequently, the presence of communication infrastructure is an inadequate indicator of openness unless the organization also examines which topics, speakers, audiences, and forms of dissent receive attention.

The proposed concept of rhetorical–enacted alignment names this diagnostic problem. It does not presume bad faith. Gaps may arise because senior leaders are unaware of local suppression, managers lack authority or resources, channels are poorly designed, legal duties limit disclosure, or employees and decision makers interpret "openness" differently. Levels of analysis are especially important. An executive message may signal organization-level commitment while employees experience team-level retaliation or occupational norms that discourage challenge. Conversely, a psychologically safe team may operate within an organization whose strategic decisions remain inaccessible. Claims about openness should therefore specify the referent, the issue domain, the intended audience, and the authority attached to the channel.

A Critical Viewpoint must also acknowledge that rhetoric performs legitimate coordinating functions. Leaders cannot promise that every proposal will be adopted, that confidential matters will be disclosed, or that all decisions will be decentralized. The evaluative question is narrower: does the rhetoric accurately represent the opportunity, process, and limits of influence? Substantive signaling requires clarity about who can speak, where concerns go, who decides, what criteria apply, and how nonadoption will be explained. The article's original interpretation is that rhetoric becomes performative when visibility is treated as sufficient evidence of openness, particularly when organizations measure invitations or participation rates without examining response quality, distributive access, or traceable consequences.

### *Voice opportunities without influence*

Voice opportunity refers to the availability of formal or informal occasions through which employees can communicate suggestions, concerns, disagreement, or warnings. Influence refers to the capacity of that communication to enter consequential consideration, including agenda formation, evaluation, explanation, escalation, or change. The two should not be conflated. Perceived impact is empirically distinguishable from psychological safety and relates differently to voice and silence, indicating that an employee may feel able to speak while doubting that speaking will matter [10]. This distinction supports the article's central claim: interpersonal permission is not equivalent to organizational consequentiality. It does not, however, prove that managers intentionally neutralize voice or that every unimplemented suggestion lacked influence.

Voice content further complicates the opportunity–influence relationship. Promotive voice proposes improvements, whereas prohibitive voice identifies harmful practices, risks, or failures; meta-analytic evidence indicates that these forms have distinct associations and should not be treated as interchangeable participation [11]. A system optimized for ideation may be poorly suited to allegations, safety concerns, or challenges to strategic assumptions. The same meeting format can be accessible for confident specialists yet unusable for lower-status employees, contingent workers, or those raising identity-threatening issues. Thus, usable access is a proposed governance gate that requires more than channel presence: it concerns practical reach, intelligibility, protection, routing, and fit between the issue and the forum.

Silence can also emerge without fear or suppression. The voice bystander effect shows that perceived information redundancy may inhibit speaking because employees expect others to raise the same issue [12]. This mechanism offers an important alternative explanation for low participation and reveals a responsibility problem created by collective visibility. When everyone can see a concern, no individual may feel uniquely accountable for advancing it. Organizational efforts that simply multiply channels may intensify this ambiguity unless they specify ownership, escalation, and closure. The evidence therefore supports a mechanism of inhibited voice under particular conditions, not a general claim that silence reflects organizational bad faith.

Influence also depends on the exchange between senders and receivers. Research on prohibitive voice indicates that preferences on both sides shape whether concerns are expressed and accepted [13]. Employees may hesitate when they anticipate defensiveness, while recipients may evaluate identical content differently depending on framing, source, relationship, or perceived feasibility. These dynamics complicate any binary classification of "heard" versus "ignored." Rejection may reflect weak evidence, conflicting obligations, timing, resource constraints, or legitimate disagreement. The article's critical position is not that substantive openness requires adoption, but that organizations should be able to distinguish reasoned nonadoption from nonresponse, indefinite deferral, or ritual acknowledgment.

The proposed concept of consequential influence therefore includes more than implementation. Voice may influence how a problem is framed, which evidence is requested, whether an issue is escalated, what safeguards are introduced, or how a decision is justified. Such influence can be limited yet real. Conversely, visible speaking can remain inconsequential when it generates no accountable evaluation or when authority is opaque. This distinction preserves managerial decision rights while making the response process analytically visible. It also creates a researchable boundary between voice opportunity as an input and organizational influence as a process and outcome that may unfold across time, levels, and decision arenas.

### *Symbolic listening and managed dissent*

Listening is often treated as the natural consequence of voice, but organizational response contains several separable stages. A manager may hear and understand a concern without endorsing it. Evidence on managerial endorsement shows that evaluations of voice content and the person delivering it shape whether managers support an idea [14]. This finding supports a distinction between receipt and endorsement, not an assumption that nonendorsement is symbolic. Managers may reasonably reject low-quality, infeasible, mistimed, or jurisdictionally inappropriate proposals. Symbolic listening is therefore introduced here as an original interpretive category for situations in which acknowledgment is visible but the evaluative process, authority, reasons, or subsequent handling remain weakly traceable.

Endorsement is also not implementation. Multilevel social-network research indicates that movement from an endorsed idea to implementation depends on relational and structural conditions [15]. An idea may receive support yet stall because required actors are disconnected, resources are unavailable, or authority lies elsewhere. Conversely, implementation may occur without broad endorsement when formal power is concentrated. These distinctions prevent a simplistic equation of listening with action. They also identify accountable response as a proposed governance gate: an organization should make receipt, evaluation, decision authority, reasons, handoffs, and closure sufficiently visible to determine what occurred, without promising that every contribution will change practice.

Managed dissent refers to the organizational channeling, sorting, containment, or authorization of disagreement. It is not inherently illegitimate. Hierarchy can allocate responsibility, protect confidentiality, and coordinate action, while voice can itself affect social status and hierarchical relationships over time [16]. The critical question is whether management of dissent preserves a meaningful route to challenge or merely confines disagreement to arenas without decision relevance. The proposed category is especially useful where organizations celebrate candor but restrict which issues can travel upward, who may define a problem, or when challenge becomes "constructive." Because hierarchy and voice are reciprocal, interpretation requires attention to status, issue ownership, and temporal process rather than a static label of openness or suppression.

Contextual voice efficacy adds an employee-centered indicator of whether speaking is expected to work in a particular setting [17]. It helps explain why nominally identical channels can generate different participation patterns across teams, occupations, or institutions. Yet efficacy is a perception, not objective evidence that influence occurred. Employees may underestimate receptive managers, overestimate informal power, or infer future futility from isolated experiences. Organizations may likewise misread low use as satisfaction rather than skepticism. A defensible assessment therefore requires matched evidence: employee expectations, documented response processes, recipient reasoning, and issue trajectories. No single perceptual measure can establish symbolic listening, managed dissent, or substantive openness.

The original synthesis proposed here positions symbolic listening and managed dissent between voice expression and later consequences for trust and participation. Repeated acknowledgment without transparent evaluation may be interpreted as ritualized receptivity, whereas reasoned rejection may preserve credibility even when influence is limited. This relationship remains conceptually plausible rather than empirically validated. Alternative explanations include workload, decision latency, confidentiality, legal constraints, competing priorities, and poor voice quality. The relevant decision boundary is not whether dissent wins, but whether the organization can demonstrate a legitimate, proportionate, and traceable response process while preserving meaningful opportunities to question both operational practices and the premises governing them.

### *Consequences for trust and participation*

The consequences of managed openness are unlikely to appear as a single, immediate employee reaction. They are better understood as changes in expectations about whether speaking is worthwhile, appreciated, safe, and consequential. Voice has been associated with organizational engagement, although the available evidence does not establish a universal causal pathway from participation to engagement [18]. The relationship may depend on what employees believe happened after they spoke. Where voice is solicited but its disposition remains invisible, participation can coexist with uncertainty about whether management regarded the contribution as useful, inconvenient, or irrelevant.

Perceived appreciation provides one response-related condition. Voice is more likely to be associated with job engagement when employees believe their contribution was appreciated, with individual differences also shaping that relationship [19]. Appreciation, however, is not the same as agreement, endorsement, implementation, or trust. A courteous response may preserve dignity while leaving authority and issue handling obscure. Conversely, a demanding evaluation may still be substantive when criteria, constraints, and next steps are clear. The proposed concept of trust calibration therefore concerns how employees update expectations from accumulated response histories rather than whether they report an undifferentiated favorable attitude.

Participation may also carry costs. Evidence indicates that job insecurity can condition whether voice benefits or harms occupational well-being [20]. Speaking under insecure conditions may expose employees to anticipated replacement, marginalization, or lost opportunities even when formal retaliation is prohibited. This boundary challenges the assumption that increased voice frequency is inherently beneficial. It also separates autonomy from responsibility transfer: organizations should not use invitations to speak to shift the burden of identifying, escalating, and correcting systemic problems onto employees who lack authority or protection.

Institutional response arrangements matter alongside individual perceptions. Australian evidence links employee voice and conflict-resolution conditions with intentions to quit, but national institutions and cross-sectional designs constrain broader inference [21]. The relevant implication is not that a particular channel guarantees retention. It is that voice occurs within systems of representation, dispute handling, managerial authority, and employment security. Repeated experiences of acknowledgment without traceable evaluation may reduce future participation, whereas reasoned nonadoption may preserve credibility. That proposed feedback is consistent with the distinction between perceived impact and psychological safety [10]. It is also consistent with evidence that managerial endorsement is a separate evaluative stage [14]. Nevertheless, the suggested recursive path from response history to trust calibration and future participation remains unvalidated.

**Table 1** organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for managed openness and the performance of psychological safety.

**Table 1.** Core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for Managed Openness and the Performance of Psychological Safety.

| Construct or component | Definition | Problem addressed | Distinction from adjacent concepts | Proposed role | Uncertainty | Boundary statement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Psychological safety** | Perceived interpersonal latitude for risk-taking | Fear may inhibit speaking | Not influence or implementation | Context for entry | Performance links vary | Does not prove organizational responsiveness |
| **Rhetoric of openness** | Signals that speaking is welcome | Visibility may substitute for practice | Policy differs from enactment | Proposed credibility test | Signals may be sincere | Rhetoric alone is not performativity |
| **Voice opportunity** | Available route for contribution | Channels may be unusable | Opportunity differs from impact | Proposed access gate | Fit varies by issue | More channels need not mean more influence |
| **Accountable response** | Traceable receipt, evaluation, reasons, and authority | Acknowledgment can obscure disposition | Listening differs from agreement | Proposed response gate | Legitimate delay is possible | Nonadoption may be substantive |
| **Consequential influence** | Demonstrable consideration affecting agenda, reasoning, escalation, or practice | Implementation is too narrow | Influence is not automatic adoption | Proposed fourth gate | Influence can be indirect | No suggestion has an inherent right to adoption |
| **Symbolic listening** | **Proposed:** visible acknowledgment without traceable handling | Ritual response can mimic openness | Courtesy differs from accountability | Diagnostic category | Intent may be unknowable | Apply only with process evidence |
| **Managed dissent** | **Proposed:** organizational routing and authorization of disagreement | Hierarchy can contain challenge | Coordination differs from suppression | Boundary-sensitive category | Containment may be legitimate | Examine status, authority, confidentiality, and issue quality |
| **Trust calibration and participation trajectory** | **Proposed:** updated expectations shaping later voice | Static trust measures miss response history | Not validated mediation | Proposed feedback loop | Direction may be reciprocal | Requires longitudinal, multilevel testing |

Note: Evidence-derived distinctions are cited. Terms marked "Proposed" and their relationships are original synthesis rather than validated constructs.

### *Moving from performative to substantive openness*

Movement toward substantive openness requires evidence about organizational listening, not merely evidence that messages were transmitted. Employee-centered research conceptualizes organizational listening as a competency involving participatory communication [22]. This perspective supports examination of attentiveness, interpretation, responsiveness, and organizational capacity. It does not establish that a high perceived listening score produces influence or performance. Listening can be competent at one level while decision authority remains elsewhere, and employees may evaluate courtesy, access, and responsiveness differently.

Digitalization widens this problem. Qualitative evidence from an alternative organization indicates that electronic voice can alter access, visibility, and participation while leaving organizational power consequential [23]. Digital channels may preserve records and permit asynchronous contribution, yet they can also expose speakers, fragment responsibility, amplify popular issues, or direct attention toward what is easily categorized. Technological capability should therefore be distinguished from legitimate authority. A platform may collect, rank, or route concerns without possessing the mandate to adjudicate them, and algorithmic visibility does not itself make a decision process accountable.

Voice also operates through more than one organizational form. Organizational voice arrangements and employee-focused voice are distinguishable and may have different implications for burnout and innovative behavior [24]. This reinforces a multilevel boundary: the existence of a formal voice system cannot be inferred from one employee's speaking behavior, while an organizational policy cannot establish that a particular employee has practical access or influence. Substantive openness requires alignment between system architecture and issue-level response, not the substitution of one for the other.

**Figure 1** presents the original conceptual synthesis for transition from performative to substantive openness, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

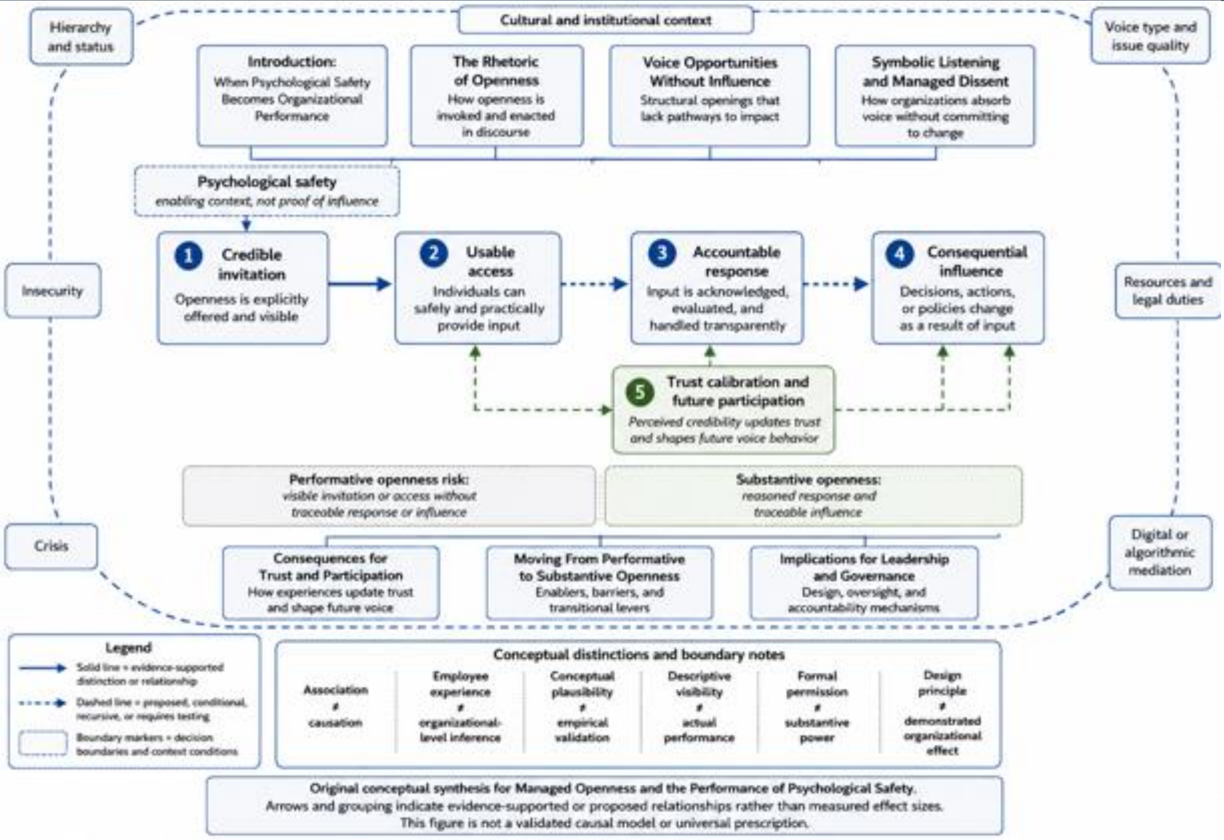


**Figure 1.** Transition from Performative to Substantive Openness.

The four governance gates clarify the proposed transition. Credible invitation concerns whether formal and interpersonal signals make speaking plausibly welcome. Usable access concerns whether an appropriate, protected, and intelligible route exists. Accountable response concerns traceable evaluation, reasons, authority, and closure. Consequential influence concerns whether voice affects consideration, framing, escalation, explanation, or practice. These gates are diagnostic distinctions, not a demonstrated temporal sequence. An organization may cross them unevenly across teams and issues. Reasoned rejection can qualify as substantive response; implementation without employee understanding may still leave openness fragile. Testing should therefore trace issues longitudinally and compare employee expectations with recipient actions and decision records.

### *Implications for leadership and governance*

Leadership implications follow from response architecture rather than exhortation alone. Leaders shape credibility when they clarify what kinds of voice are sought, who possesses decision authority, which constraints apply, how issues move across levels, and how employees can challenge a closure decision. Such principles are normative and context-dependent. They should not be converted into compliance scores or promises that participation will improve performance. Their function is to make organizational claims about openness more falsifiable by connecting invitations with observable processes.

Technology-mediated work makes those distinctions increasingly important. Algorithmic management can function as work design by reallocating discretion, monitoring, pacing, and informational visibility [25]. A digital voice system may therefore invite contribution while an algorithmic work system narrows the autonomy required to act on it. Governance should identify who designed the classification rules, who can override automated routing, what information is visible to whom, and where accountability remains human. These questions distinguish technological capacity from legitimate authority and prevent responsibility from being displaced onto a tool or its users.

Crisis conditions present another boundary. A conceptual framework of crisis voice suggests that HR practices and HR-system strength may influence whether voice arrangements remain credible under pressure [26]. Consistency can matter when priorities shift rapidly and ordinary channels are bypassed. Yet crisis response may legitimately centralize authority, restrict disclosure, and shorten deliberation. Substantive openness in such settings does not require unrestricted participation; it requires explicit temporary boundaries, protected escalation for high-consequence concerns, and later review of how exceptional authority was used. These propositions need comparative testing across crisis types and institutional regimes.

The broader governance problem is that formal voice can remain unheard even when mechanisms are abundant [27]. Boards, executives, HR functions, employee representatives, and operational leaders should therefore examine distribution as well as volume: whose concerns reach decision makers, which topics are reframed or filtered, how long resolution takes, and whether reasons are intelligible to affected groups. The proposed framework favors issue-level auditability over symbolic counts of channels, submissions, or participation. It also preserves legitimate managerial discretion by recognizing feasibility, confidentiality, legal duties, and competing stakeholder claims.

Research should test the framework rather than assume its value. Longitudinal, multilevel studies could connect invitations, access, responses, and issue trajectories to later participation. Matched employee–manager records could separate perceptions from documented actions. Qualitative process tracing could distinguish suppression from legitimate nonadoption, while comparative designs could examine culture, employment institutions, occupation, crisis, and technology. Field experiments may be appropriate for specific response practices, but organizational-level performance claims require designs capable of addressing selection, temporal lag, cross-level inference, and unintended effects. Failure of the proposed gates to predict or explain response trajectories should lead to revision or rejection, not retrospective relabeling.

## Conclusion

This Critical Viewpoint Article argues that psychological safety becomes organizational performance too easily in contemporary discourse. Feeling able to speak is consequential, but it is not evidence that an organization can receive, evaluate, answer, and learn from what is said. Managed openness names the organizational structuring of that passage. It can support coordination and legitimate authority, or it can allow invitations, channels, and acknowledgments to perform the appearance of receptivity without traceable influence.

The proposed Performative-to-Substantive Openness Transition Framework separates credible invitation, usable access, accountable response, and consequential influence. It also proposes that response histories calibrate trust and future participation. These components provide a vocabulary for examining where openness claims hold, where they fracture, and which evidence would be needed to decide. They do not constitute a validated causal chain, universal prescription, managerial technology, or implementation-ready system.

The principal decision boundary is that substantive openness does not require adoption of every suggestion. It requires a legitimate and sufficiently visible process through which voice can be considered, constrained, escalated, answered, or used. Interpretations must remain conditional on issue quality, hierarchy, culture, institutional arrangements, insecurity, resources, legal duties, crisis, technology, and level of analysis. The contribution is therefore an invitation to make openness claims more precise and empirically vulnerable. Its usefulness ultimately depends on whether future research can test, refine, challenge, or reject the proposed synthesis.

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