



Developing Psychological Safety in the Workplace through Forgiveness & Other Leadership Virtues

Summary

In a highly competitive talent landscape, some employers have turned to the psychological community to better understand employee **engagement** and one of its key antecedents, **psychological safety**. While a growing body of descriptive literature has highlighted the numerous benefits of these constructs, challenges to experimental research in the workplace have resulted in **few empirical studies on specific interventions**. In the present study, we use an experimental vignette methodology (EVM) to examine how virtuous leadership behaviors contribute to psychological safety in the workplace.

We Have an Engagement Problem

Employee engagement is below 36% in the US
(Harter, 2022)

Low engagement is bad for productivity.

- Costs US\$7.8 trillion or 11% of GDP every year (Gallup, 2022)
- Lower productivity (Harter et al., 2002)
- Higher absenteeism (Borritz et al., 2006)
- High turnover costs (Skelton et al. 2019)

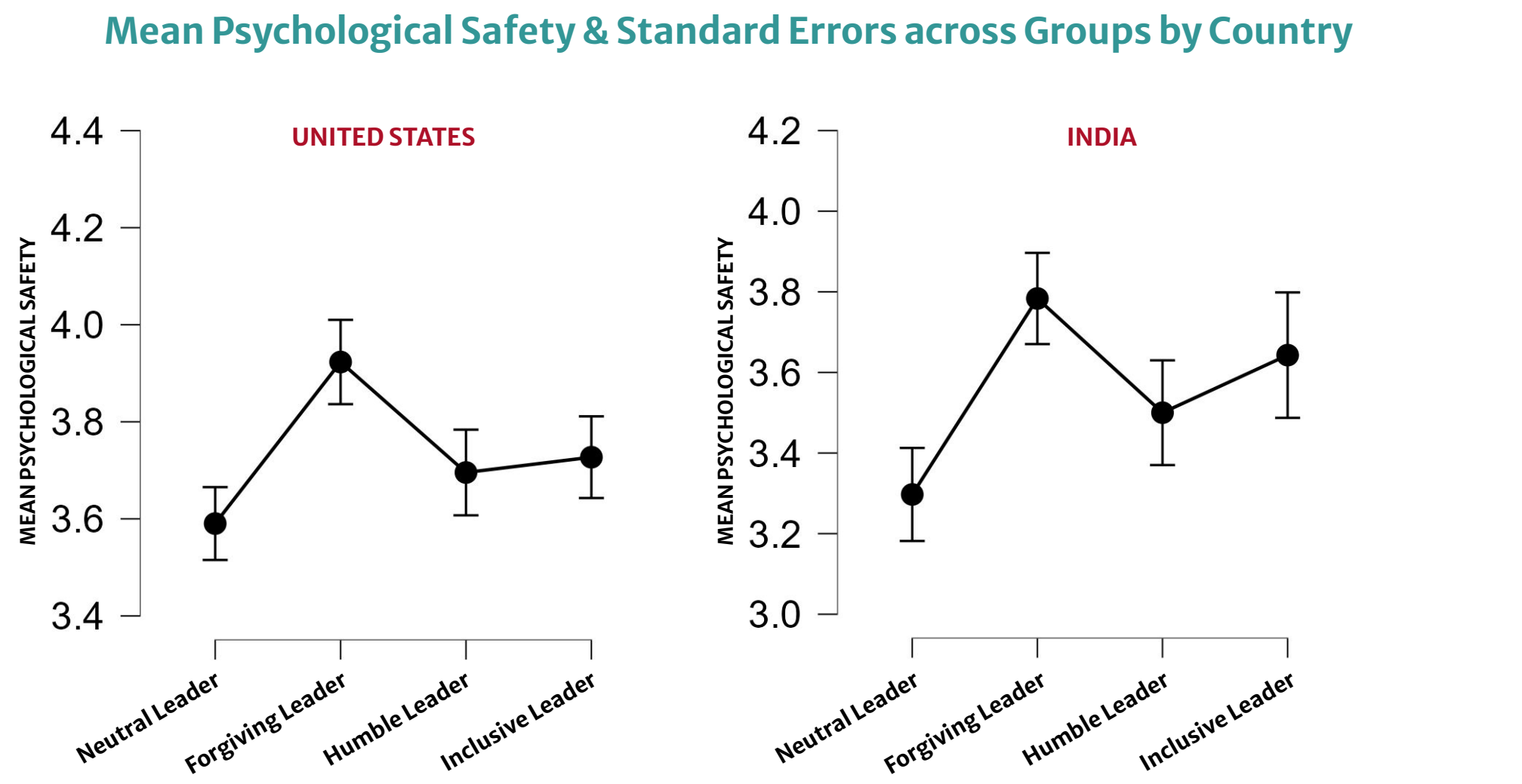
Low engagement is bad for our health.

- Disengaged employees have worse **mental** health (Shuck & Reio, 2014)
- Disengaged employees have worse **physical** health (Salvagioni et al., 2017)



Results

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests revealed a statistically significant difference in means for psychological safety across groups for both the United States sample, $F(3, 259) = 2.83, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.032$, and the India sample, $F(3, 102) = 2.73, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.074$.



In both samples, post hoc analysis also revealed that participants who experienced the leadership virtue of **forgiveness saw the largest positive effect** on psychological safety. One-way ANOVA tests of work engagement showed differences in means were non-significant in both samples.

Hypothesis

Given our understanding of the antecedents of psychological safety and its relationship with engagement, we expect **positive leadership virtues** of humility, inclusiveness, and particularly forgiveness **will predict increased follower perceptions of psychological safety** and engagement.

Sample & Method

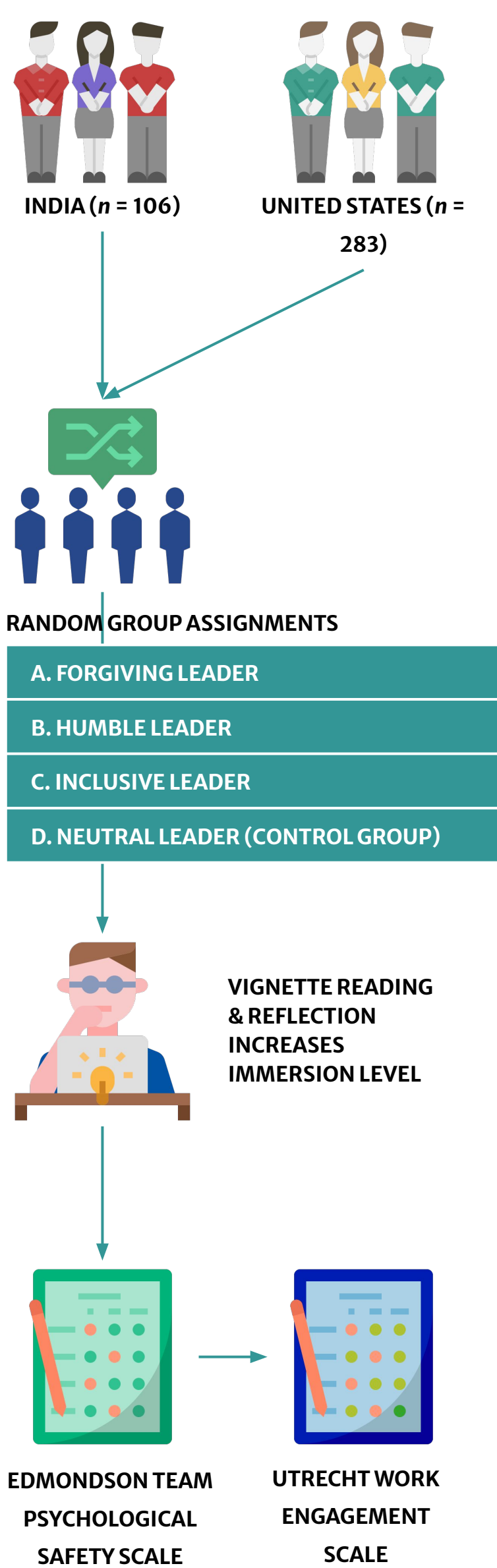
In two separate EVM studies at universities the U.S. and India, we recruited samples of 283 and 106 participants, respectively. The only requirements were that they be over 18 years old and be **currently employed** at either a full- or part-time capacity.

Participants were assigned to one of four groups of approximately equal size, and members of each group were asked to **read a short vignette** about making a mistake in a fictional work place. The vignettes were identical except for 2–3 sentences describing the employee’s leader: a forgiving leader, humble leader, inclusive leader, or neutral leader (control). Each description was based on **leadership attributes identified as established antecedents to psychological safety** in the literature.

Because more realistic, immersive experiences may increase the level of external validity (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) for experimental vignettes, after completing the reading, participants were also asked to take a few minutes to complete a **brief reflection**.

Finally, participants were asked to complete two measures:

1. **Edmondson’s (1999) team psychological safety scale** to measure psychological safety—i.e., the extent to which an individual feels that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking).
2. **Utrecht Work Engagement Scale** (UWES; Bakker et al., 2008) to measure engagement—i.e., “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004a, p. 295).



Conclusions & Limitations

- In support of our hypothesis, the findings from two EVM studies suggest that **leadership virtues, particularly that of forgiveness, contribute to follower’s psychological safety**.
- Replication of our results in India indicate the **causal relationship between forgiveness and psychological safety may generalize beyond Western cultures**.
- The lack of statistically significant results for measures of engagement underline the importance of creating stronger, more immersive vignettes for future studies.
- Because our study focused on those who hold a college degree, who tend to be *knowledge workers*, future research may benefit from by drawing from populations that include more *manual workers*.

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