It Must Exist Somewhere? The Search for Psychological Safety in the Indigenous [1]Workforce

Purpose: Employment success for Canada's Indigenous employees is met with deep rooted social barriers (Usalcas, 2011; National Aboriginal Economic Development Board, 2015). One result of these barriers may be a lack of psychological safety for Indigenous employees. While research has investigated expectations with respect to leadership (Stonefish & Kwantes, 2017) and values (Kwantes & Stonefish, 2019) in the workplace, no research has yet sought to understand what psychological safety may mean for employees who are marginalized due to the legacy of colonization and its continuing impact in the context of the Canadian workforce. The purpose of the project was to gain an in-depth, personal understanding of what psychological safety means to Indigenous employees.

Procedure: Guided by Indigenous knowledge keepers and elders, the study was conducted by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty and students. Rather than utilizing existing scales, it was deemed appropriate to approach the topic qualitatively requesting Indigenous employees to share their perspectives in their own voices. It was challenging to find participants who felt they had anything to say about psychological safety in the workplace. However, through persistence we were able to find ten Indigenous employees in Ontario who were willing to share their personal and (mostly) positive work experiences with us. Semi-structured interviews via teleconference were conducted by two trained Indigenous research assistants. Indigenous methodologies were utilized during the interviews and qualitative coding techniques were utilized through the codebook creation process and thematic analysis. Four research assistants worked in pairs to develop codebooks, each for half the interviews. Each pair then coded the other half of the interviews for the themes found for psychological safety in the literature: belongingness, voice, appreciation, and authenticity.

Results: There was 100% agreement in the rank order of the frequency of each theme in the interviews. Voice was the most frequently mentioned psychological safety theme, and belongingness was second, appreciation third, and authenticity fourth.

Conclusion: The emphasis on voice is consistent with the current focus globally for Indigenous people to have a "seat at the table." The results are clear that being heard is critical to experiencing a sense of psychological safety in the workplace.

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[1] The term Indigenous refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations in North America, recognizing the tremendous diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages under this umbrella term.