

# Fostering Psychological Safety: What is a Leader to Do?

A dissertation submitted

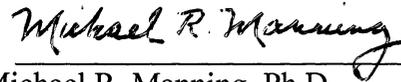
by  
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degree of

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in  
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This dissertation has been  
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## Abstract

The research question I considered is the following: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety? I used a mixed-methods approach. The study began with an online survey conducted at a logistics outsourcing company. Additionally, I completed 22 semi-structured interviews and 100 hours of observations. I assumed I would find that servant leadership behavior is predictive of psychological safety. The analysis confirmed this and illustrates that some of the eight behavioral dimensions of servant leadership have a more significant impact than others. Specifically, results support the notion that psychological safety is significantly related to seven of the eight dimensions of servant leadership. Humility ( $r = .51$ ) and empowerment ( $r = .49$ ) had the strongest associations. I then provide evidence to suggest that the organization shifted from a toxic climate, driven by an abusive leader, to a climate more conducive to the development of psychological safety due to a change in leadership. I witnessed the rejuvenating impact behaviors like inclusiveness, humility, authenticity, and accountability had on individuals and the collective perception of psychological safety. I also found communication played a vital role in both the deterioration of the facility as well as its eventual turnaround. Lastly, the narrative accounts suggest employees struggled to find sufficient stability to put down roots. In the interviews, the employees suggested that their felt ambiguity was a result of conditions like high turnover rates, constant change, and inconsistent policy administration. This study has practical implications for how leaders can develop psychologically safe teams. It

makes clear that there are consequences for leaders' actions, and that perceptions of psychological safety can be influenced by leadership behavior.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
The State of Leadership .....	3
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Benefits of the Study.....	5
Research Agenda .....	7
The Study .....	9
Research Context and History of AB Logistics .....	9
AB Logistics market realities.....	12
Research Objectives and Conceptual Orientation.....	20
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	22
Relational Leadership Theory .....	23
Leader-member exchange .....	24
Leader behaviors .....	26
Psychological Safety .....	29
Antecedents of psychological safety.....	32
Implications.....	36
Abusive Supervision .....	39
Servant Leadership.....	43
Evolution of servant leadership .....	44
Antecedents.....	46
Outcomes .....	47
Servant leadership criticisms .....	48
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	53
The Evolving Study Context.....	53
Research procedures .....	59
Questionnaire measures .....	60
Interviews.....	65
Observations .....	67
Data analysis .....	68
Summary .....	70
Chapter 4: Survey Results.....	71
Sample Characteristics.....	71
Scale Reliabilities.....	73
Descriptive Statistics.....	73
Correlation Analysis .....	75
Regression Analysis.....	77
Summary of Survey Results.....	79
Chapter 5: Qualitative Findings .....	81
Interview Participants .....	81
Overview of Interview Findings and Coding Scheme .....	82
A Toxic Work Climate.....	85
Internal employee engagement survey.....	86

Abusive leader behaviors .....	87
Evolving Toward a Healthy Work Climate .....	93
A psychologically safe microclimate .....	94
Changing attitudes at AB .....	96
Leadership change at AB Logistics and a shift in psychological safety .....	98
Supportive leader behaviors .....	99
Vital communication .....	110
Felt ambiguity .....	115
Summary of Findings .....	120
Chapter 6: Discussion .....	124
Fostering Psychological Safety .....	125
Business necessity .....	125
Leadership in contrast .....	126
Leader Behavior .....	130
Abusive leader behaviors .....	130
Justice theory .....	133
Supportive leader behaviors .....	135
Inclusive leadership .....	136
Servant leadership .....	139
Vital Communication .....	142
Conservation of resources theory .....	142
Employee voice .....	143
A leader's role in promoting employee voice .....	144
Transparency .....	146
Felt Organizational Ambiguity .....	148
Perceived organizational support .....	148
Work Climate .....	151
Social mechanisms and collective perceptions .....	155
Climate change .....	158
Summary .....	159
Chapter 7: Implications for Future Research and Practice .....	162
Impact and Significance of the Study .....	162
Limitations .....	162
Strengths .....	163
Implications for Research .....	163
Practical Implications .....	165
Appendix A: Survey Instrument .....	168
References .....	172

## List of Figures

Figure 1. How Leader Behavior Affects Work Performance .....	7
Figure 2. The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety .....	8
Figure 3. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety .....	21
Figure 4. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety (Repeated).....	23
Figure 5. Fostering Psychological Safety .....	51
Figure 6. Research Timeline .....	58
Figure 7. Organizational Chart .....	82
Figure 8. Coding Scheme in the Development of Aggregate Dimensions .....	84
Figure 9. Behavioral Undermining Pathway .....	92
Figure 10. Behavioral Enhancing Pathway.....	108
Figure 11. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety (Repeated).....	124
Figure 12. A Model of Leader Behavior and Psychological Safety .....	128
Figure 13. Visual Taxonomy of Dysfunctional Leader Behaviors .....	131
Figure 14. Behavioral Undermining Pathway .....	134
Figure 15. Behavioral Enhancing Pathway.....	138
Figure 16. Work Climate as a Moderator .....	152
Figure 17. A Model for Fostering Psychological Safety .....	160

## List of Tables

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Survey Participants (n=127) .....	71
Table 2. SLS Subscale Reliabilities .....	73
Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Psychological Safety and Servant Leadership Measures (n= 127).....	74
Table 4. Intercorrelations of Study Variables .....	76
Table 5. Bivariate Correlations of Psychological Safety, Total SLS and SLS Dimensions .....	77
Table 7. Regression of Organizational Role and Servant Leadership on Psychological Safety .....	78
Table 8. Regression of Organizational Role and Dimensions of SLS on Psychological Safety .....	79
Table 9. What Is One Thing That I Would Like To See Changed?.....	87
Table 10. Employee Quotations Reflecting Dysfunctional Leader Behavior.....	90
Table 11. Employee Quotations Reflecting Supportive Leader Behavior.....	106
Table 12. Employee Quotations Reflecting the Effect of Leader Communication ..	114
Table 13. SLS Dimensions and Examples .....	121

## Chapter 1: Introduction

My two-year-old daughter's preferred diversion is watching Disney's *The Mini Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. In her favorite episode, Christopher Robin leads Pooh and friends through the Hundred Acre Wood on an expedition to discover the North Pole (Robinson & Glebus, 2011):

Though they had marched and sung for quite some time, their expedition had not led them anywhere. Until—"Pooh Bear, where did you find that stick?" Christopher asks.

"Uh, what stick?" Pooh shrugs.

"That stick!" Christopher says, pointing to the branch Pooh is holding.

"Well, uh, I was standing here without a stick and then I had a stick, so maybe the stick found me," Pooh suggests dumbfoundedly.

"Assembled adventurers," Christopher says. "The expedition is over. For Pooh has discovered the North Pole."

"Eureka!" Pooh cries, as he triumphantly raises the *North Pole* over his head.

In many ways, this conversation is analogous to my research. As a practitioner, I worked for a number of organizations. Each, to varying degrees, had a toxic work climate. I wanted to better understand these dysfunctional environments and, more importantly, how leaders could change them. As I began my Ph.D. journey, comprehending these dynamics was where I wanted to focus my research efforts. I was introduced to the construct of psychological safety early in the program.

Psychological safety has been defined as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking,” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350), and it was missing from all of those places I had worked. Finally, I felt that I had been introduced to the mechanism that could combat toxicity and a lodestar for my research. Over time, this notion was reduced to a research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees’ perceptions of psychological safety?

I felt that the components of this research question addressed the root cause of the toxic environments I had worked in during my career, but it did not account for how to change the environment. I have had a relationship with an organization, which I’ll call AB Logistics, for more than a decade. AB has chronically struggled with employee turnover, safety, and morale at its largest facility. I contacted them and explained that I wanted to do a comparative case study between this location and a facility in another organization. They were intrigued by the opportunity because their problems were progressively getting worse. An abusive leader had recently been fired, team morale was plunging, turnover was running more than 300%, and the location was losing money. It was an exemplary toxic workplace.

Shortly after I began my research, a new leadership team was put in place at the struggling AB location. The leaders behaved differently. They viewed employees as allies, not adversaries. They treated people with dignity and respect. As time

progressed, I abandoned looking for a comparison company for a case study. Instead, I focused my research on the work climate that was changing in front of me. I stumbled onto a comparative case study in a single organization. I had found my *North Pole*, or maybe it found me. I was able to research psychological safety emerging in the least likely of places.

### ***The State of Leadership***

Leadership perplexes people the way Russia confounded Winston Churchill (n.d.) during World War II: “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” Defining what it means to be a leader is difficult, in part, because of nebulous leadership characteristics, like having business savvy, and because of abstract academic definitions, which are hard for practitioners to grasp and apply. According to Antonakis and Day (2018), there is no universal definition of leadership. For example, Fiedler (1971) noted, “There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are leadership theories—and there are almost as many theories of leadership as there are psychologists working in the field” (p. 1). Although this is a quotation from almost fifty years ago, few would argue that it does not aptly apply today.

In addition to leadership being hard to define, it is ever-changing. Given the complexity of the global world we live in, with disruptive technology and increasing competition, the demands of a leader, and what it means to lead, are constantly evolving (Osland, Oddou, Bird, & Osland, 2013). Since the 1990s, there has been a shift toward leaders whose genuine bonds and positive relationships can create a

healthy workplace (Härtel, Kimberley, & McKeown, 2008). As an illustration of the shift, this is the definition of leadership from a 1927 leadership conference: “The ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation” (Moore, 1927, p.124). Contrast that with a more recent assessment of leadership where Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) concluded that “leaders are one element of an interactive network that is far bigger than (the leader)” (p. 414).

### ***Statement of the Problem***

A recent meta-analysis questioned if the proliferation of leadership theories was beneficial given the lack of evidence that each theory was theoretically and empirically unique (Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, & Harrington, 2018). Some researchers have questioned if the similarity in theories makes them irrelevant in practice (van Dierendonck, 2011). It is one thing when redundancy creates scholarly debates among academics, but the risk is practitioners are unable to find a consistent foothold in the literature in order to foster positive real-world outcomes. Focusing on a single theory creates blind spots due to the theory’s boundaries. “A minor change in theoretical focus could so substantially alter what is to be predicted and why the actions are linked to the criteria that even the most skilled leadership researcher would be unable to see the commonality” (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002, p. 799).

If it is true that we have evolved beyond concepts that embrace authoritarian and command-and-control leaders, what may be more important than creating or building on analogous leadership theories are the mechanisms that lead to desired

organizational outcomes. Maybe scholars and organizations alike should worry less about the “how-to” of leadership and simply focus on leaders having resources to develop the types of relationships that create environments where employees flourish. Organizations are like soil—employees generate a higher yield when their environment is rich and fertile. Leaders can supplement their soil by exhibiting behaviors that build relationships and foster psychological safety (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

A systematic review of the literature found numerous outcomes associated with psychological safety that should motivate leaders to engage in supportive behaviors and build bonds with team members that build a psychologically safe work climate (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). Unfortunately, for many employees, working with a sense of psychological safety is elusive. A 2012 worldwide survey by Ipsos found only 47% of people felt their workplace was psychologically safe (as cited in Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017), and despite all of the research extolling its benefits, no one has provided a playbook for how to cultivate this important component of a work environment (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

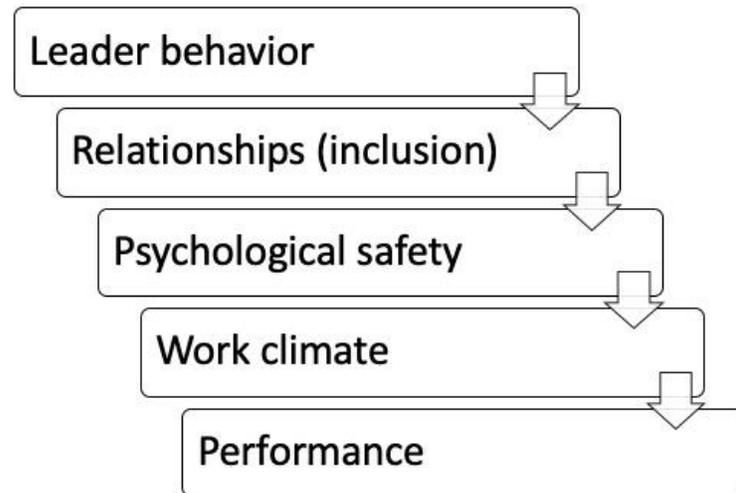
### ***Benefits of the Study***

Creating psychological safety is crucial for having a healthy learning work environment in today’s vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) global business environment:

Psychological safety is a timely topic given the growth of knowledge economies and the rise of teamwork. Both of these trends have given rise to new work relationships in which employees are expected to integrate perspectives, share information and ideas, and collaborate to achieve shared goals. (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 24)

The potential benefit of this study is to help leaders gain insight into how to create and maintain an environment where employees' need for self-protection is secondary to freely collaborating for the greater good of the organization's mission.

I believe this process germinates at a very granular level. It starts with a leader's behavior. Subordinates interpret their leader's behavior and decide how they intend to engage in the employment process. Ultimately, some types of leader behaviors foster relationships, while others suppress or destroy relationships. It is through inclusive relationships that psychological safety emerges. As peers share their perceptions of how they experience the leader, an aggregate opinion of psychological safety evolves. This group perception affects the relationship between a leader's behavior and their team's work climate, which ultimately affects performance. This process is illustrated below in Figure 1 and provides the overarching conceptual orientation for this dissertation. This figure suggests that a leader should choose their words and deeds carefully because it has a bottom-line impact. Leader behaviors do affect distal outcomes.

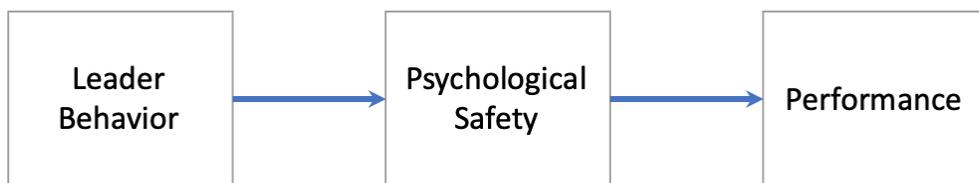


**Figure 1. How Leader Behavior Affects Work Performance**

### ***Research Agenda***

While the full scope of how psychological safety evolves is unknown, it is clear that a leader's behavior affects organizational performance through the mediating influence of followers' perceptions of psychological safety (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). This relationship is modeled in Figure 2 below. Because research suggests psychological safety is very significant for all stakeholders, research that helps define its antecedents and the process of how it facilitates work outcomes is salient (Newman et al., 2017). To that end, the research question I will consider is the following: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety? I hope to respond to calls for research like that of Frazier et al. (2017) who ask researchers to develop a deeper understanding of when

leadership matters and how it functions in relationship to psychological safety. My research could shed light on which leader behaviors are most effective at fostering psychological safety and how leaders can avoid extinguishing it with dysfunctional behavior. Kaiser, Hogan, and Craig (2008) suggested that successful leaders affect organizational outcomes by developing work climates that enable employees to achieve organizational goals. This research will show psychological safety is crucial because it mediates the relationship between leader behavior and performance (see Figure 2). In my literature review, I will cover many of the specific ways psychological safety affects performance. For now, I will suggest that the relationship between leader and follower—the leader member exchange—is influential in how followers interpret their leader’s behaviors. This sensemaking affects followers’ contributions.



**Figure 2. The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety**

## ***The Study***

The research took place with employees working at AB Logistics, in a large, midwestern, consumer-product, distribution center. The main participants in this research are blue-collar forklift operators. The forklift operators' primary tasks consist of unloading trucks from the manufacturing plants, picking and staging outbound retail orders, and loading those orders on trucks. I worked for this organization from 2008–2013. Over the course of three and a half months, I administered a work climate study, and I completed more than 100 hours of observations, informal interviews, and formal semi-structured interviews with leaders and frontline employees in this organization. As I began the study, the facility was in the process of finding a replacement for a site manager who had created a toxic work environment as a result of abusive supervisory behaviors. During my research, a new leadership team was put in place. I witnessed more supportive and encouraging behaviors from the new regime. These two contrasting approaches affected employees' perceptions of psychological safety.

## ***Research Context and History of AB Logistics***

Conger (2004) and Zaccaro and Klimoski (2001) have criticized researchers who fail to account for context. They have suggested that most theories in the leadership literature do not account for environmental factors, yet leadership cannot be correctly explained without accounting for the contextual variables that differ in every situation. With that in mind, it is important to establish the unique setting where this research took place because “Leadership is a function of both the leader and the led

and the complexity of the context” (Avolio, 2007, p. 31). In this section, I will briefly address some of the internal and environmental challenges AB faced that are relevant to understanding the research setting.

Because I have a long history with AB Logistics and am able to summarize their business situation as it has developed historically, I will provide an extensive characterization of the context in which this research takes place. Over the next several pages, I inform the reader of AB Logistics’ rich contextual history. I provide this information upfront before delving into the specifics of data collection and research findings.

AB Logistics manages the warehousing part of the supply chain for a large multinational consumer product company that I will refer to as CPC. The facility where I conducted my research has always had chronic employee problems (e.g., employee turnover, safety, and morale). While many contextual factors could contribute to a poor performance, the intuition of those working for the organization (AB Logistics’ leaders and followers) was that an abusive facility manager had a substantial effect. A toxic work climate had evolved, and it dramatically hampered the operation. CPC was demanding a turnaround because the facility was not meeting contractual obligations as it related to inventory accuracy, on-time shipments, prompt receipt of inventory from the manufacturing plants, dwell time (i.e., the time a driver waits beyond their scheduled appointment time to pick up a load), and other key

performance metrics. The plan involved nearly every aspect of the operation, including training and retention in addition to the previously mentioned operational key performance indicators (KPI). AB developed a 30/60/90-day plan to prioritize and correct operational failures. AB committed to having subject matter experts (SMEs) on-site at this warehouse weekly as part of the turnaround. The SMEs were to conduct independent audits for site compliance with these processes. The result of these audits would be used to create action plans to address any gaps and/or to refine the process through additional or modified steps or automation. None of AB's other facilities are located in the region, which meant it was costly to send management support to facilitate the turnaround plan. Because of my familiarity with the operation, and because I live in the community, AB contacted me to see if I could oversee the turnaround plan.

Because I was finalizing my dissertation research, I was looking for participant organizations. I did not have time to commit to overseeing the turnaround. However, I suggested that if AB was willing to participate in my research, I would be spending enough time in the facility to help with some audits and provide a sanity check for what was happening at the warehouse. We agreed that I could be a local resource and provide status updates on the turnaround in exchange for their research participation.

I was granted access to employees at every level of the company. Over the course of three and a half months, I spent more than 100 hours in the facility, which provided

abundant opportunities for employee observations and informal conversations. I also interviewed the organization's corporate leaders, customer service employees, and human resource staff to provide context for the research setting. I reviewed historical data relating to productivity, turnover, and employee engagement. I also had access to weekly conference calls between AB logistics and CPC that were a review of how the facility was making progress versus what had been the week's commitments in the 30/60/90-day plan. Additionally, the major gaps in KPIs were reviewed on this call, (e.g., inventory accuracy, inbounds received on time, detention accessorial charges, outbound load dwell time, and employees working more than 60 hours a week). In addition to this wealth of data, I completed a cross-sectional quantitative survey and 22 semi-structured interviews with employees in the midwestern warehouse and some of the corporate leaders.

### **AB Logistics market realities**

Like many small businesses, AB has been negatively impacted by the evolution of big box stores like Walmart. The difference is that AB experienced the pain inside the supply chain as opposed to demands outside the supply chain. The Main Street mom-and-pop shops are at a competitive disadvantage because they cannot match the large retailer's prices, in part because of the economies of scale and efficiencies that companies like AB are delivering. The president of AB alluded to how this industry disruption has evolved over the last decade. He suggested big retailers like Walmart and Target started demanding more from their supply chain partners. These firms have become very savvy over the last 20 years about utilizing information to make

evidence-based business decisions. These insights gleaned from data led to big companies, like Walmart, leaning more on outside providers, like AB, to improve their inventory turns and change their ordering patterns. They were no longer ordering in full pallet quantities. Instead, they were replenishing cases based on real-time sales, which increased AB's labor and handling costs. The financial burden for many of those supply chain efficiencies has been placed on AB Logistics. This process change was the arrival of just-in-time inventory.

#### A dysfunctional agreement

Based on my observations, AB's relationship with CPC is best described as antagonistic or contentious. A third-party logistics model should create a synergistic scenario where both the outsourcing company and the work provider benefit, according to Vitasek, Ledyard, and Manrodt (2010). The authors went on to suggest this relationship does not have to be a zero-sum game; however, most outsourced contracts are structured on this flawed transaction-based model. Vitasek et al. (2010) illustrated the "perverse incentive" inherent in these contracts by describing how nineteenth-century paleontologists visiting China paid locals for every dinosaur fossil they produced. Eventually, they realized the peasants were smashing the bones to maximize their income. Vitasek et al. (2010) said that in the absence of a synergistic contract, one party may use a "muscular" approach:

The muscular approach assumes that one of the parties, usually the large buyer, deals with smaller suppliers in a peremptory way. Muscular buyers not only use their suppliers, but they often "use up" their suppliers and discard them. (Williamson, 2008, p. 10)

AB was locked in a competitive zero-sum game with its “muscular” business partner. CPC was aware it represented a disproportionately large amount of AB’s total revenue, so it leveraged its power at the bargaining table. One senior leader described negotiating with CPC by comparing it to the scene from the 1978 National Lampoon’s classic *Animal House* in which a fraternity pledge is being paddled as part of a hazing initiation ritual: “Thank you, sir. May I have another?” (Reitman, Simmons, & Landis, 1978).

#### Internal challenges

In 2008, AB’s founder retired and sold the business to his leadership team, which included the corporate Director of Human Resources and the President.

When we bought the company, we thought we knew, and we really didn’t. What I mean by that is you don’t know what you don’t know. We were very good operators, but we weren’t financial people, we weren’t bankers and we weren’t accountants and things of that nature. So, could we operate a warehouse and operate a business? Absolutely. The mistakes we made were we overleveraged ourselves and didn’t totally understand what we were getting ourselves into. (AB President, personal communication, January 29, 2020)

Because the business was strapped for cash, resources were often in short supply. Employees seldom had the necessary operational equipment to be effective. Difficult staffing decisions had to be made, employee benefits were cut, and some employees were laid off. With the benefit of hindsight, the President lamented some of the actions that were taken, but he suggested as a leader he was ensuring sustainability for the greater good, even if few people recognized it at the time.

At the end of the day, there is what I want to do and what I have to do, and they are not always the same thing. Unfortunately, that's life. Today we're bigger; we're more sustainable; we're on a better footing; we're more mature as a company. (AB President, personal communication, January 29, 2020)

The HR Director explained the distribution center's problems began to spiral in 2014 when a long-tenured manager retired. He was replaced by a parade of incompetent facility managers. With all of the leader churn in the facility manager role, AB's faraway corporate leaders didn't realize how bad the work climate in the warehouse was becoming, and they failed to recognize just how much knowledge was leaving because of the significant frontline employee turnover. For example, one of the challenges with so many new people was training and having enough people well-versed in the legacy warehouse management system to both train and keep up with the workload. According to the AB Logistics' HR Director, CPC has been a detriment to AB's success when it comes to recruitment, retention, and other staffing concerns.

If you rewind to the 2012–2014 period, we operated this building without a contract for the better part of two and a half years. The workforce knew it. We had a mass exodus of our tenured people.” Employees, especially those with families, were left with no choice but to jettison the company in search of security. “If you know your current employer no longer has a long-term contract, and they are working on a month to month basis, at some point you've got to look out for yourself. That's what happened. (AB's HR Director, personal communication, January 29, 2020)

The HR director remarked that the facility went from having an average tenure of 4.3 years amongst its operators to an average tenure of 2.1 years in a two-and-a-half-year period. The HR Director argued that this series of events propelled the distribution

center into a steep decline because as the rate of turnover increased it was progressively harder to train employees properly and still maintain the throughput levels of volume CPC required. As poorly trained employees hit the floor, inventory issues rose steeply. The decline in tenure created a snowball effect that had a damaging effect on AB's performance.

#### My experiences as an AB employee

Because of my previous experience as an AB employee, I must acknowledge the risk of bias related to this research. When I joined AB Logistics as an external hire in a frontline supervisor position, I struggled with the same knowledge gaps that employees are identifying in the AB supervisors today. I did not have the functional skills to help, train, and guide my employees in their tasks. Over time, I built up these skills, but it took a while because I was quickly pressed into duty. After a few weeks, I found myself managing a weekend crew of about 25 people. An assistant supervisor and I were the only leaders in the facility. I felt extremely ill-prepared. Luckily, my assistant was well versed in the business and kept us on track while I became acclimated. I share this because I can empathize with the AB employees who experience suboptimal onboarding. I had a significant bout of imposter syndrome early in my AB career. Getting properly acclimated to an organization is crucial for creating conditions for psychological safety.

As a new supervisor, I found myself in a fast-paced, dynamic environment, where I was constantly responding to customer requests and organizational challenges. As an

example, the manufacturing plant was located 20 miles away. I had no forecast of how many trucks I would have to receive on any given day. Drivers could deliver a truck an hour. Somedays the plant sent one shuttle driver; somedays the plant sent three. There was an expectation from CPC that trucks were unloaded as soon as they arrived. With a finite staff, this created significant challenges. We also struggled with having appropriate resources. Much of the equipment we were using was obsolete and chronically breaking down. We were constantly being asked to put six gallons in a five-gallon pail. Fighting fires was an adrenaline rush, but it never felt like we mastered tasks. We pushed to the point of a minimally viable product and moved to the next pressing issue. My manager at the time was fond of saying, “When everything is a priority, nothing can be a priority.” The sense of ambiguity, unrealistic expectations, and fear of missing deadlines did not create a psychologically safe environment.

When I was promoted to the facility manager role, I saw a different side of the organization. At the senior level, the executives appeared to fight like siblings. They had grown up in the organization together and were radically candid in their communication. We would be on an operations call, and they would begin “arguing.” It would generally get heated enough that all of the sites were put on hold. Often, when the corporate office came back online, they had reached a consensus. Looking back, while their behavior was dysfunctional, what they were exhibiting was a form of psychological safety. They were taking an interpersonal risk and doing battle to get

to the best solution for the greater good. At the time, in a new manager role, it was intimidating. I recognized it as conflict, and I did not speak unless I was asked a direct question on those operational calls. I was unwilling to be vulnerable. For the most part, this was the approach most of the managers in my role took. These were one-sided conversations about our locations' performance metrics. It felt more like a witness being interrogated than a business review.

Several months into my tenure, AB's president was berating our location on a call. His ire was directed at my supervisors. He was talked about firing someone on my staff. I felt like he was scapegoating. My sense of responsibility to my team outweighed my fear, and I interrupted him and began arguing that we were set up to fail. The phone went silent. We had been put on hold. I was certain I was in trouble. After what seemed like an eternity, the corporate office came back on the line. There was laughter in the background. The president said, "You've got balls, but you are still wrong." Then he moved on to the next location's report out. When the call ended, my phone rang. It was the president. We talked for a long time about the challenges we faced. This call changed my willingness to take risks, and I became a more engaged participant in the organizational discussions. I felt more willing to take risks because of having a relationship with the person who ultimately judged my performance and signed my paycheck.

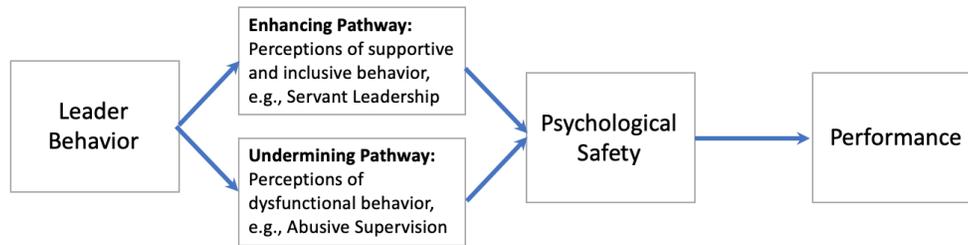
At the time of my promotion to the facility manager, I reported to one of the 11 original CPC leaders who transitioned to work for AB during warehouse outsourcing. About six months after my promotion, my boss was reassigned. I found myself reporting to an AB insider. He had been with the company since its inception. This was not just any member of the gang. He was the cooler. He was the manager sent to every startup to set the organizational tone. He was the manager sent to locations having labor problems. His reputation preceded him, and he was feared. The stories of him snatching badges and firing people on the spot were legendary. It turned out that he was not the Boogie Man. He was austere but fair. Over time, we became close friends. He taught me about constructive conflict in the name of progress. He taught me to be proactive, not reactive in the face of chaos. He was a tremendous mentor, and these lessons were key to me developing psychological safety in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment we worked.

In 2013, I left AB Logistics. At that time, I was frustrated because the employees' work-life balance was not a priority. They were treated like fungible widgets. I was tired of being part of the problem. I was tired of being the person deciding to place the employees on six 12-hour days. During my time with AB logistics, I perceived the full spectrum of psychological safety. My reality as a new entry-level supervisor with low psychological safety was likely not much different than one of the hourly employees. My psychological safety increased during my time with AB because I developed key relationships, and I had more information and control.

It is with this personal working history and familiarity with AB Logistics that I began this study to collect and analyze data on how leaders influence the psychological safety of their employees.

### ***Research Objectives and Conceptual Orientation***

My goal in this study was to understand the leader behaviors that affected psychological safety. I chose AB Logistics because I was aware of the challenges it had faced and the type of environment I had worked in as an employee. I was unaware of how much the work climate had deteriorated in the eight years since I left the company. I could not foresee how new leaders would alter the facility's course dramatically through their behavioral approach. This research study's unique context—turnaround environment—allowed me to investigate both the dark side leadership behaviors that destroyed psychological safety and were detrimental to the work climate, as well as the servant leader behaviors that rebuilt psychological safety and lifted the organization. These contrasting behaviors are modeled in Figure 3 below. The new regime's supportive behaviors are illustrated by the enhancing pathway, while the previous authoritarian leader's behaviors represent the undermining pathway.



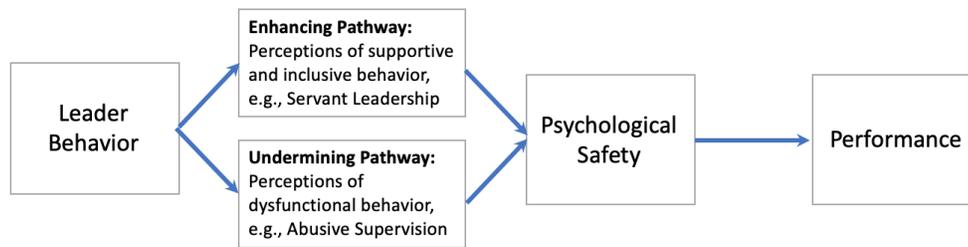
**Figure 3. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety**

Understanding the key components of this process is critical for providing a foundation for this study. In the next chapter, I will review the extant literature related to those constructs, which will provide the underpinning for explaining the results of this study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In the last chapter, I outlined the challenges practitioners face while trying to unpack leadership research into actionable guidance, and I suggested that focusing on relationships that foster a healthy work climate might bear more fruit. I proposed the underlying mechanism that facilitates this process is psychological safety. This chapter covers a review of the most relevant literature on my research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety?

The first two topics relate to my proposed model (see Figure 4 below). The review will begin with relational leadership theory, which contains the literature on leader behavior. Leader behavior is my independent variable and is a key component in the employee sensemaking process. Leader behavior can enhance or undermine an employee's perception of their environment. Next, I will review psychological safety, which is the mediating variable in my model. As employees make sense of their environment, their perception of psychological safety sets the tone for the organization's work climate and affects its performance.



**Figure 4. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety (Repeated)**

The last two topics, abusive supervision and servant leadership, relate to my findings and the experiences of my research participants. The participants were exposed to abusive supervisor behaviors, which created a toxic work climate. This relationship is represented by the undermining pathway in the model above. Eventually, the despotic boss was removed and replaced by a supportive leader. The new manager typified servant leadership behaviors, which had a positive effect on the work climate and psychological safety. This relationship is represented by the enhancing pathway in the model above.

### ***Relational Leadership Theory***

As a result of the paradigm shifts away from top-down management, there has been an increased research focus on the relationships between leader and followers. The idea that leadership is not about any individual or role is an important concept. Robert Quinn (1996) said leadership is an organic function that any person can exhibit, regardless of their formal position in the organizational hierarchy. Balkundi and

Kilduff's (2005) research on a broad social network structure reinforces the importance of the collective because it locates leadership in the web of relationships connecting stakeholders—not just a function of the leader. Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) suggested that these relationships account for not only performance but also how an organization may respond to external changes.

According to relational leadership theory, relationships are an informal contract between both parties in the dyad. As the interactions evolve, each person can assess the value of the relationship and the fit with their partner (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000). The relationship becomes, in part, a cost-benefit analysis for each participant, and, when beneficial, it acts as the mortar joining the collective in a common pursuit.

### **Leader-member exchange**

The key mechanism within the relationship-based leadership is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), which explains the strength of relationships between leaders and followers (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). The idea is effective leadership occurs when leaders develop unique, synergistic, mature relationships with each follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Every interaction is context-specific because each individual's behaviors define the outcomes of the relationship. In describing Vroom and Jago's (2007) situational leadership model, Hanges, Aiken, Park, and Su. (2016) suggested leadership is a process that develops from people's interactions; it is not a trait of the person in charge. They continued on to suggest that leaders garner influence through

the process of building and nurturing these relationships. In an LMX, a leader's actions can endear or alienate followers, which can create in-groups and out-groups (Roussin, MacLean, & Rudolph, 2016). A subordinate's poor relationship with their leader can create a need to seek out high-quality interactions with peers whom they identify with as being similar (Roussin et al., 2016), which can bolster the outgroup dynamic.

Other researchers have underscored the follower's role in the relational leadership model by suggesting there is no leadership without followers (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). When framing the relationship from a subordinate's perspective, a leader cannot lead until the follower has agreed to be led. As early as the 1950s, the importance of the follower's role was being considered. Sanford (1950) suggested the follower was the most important role in a leadership setting because the follower can reject leadership. Howell and Shamir (2005) extended this reasoning, suggesting it is the follower who influences and empowers the leader, which is in contrast to the traditional top-down management process.

There are many reasons, both at the individual level and as a collective, why followers are influenced by positive relationships. Employees who have a leader who show a personal interest in them and develops a mentor/mentee relationship experience less personal risk and are more likely to contribute, according to Edmondson and Lei (2014). Ryan Quinn and Dutton (2005), stalwarts in the positive

psychology field, suggested that a work environment that emphasizes positive work relationships generates opportunities that lead to growth and development.

Employees' intrinsic motivation can also be increased through these relationships because they garner a sense of relatedness and security, according to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A leader's actions and behaviors have an outsized impact on the shared experiences of employees, which sets the tone for everyone regarding values, beliefs, and expectations (Van den Steen, 2010). Leaders are always on stage, and followers emulate the example set by their leader (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Ultimately, the research on the relationship between leaders and followers suggests that leadership is a social process where *the boss* exerts influence through their behaviors (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). How followers view the relationship with their leader affects the relationship between leadership and follower performance, which represents a significant shift in how leadership is viewed by scholars and practitioners (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017).

### **Leader behaviors**

A review of three decades of research on leader behavior and employees' well-being found that leaders' behaviors, styles, and their relationship with employees affected employee stress and emotional well-being (Skakon, Nielson, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). They suggested a leader's behavior can create either a negative or a positive experience for an employee. Diebig, Bormann, and Rowold (2016) framed leadership in terms of whether behaviors are clarifying or ambiguity increasing. The authors stated it is challenging for leaders to manage their behaviors because even well-

intentioned actions can create stress for followers because the outcome is based on the follower's perception, not the leader's intent (Diebig et al., 2016). Feelings of stress can negatively affect job productivity because of its impact on the motivational aspects of performance (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986). Even looking the part of a leader can stifle employee participation, empowerment, and perceptions of safety, so reducing the perception of power differences is important for fostering work relationships (Edmondson, 2002). Locke and Anderson (2014) found that when an authority figure exuded confidence through their nonverbal demeanor, people participated less in joint decision-making discussions because they viewed the leader to be more competent. Additionally, they found people failed to object, even when the leader was wrong. However, their research also opined that an open nonverbal demeanor could partially mitigate this effect, which reinforces how much a leader's behaviors matter.

A recent study, which looked to describe ideal leader prototypes, shows the challenge of defining appropriate leader behavior (Bray, Foti, Thompson, & Wills, 2014). The study found no consensus among followers on what makes a good leader: 38% of participants endorsed a prototypical ideal leader, 30% endorsed a laissez-faire ideal leader (disengaged, passive), 19% endorsed an autocratic ideal leader (narcissistic, pushy), and 14% endorsed an antiprototypical ideal leader (tyrannical). Given the study's descriptions of laissez-faire, autocratic, and antiprototypical leaders, it complicates decoding how any leader should behave. It is counterintuitive that people

would want to work for a fear-inducing tyrant. However, this study suggests a portion of the population would choose to do just that (Bray et al., 2014). Interestingly, research shows that leaders often do not recognize dysfunctional behaviors due to bloated levels of self-confidence and their perception of their leadership ability (Bassman & London, 1993).

Taking the time to build relationships and understand employees may have the potential to help leaders span the chasm between an organization's aspirations and the realities of the employees in the trenches. Relationships can be a bridge that helps employees interpret a leader's ambiguous words and deeds and ultimately determine whether the environment is perceived as psychologically safe (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) found the type of relationship people have with someone is a key determinant of how they behave while interacting with the individual. This is particularly salient when it comes to leadership because leaders hold the key to setting an organizational tone down the chain of command through their actions, words, and behaviors. "Employees' attitudes are a mediating link between CEO leadership behaviors and firm performance" (Wang, Tsui, & Xin, 2011, p. 95).

The answer to how a leader should behave to maximize employee output is likely unique to each relationship and the context of where the relationship evolves. Behaviors occurring at a micro level within a dyadic relationship can have a profound

macro effect on the organization's work climate. A follower's perception of the security they obtain from positive interactions with leaders may be the key driver of relationships, a healthy work climate, and, ultimately, a leader's and their organization's success. According to Edmondson and Lei (2014), much of this perception in a workgroup can be attributed to routine behaviors, like how a leader responds when an employee asks for help, shares an idea, or admits a mistake. "Leader behavior sets a salient example for how to behave, and beliefs about how leaders will use their power is likely to affect psychological safety" (Edmondson, 2004b, p. 249).

### ***Psychological Safety***

Researchers found that LMX is the key mediating mechanism linking leadership behaviors and follower performance, in part, because when this relationship is positive, it creates a psychologically safe environment (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). Schein and Bennis (1965) first discussed psychological safety as part of change management. They viewed it as a necessary component of the "unfreezing" process to achieve organizational learning. Psychological safety fundamentally reduces interpersonal perceived threats, removes barriers to change, and creates an environment that is tolerant of mistakes (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Kahn (1990) described psychological safety as "being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career" (p. 708). Kahn (1990) also suggested that psychological safety is necessary for employees to become engaged in their work. Edmondson (2002) described psychological safety as a "tacit

calculus at micro-behavioral decision point, in which [employees] assess the interpersonal risk associated with a given behavior” (p. 241).

All of these definitions suggest psychological safety is a key factor in critical phenomenon like employees’ willingness to speak up, teamwork, and learning at both the team and organizational levels, which ultimately drive performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) found a strong positive relationship between employee engagement and psychological safety, and that psychological safety was the instrument that led to employee engagement through relationships that were developed with followers. In their literature review, Edmondson and Lei (2014) identified that psychological safety has dependably enabled performance, learning, and employees’ willingness to provide upward communication across studies and levels of analysis. As a practical example, when an employee experiences high psychological safety, there is no need to worry about punitive reactions or being rejected when they propose solutions to problems (Baer & Frese, 2003). On the other hand, when employees’ psychological safety levels are low, collaborating for the greater good is secondary to their need for self-protection, and a follower’s potential solution may never be revealed (Yang, Li, Liang, & Zhang, 2019).

The research on psychological safety analyzes the construct at three levels: individual, group or team, and organizational (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). The early conceptualizations of psychological safety,

from Schein and Bennis (1965) then later Kahn (1990), considered psychological safety as an individual level cognitive state with experiences and outcomes attributable to oneself (Frazier et al., 2017). Later, Edmondson (1999) framed psychological safety as a group-level measure because team members share experiences. However, it is important to note that different groups within the same organization may hold different perceptions of interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 2002). Lastly, and most infrequently studied, psychological safety can be analyzed at the organizational level by looking at the average of all employees' perceptions of risk-taking (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Most of the research on psychological safety has been conducted at the team level and frequently uses Edmondson's Team Learning Climate subsection of the Team Learning and Psychological Safety Survey scale to measure the construct (Newman et al., 2017). In some studies, psychological safety acts as a moderator, but the majority treat it as a mediator to explain how organization practices, leader behaviors, and other variables can impact work outcomes (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). While research finds similarities across all three levels of analysis, it is best examined at the group level (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The group phenomenon is much like what is seen in child psychology and developmental science. People develop as systems that are continuously interacting with those around them and their environment (Overton, 2015). The implications of these relationship-based systems

are complex, and they are based on the experience of the people involved and the context in which it occurs.

Ultimately, psychological safety may be a barometer for organizational success. Creating a psychologically safe work environment is not a cure-all, but it is associated with decreased turnover (Chandrasekaran & Mishra, 2012) and to positively affect team-learning (Edmondson, 1999), innovation (Detert & Burris, 2007), creativity (Gong, Cheung, Wang, & Huang, 2012), collaboration (Collins & Smith, 2006), empowerment (Wanless, 2016), engagement (Kahn, 1990, May et al., 2004), feelings of vitality (Kark & Carmeli, 2009), employee voice (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), and learning from failure (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). These possible psychological safety benefits are only an illustrative, not exhaustive, list. Edmondson (1999) suggested psychological safety enhances performance through team learning and empowerment because if employees feel psychologically safe, they can function in a collaborative, participative environment where learning from their peers through questioning, reflecting, and experimenting is a norm. Psychological safety creates conditions where the benefits of speaking up outweigh the perceived costs to the speaker (Edmondson, 1999), and when mistakes do occur, people receive the benefit of the doubt (Edmondson, 2004b).

### **Antecedents of psychological safety**

Kahn (1990) broadly identified four antecedents to psychological safety:

interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, leadership, and organizational norms.

However, as research has advanced, like the construct itself, psychological safety's antecedents are discerned based on the level of analysis. According to a recent meta-analysis (Frazier et al., 2017), group-level antecedents are learning orientation, positive leader relations, work design characteristics, and supportive work context. The same antecedents apply at the individual level, as well as having a proactive personality, being emotionally stable, and being open to experiences (Frazier et al., 2017). The primary drivers of perceived psychological safety are an individual's attributes, a leader's behaviors, and the context where relationships play out.

Everyone encounters the world through a unique lens, but some individual differences can potentially influence psychological safety perceptions. For example, Detert and Burris (2016) found that people with proactive personalities, who take it upon themselves to try and change outcomes, have a greater perception of feeling psychologically safe. Also, the personality constructs of being emotionally stable and being open to experiences have been linked to psychological safety. Emotionally stable people tend to be calmer and less susceptible to stress and anxiety (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000). According to Edmondson and Mogelof (2005), people who are curious and open to change may be more likely to feel safe when exposed to the risk of being vulnerable at work.

Organizational factors can also affect psychological safety. Edmondson (2004b) suggested factors like size, the virtual nature of the work, and complexity may play a

role in psychological safety. Frazier, et al. (2017) found that perceiving support from both your peers and the organization, as well as having a sense of autonomy, role clarity, and doing independent work were key characteristics of work design that enabled psychological safety. Edmondson (1999) also suggested that structural features and resources are part of the framework that fosters psychological safety. When employees are left to fill in a blank, they often do so with an answer more diabolical than reality. Employees in an information vacuum and short of resources are likely to feel insecure or defensive due to fairness concerns regarding the distribution of organizational assets (Edmondson, 2004a). Carmeli and Gittell (2009) found that having a sense of cognitive structural clarity played a role in psychological safety and can be a key contributor to promoting learning. When employees lack an understanding of each other's roles, it can lead to an unhealthy competition where people cannot learn from their failure. However, when everyone understands the big picture and values how each unique role contributes to the collective goals, employees are more likely to feel psychologically safe to collaborate and learn from setbacks (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Leaders need a holistic approach and must consider many organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors to create a climate that fosters psychological safety.

Despite a leader's best efforts to create a healthy work environment, psychological safety is fragile and can be violated and damaged as a result of a negative response to an act of vulnerability (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). Human nature

complicates how people interpret their environment. Fear is an evolutionary emotion that evolved to protect us from threats; fear has not changed, but the modern-day threats we face have (Ohman & Mineka, 2001). Our survival instincts have taken us down the evolutionary path of “better safe than sorry” when it comes to real or perceived threats, which creates a scenario for frequent “false positives” (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009, p. 169). We are navigating a sophisticated world with a defense system hardwired from our past. Anthropologist David Scruton (1986) said, “if any human emotion is as old as our species it must, surely, be fear, and the end of its hold on us is not in sight” (p. 7). Follower’s psychological safety and leadership can seem incompatible in the absence of relationships because authority figures inherently hold power, which results in employees perceiving risk anytime a hierarchy is salient (Detert & Treviño, 2010).

People recoil from the negative and are drawn toward the positive (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). “Negative information or events have adaptive significance and lead to greater physiological arousal, trigger more cognitive processing, and are ascribed greater importance” (Newsom, Nishishiba, Morgan, & Rook, 2003, p. 752). Research suggests it takes five positive events to balance out a single negative encounter (Flora, 2000). Additionally, research suggests negative events require more sensemaking than positive events (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), and the need for sensemaking is more relevant in dysfunctional environments (Roberson, 2006). Another challenge is when people develop implicit theories about

the roles of leaders and followers, and they have expectations about how those roles play out in groups (Lord, 1985). People base much of what they perceive on a running tally of their experiences throughout their life (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). This explains why people are not a blank slate when they join an organization, but rather they have life and work experiences inside and out of work roles that are shaping their behaviors and perspectives (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). This creates a scenario where an individual's response may have little to do with their present circumstance (Power & Dalglish, 2008).

Another challenge of fostering psychological safety is that two individuals who experience the same reality may have different perceptions of psychological safety because of their unique history or access to people and information (Wanless, 2016). Problems can occur when people frame their experience through someone else's lens in a vicarious acquisition of fears (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). This creates a challenge where a leader's "reputation" may precede them, regardless of whether the reputation is warranted. This is often the case when an employee says they are afraid of encounters with a certain leader even though they may have never had a bad experience with the leader (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009).

### **Implications**

Psychological safety is closely related to the construct of trust. However, two subtle differences make it unique (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 2004a). First, trust focuses on giving someone else the benefit of the doubt (e.g., when they make a

mistake), while psychological safety is about whether you believe the other will extend you that same courtesy. Secondly, trust relates to the anticipated consequence of an event that may linger into the future, while psychological safety focuses on the outcome of specific action at the moment. Researchers have split trust into two distinct categories (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Cognition-based trust refers to the trust built on functional attributes like competency, responsibility, and dependability. Affect-based trust refers to the emotional bonds that develop between individuals as the result of being in a close relationship. McAllister (1995) suggested that people reach a tipping point regarding cognition-based trust that makes them receptive to affect-based trust. Affect-based trust has been shown to positively influence team psychological safety (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

Edmondson (2004a) found that employees trusting in their leader is a requirement for developing psychological safety, but it is not related to cognition-based trust; rather it is conceived through relationships where “choices are more affective and intuitive rather than calculative” (p. 243). According to Schaubroeck et al. (2011), when teams form a strong emotional bond with their leader, performance is enhanced through the mediating influence of psychological safety. In addition, leader behaviors are antecedents to dimensions of trust, which ultimately allows for the emergence of psychological safety (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

Creating a psychologically safe work climate does not mean managers have to be soft, overlook mistakes, or that a lack of accountability exists. It is about learning from errors, failing forward, and succeeding as a collective unit. Schein (1993) suggested psychological safety helps people overcome defensiveness when things do not go as they had planned because it creates a condition which allows people to focus on collective outcomes rather than on self-protection. Edmondson (2004a) explained that psychological safety does not imply a lack of conflict or that everyone must be friends. Rather, because people are less focused on personal risk, they can embrace divergence and candor as a route to achieving shared goals. When people can stop worrying about self-preservation, it allows them to enter into positive conflict and engage in rigorous discussions that allow a full spectrum of ideas, opinions, and solutions to surface (Bradley, Postlethwaite, Klotz, Hamdani, & Brown, 2012). The emergence of psychological safety can alter the way conflict is acknowledged and managed in teams (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). According to Bradley et al. (2012), psychological safety creates the conditions where performance benefits because each group member is more likely to contribute, even in a more intense environment, without risking team harmony.

A climate where personal risk is mitigated allows people to pursue meaningful work based on their values and goals and not simply because it is an edict from a superior (Kahn, 1990). Simonet, Narayan, and Nelson (2015) also found that when in psychologically safe environments, employees are free of the burden of fear of

negative consequences and, as a result, pursue actions important to them rather than functioning as a result of an external mandate from a boss. Employees who are feeling psychologically safe are more likely to engage because they perceive fewer obstacles (Wanless, 2016). Whereas functioning in work environments devoid of psychological safety places a governor on employees' motivation to develop through new experiences (Wanless, 2016).

The bottom line is employees have two resources at their disposal, time and energy; In most cases, leaders can control only employees' time. Psychological safety reduces the burden to lead because it creates conditions where employees spontaneously exert effort, but nurturing it is not easy. Leaders should not misjudge how much communication and effort are required to preserve psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Bass (1990) noted, "The leader must be able to know what followers want, when they want it, and what prevents them from getting what they want" (p. 168). This research suggests that the more diverse the group, the more culturally competent the leader needs to be (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). There is also an implication that the organization's scale could hamper a leader's ability to relate to individuals.

### ***Abusive Supervision***

Tepper (2000) introduced abusive supervision as a dark side leadership behavior, and he described it as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding

physical contact” (p. 178). For this research, abusive supervision is considered synonymous with other non-physical dark side leadership terms (e.g., petty tyranny, bullying, dysfunctional leadership, etc.). (Rose, Shuck, Twyford, & Bergman, 2015; Tepper, 2007). Most definitions for these terms are similar to Tepper’s (2000) definition. For example, dysfunctional leaders are described in the literature as people in power who violate psychological contracts (intentionally or unintentionally), regularly hinder progress by placing a barrier in the way, and are disrespectful toward their employees (Rose et al., 2015), which is consistent with Tepper’s definition of abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000).

The harmful effects of abusive supervision are well documented. “Subordinates whose supervisors were more abusive reported higher turnover, less favorable attitudes toward job, life, and organization, greater conflict between work and family life, and greater psychological distress” (Tepper, 2000, p. 186). In addition to these consequences, Tepper’s (2000) original research found that the magnitude of abusive supervision is more prominent among employees who feel they are trapped because they do not anticipate an opportunity for job mobility and that subordinates’ experience of injustice may explain their reactions to the dysfunctional leader behavior.

Numerous studies, since Tepper’s (2000) seminal article, have found support for the detrimental effects for both employee and organizational outcomes when an

employee perceives abusive supervision (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Kernan, Racicot, & Fisher, 2016; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, & Folger, 2014; Tepper, 2007; Xu, Loi, & Lam, 2015). One potential explanation for the relationship between abusive supervisor behavior and reduced organizational performance is in the following excerpt:

An abusive supervisory climate fractures the psychological safety that allows team members to seek and provide the feedback, help, and expertise that underlie its ability to learn and engage in appropriate actions to accomplish its work. The absence of such an environment will negatively impact a team's belief in its own task efficacy, thereby negatively affecting the unit's performance. (Priesemuth et al., 2014, p. 1526)

A supervisor's behavior may impact more than the abused. Employees can be impacted simply by witnessing or hearing about dysfunctional leader behavior. Subordinates form shared impressions of these behaviors, and these perceptions can affect group outcomes (Priesemuth et al., 2014). Abusive supervision can alter the work climate because it "become[s] embedded in the fabric of the workgroup" (Priesemuth et al., 2014, p. 1526). Abusive supervision is a subjective assessment that followers make based on how they relate to a supervisor's behavior (Tepper, 2007). This assessment may be prejudiced by the observer's past experiences, the context of the setting, an individual's temperament, and other factors, which creates a scenario that two employees can experience the same leader in vastly different ways (Rose et al., 2015; Tepper, 2007). Schyns and Schilling (2013) suggested that negative leader behavior only has an undesirable effect if it is perceived by followers as

dysfunctional. Rose et al. (2015) illustrated this idea with the example of an observer perceiving a critical review as degrading, while the supervisor, or even the employee, may consider it to be constructive or even developmental.

Supervisors may utilize dysfunctional behaviors to drive performance or reinforce expectations, and those behaviors may align with the construct of abusive supervision; however, their intent is not to cause harm (Tepper, 2007). A supervisor snapping at an employee because they are having a bad day does not constitute abusive supervision. The distinction is abusive supervision occurs when there is chronic exposure to abuse from someone in power (Tepper, 2007). Research suggests that abusive manager behavior creates a trickle-down effect where supervisors fall into the same dysfunctional patterns, which has been positively associated with workgroup deviance (Mawritz et al., 2012). Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) also found that followers' tendency to engage in workplace deviance is exacerbated when they perceive abusive supervision.

Once the abusive behavior becomes the norm, the hostile climate reinforces a relationship between abusive supervisor behavior and workgroup interpersonal deviance, whereas healthier climates shielded and reversed the effects of dysfunctional behavior on workgroup deviance (Mawritz et al., 2012). This research supports the trickle-down model of abusive supervision and also found that the climate of the work environment affects the trickle-down effect. Additionally,

research has shown that when leaders act inconsistent by combining abusive and supportive behaviors, it is worse than hostility alone because the ambiguity fosters insecurity in followers (Duffy et al., 2002; Matta, Scott, Colquitt, Koopman, & Passantino, 2017).

Organizations may pay a significant price for abusive supervision when the hostile climate increases turnover intentions. It creates a situation where workers who intend to leave have “less to lose” and are “particularly likely to perform acts of deviance” (Tepper et al., 2009, p. 165). The trickle-down impact does not stop at the abused employee. Tepper (2007) suggested that external stakeholders suffer too, in the form of higher costs and diminished service.

### ***Servant Leadership***

I have chosen to incorporate servant leadership into my research because this theory best accounts for the behaviors I observed after a regime change in my participant organization. These supportive behaviors had a positive effect on employees’ perceptions of psychological safety. The construct of servant leadership evolved out of practitioner experience rather than a scholarly review of literature and theory. Robert Greenleaf (1977; 1998; 1991) applied his observations of competencies and approaches that were most effective during his decades at communications behemoth AT&T (Frick, 2004). His theory focuses on leader behaviors that focus on followers becoming self-actualized and downplays a leader’s contribution (Hale & Fields, 2007). Servant leadership sounds like an oxymoron. In an ordinary understanding of

the term, leader implies influencing and commanding, while servant implies supporting and following. The paradox of servant leadership has been criticized for being too vague and creating “semantic noise” (Northouse, 2016, p 240). A consensus definition for the theory has been elusive for scholars, despite Greenleaf (1977) creating the expression nearly five decades ago (Aarum Andersen, 2009; Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). In his seminal work, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1977) described the servant leader as the following:

The Servant-Leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed? (p. 7)

This is likely the most prominent quotation in the servant leadership literature, and it is the only quasi-definition provided by Greenleaf (1977). As a result, the construct has been highly malleable, and scholars have bent and shaped it to serve their needs (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership has been viewed as a conceptual construct missing a consensus structure and empirical rigor (Bass, 2000).

### **Evolution of servant leadership**

Multiple authors have taken a stab at molding Greenleaf’s (1977) vague construct into a theoretical framework. Some of the most prominent attempts are discussed below.

Spears (1995), a former colleague of Greenleaf and the director of the Greenleaf

Center for Servant Leadership, identified 10 characteristics that are central to his mentor's writing: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. However, Spears's ideas were never formulated into a model that could be empirically researched (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Others have taken this foundation and expanded it to create their own functional models (Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003; Russell & Stone, 2002). When Russell and Stone (2002) developed a model, they identified nine leader characteristics: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Also, Russell and Stone (2002) identified 11 accompanying attributes, which enable the primary characteristics: communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and delegation. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) distilled servant leadership into five factors: altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship.

All servant leadership theories represent different interpretations and terminology of the same fundamental concept: a willingness to serve others through leading. It is no wonder servant leadership has often been viewed as muddled and undefined (Parris & Peachey, 2013). At its core, servant leadership is having an innate or altruistic need to positively influence others through service (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, Greenleaf,

1977). According to Northouse (2016), servant leadership focuses on leadership from the point of view of how the leader behaves. A servant leader places their self-interest subordinate to their followers' development (Bass, 2000), and they behave in a way that their professional roles remain secondary to authentic self and core value of serving followers (Halpin & Croft, 1966). The servant leader strives to create organizational opportunities that allow followers to become self-actualized by giving followers the autonomy to use their strengths for the betterment of the whole enterprise (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). It is the servant leader's belief in the intrinsic value of every individual and their ability to learn, grow, and self-actualize that is a central tenant of how servant leaders behave, according to Greenleaf (1998).

Ultimately, servant leaders lead through relationships that benefit the greater good of followers, organizations, their community, and society (Northouse, 2016). Servant leadership unequivocally stresses the importance of followers more than any other theory (Patterson, 2003), even when there are no ties to organizational outcomes (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders prioritize leadership by focusing on followers first, organizations second, and their self-interests last (Sendjaya, 2015).

Organizations wanting to adopt servant leadership will need to implement new practices and undergo a paradigm shift away from the traditional command and control environment where power is consolidated with few (Showkier, 2002).

### **Antecedents**

Northouse (2016) suggested context, culture, leader attributes, and follower receptivity are the overarching antecedents required for servant leadership to be

effective. Graham (1991) drilled deeper and suggested that having a low need for power, being empathetic and humble, as well as good communication were antecedents of servant-leadership. Eva et al. (2019), in their servant leadership review, posited that agreeable leaders who are confident and identify strongly with their company are less extraverted and are more likely to model servant leader behaviors.

### **Outcomes**

Eva et al. (2019) aggregated servant leadership outcomes into four categories: (1) behavioral outcomes, like improved voice behaviors; (2) attitudinal outcomes, like positive psychological wellbeing; (3) leader-related outcomes, like increased trust in the leader; and (4) performance outcomes, like knowledge sharing. Painting with a broader brush, Northouse (2016) suggested that servant leader behaviors create relationships that facilitate follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact. Walumbwa, Hartnell and Oke, (2010) also suggested that an engaged workforce can be a competitive advantage for a servant-led organization. Chughtai (2016) found servant leadership behaviors are a mechanism to stimulate employee voice behavior, which positively affects the team and organizational performance (Edmondson, 1999). Servant leadership behaviors produce positive outcomes by strengthening employees' identification with the organization and increasing their perceived sense of psychological safety (Chughtai, 2016; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Therefore, countless positive outcomes associated with psychological safety also appear to be attributable to servant leader behaviors.

### **Servant leadership criticisms**

Servant leadership has an image problem. Its paradoxical nature leaves some feeling as if servant leaders are a utopian notion. In addition to the “semantic noise” concerns (Northouse, 2016, p. 240) that were mentioned earlier, the lack of a consensus definition and structure have plagued the theory (Bass, 2000). For example, there is not an agreement about whether servant leaders are exhibiting traits or behaviors (Northouse, 2016), and it is “not clear whether some leaders are servant-leaders while others are not, or whether they are different servant-leaders by degree” (Aarum Andersen, 2009, p. 8). According to Waterman (2011), servant leadership can disturb followers’ traditional cognitive structural clarity of hierarchy. It may alienate secular people because it can be mistaken as a “religious” concept. Furthermore, the title “servant” can be seen as a negative in some cultures where humility can be perceived as a weakness. Additionally, not all followers want to work for a servant leader (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008).

Liden et al. (2008) found that some people find it intrusive when leaders try to get to know them or help them develop, and they may consider a leader’s exuberance to help as overbearing or meddling. Because Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized servant leadership as a way of life rather than as a management philosophy, some academic scholars have balked at a construct that cannot be empirically tested (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Greenleaf’s (1977) assertions that servant leadership is difficult to operationalize, as “it is meant to be neither a scholarly treatise nor a how-to-do-it

manual” (p. 49), and that it is a life-long journey, apt to evolve, have not helped its case for becoming a preeminent leadership theory (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Servant leadership has also been criticized for being too similar to other employee-centric leadership styles (Chughtai, 2016). Van Dierendonck (2011) identified seven leadership theories that significantly overlap with servant leadership: transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, Level 5 leadership, empowering leadership, spiritual leadership, and self-sacrificing leadership. Transformational leadership is the theory most frequently juxtaposed with servant leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, & Alkema, 2014).

While there are similarities with transformational leadership, there are also distinct differences. Servant leadership and transformational leadership both focus on followers’ needs. However, servant leaders’ focus is in service to the follower and their development, while transformational leaders’ motive for focusing on the follower is a means to an end that enables the achievement of organizational outcomes (Graham, 1991; Russell & Stone, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Transformational leadership’s task-focused alignment with the collective agenda builds cognition-based trust (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Stone et al. (2004) suggested a servant leader’s organizational objectives will only be sustainably achieved by helping followers become self-actualized.

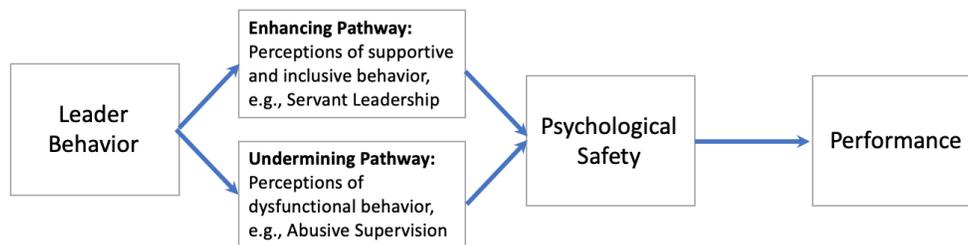
Stone et al. (2004) suggested that idealized influence, the charismatic element of transformational leadership that explains why leaders become role models that followers mimic, is the same thing as servant leadership. Regardless of which moral leadership theory mimicry is attributed to, employees can be inspired by leaders who advocate for a common good (Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2018). Ultimately, servant leadership behaviors promote followers' affect-based trust in their leader, which builds relationships that allow the emergence of a psychologically safe work environment (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

In this chapter, I have reviewed literature that provides a foundation for this research (e.g., relational leadership, psychological safety, abusive supervision, and servant leadership). My review suggests that although psychological safety may not be a panacea, its positive effect on employees, teams, and organizations is firmly grounded in empirical research findings. Leader behaviors set the tone of an organization by sending salient signals about what employees can expect from their environment. Hogan's (2006) survey results suggest 60%–70% of employees report the most stressful feature of their job is their direct manager. Leader behavior affects how employees can interact with their leader, each other, and the organization in general. This study's goal is to better understand a leader's role in psychological safety and work climate because of the following:

Much of the literature on psychological safety provides relatively little insight regarding how psychological safety unfolds and builds, or

lessens, or even is destroyed. It seems reasonable to assert the likelihood of an asymmetry, in which psychological safety takes time to build, through familiarity and positive responses to displays of vulnerability and other interpersonally risky actions, but can be destroyed in an instant through a negative response to an act of vulnerability. (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 38)

In Figure 5, you can see how the literature review puzzle pieces fit together. Leader behavior is a key component of relational leadership theory and the LMX relationship. Employees' perceptions of a leader's behaviors (abusive supervision and servant leadership) affect their perceived psychological safety.



**Figure 5. Fostering Psychological Safety**

In the next chapter, I describe the methods used in this study to answer the research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety? While it is important to verify empirically that leadership behaviors effect psychological safety, this study will take a granular look at individual elements of leader behavior in an effort to see which behaviors and

practices have the most effect. That is, the analyses performed will look not just at general servant leadership but at its constituent dimensions as well.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to understand the influence leadership behaviors have on individual perceptions of psychological safety. The study begins with a survey conducted at a logistics outsourcing company. The survey examines the relationship between a measure of servant leadership and psychological safety. Although the initial research design was to use this survey to identify participants (high/low psychological safety) for interviewing, this approach was abandoned when I realized that the climate of one organization that was initially toxic was changing in real-time. I then re-focused the study solely on this organization since I had an opportunity to observe leadership behaviors inhibiting psychological safety and the behaviors that were allowing it to emerge. This section will outline the research methods I performed that allowed me to study this phenomenon.

### ***The Evolving Study Context***

AB Logistics is an east coast, third-party firm that specializes in managing other organizations' supply chains. It runs 12 distribution centers throughout the US for multiple clients, and it employs between 700 and 800 people. In three of its facilities, AB oversees the warehousing component of the supply chain for a large multinational consumer product company that I will refer to as CPC. The main participants in my research are AB employees (mostly blue-collar forklift operators) working in CPC's midwestern distribution center. Their primary tasks consist of unloading trucks from the manufacturing plants, picking and staging outbound orders, and loading those

orders on trucks. I worked for AB logistics from 2008–2013. I began with the company as a shift supervisor, and I was eventually promoted to the facility manager at this midwestern distribution center. In that role, I had full responsibility for the 800,000 square-foot continuous-operation facility. At that time, it had 120 employees and managed inventory valued more than \$120 million.

Before CPC outsourced its warehousing in May of 2005, it managed its own facilities, and the warehouse employees were part of the manufacturing union. According to a former senior manager who participated in the transition, the logistics outsourcing coincided with CPC’s looming labor contract negotiation with the warehouse employees. Working for AB, employees were no longer part of a union. At the time of the transition, most CPC employees transferred to the manufacturing plant, but about 25% were retained by AB to work in the warehouse. For these employees, the transition should have been fairly seamless. In addition to the forklift operators, 11 members of management also moved from CPC to AB. AB maintained the legacy warehouse management system and inherited CPC forklift equipment, so no special training was required. The facility had closed on a Friday night managed by CPC and reopened Saturday morning managed by AB Logistics. Employees were moving the same freight, using the same equipment, and, in many cases, reporting to the same managers. What was different was that 75% of the operational workforce did not know how to perform their tasks. CPC had agreed to reduce the volume to facilitate the management transition. However, they failed to follow through on this

commitment. The facility was instantly overwhelmed. The transition quickly deteriorated into a turf war between the former CPC managers and their new employer concerning the best way to get work completed. That initial turmoil and associated distrust became part of the culture and continued to linger under the surface. This was a prelude to the relationships between the two organizations and, in some ways, to the relationship between AB Logistics and its employees at this site.

The warehouse has had chronic problems, like employee turnover, safety, and morale issues, the entire time it has been managed by AB logistics. At the end of 2019, the facility was not meeting its contractual obligations, and CPC demanded a turnaround. AB was implementing a 30/60/90-day performance improvement plan to correct the operational failures. Because none of AB's other facilities are located in the region, it was costly to send management support to facilitate the turnaround plan. The problem was exacerbated because, as the facility had chronically struggled, much of the business oversight and decision-making had been centralized at a corporate office, more than 900 miles away. Because of my familiarity with the operation and because I lived in the community, AB contacted me to see if I could oversee their turnaround plan.

At the time, I was finalizing my dissertation research and looking for participant organizations. I did not have time to commit to oversee the turnaround. However, I suggested that if they would participate in my research, I would spend enough time in

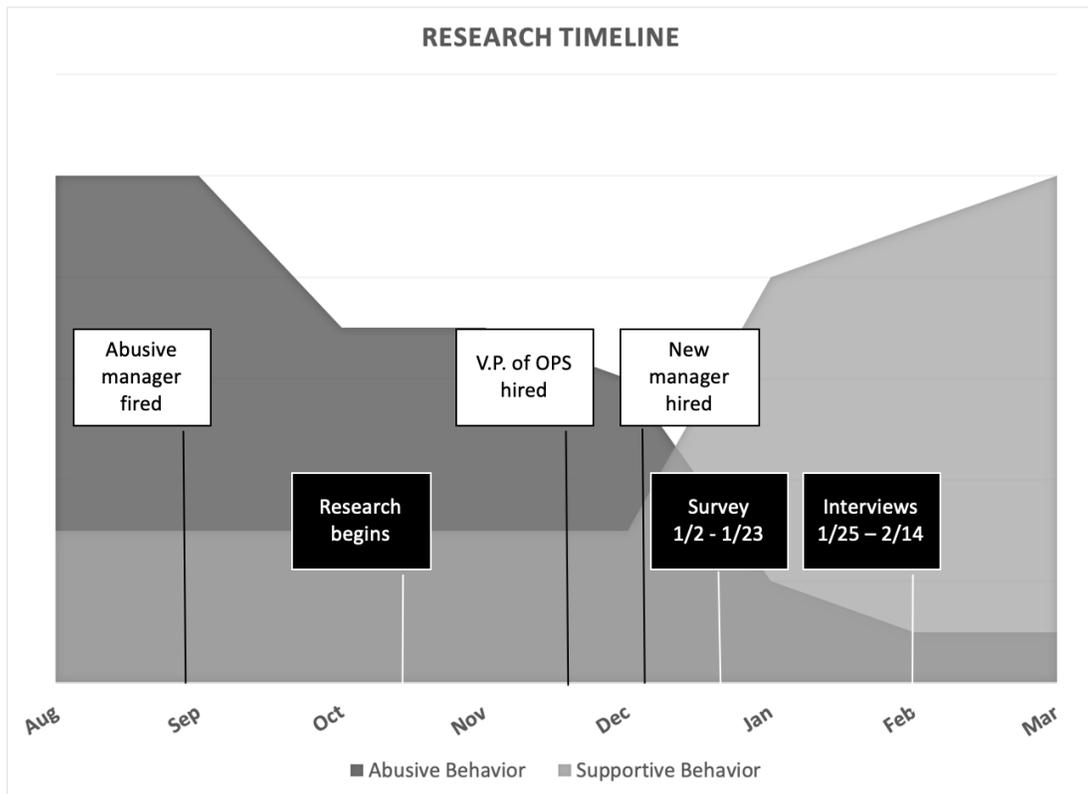
the facility to help with audits and provide feedback on what was happening at the warehouse. I explained that I wanted to do a comparative case study between AB's problem distribution center and the culture at another organization. They were intrigued by the opportunity because the location's problems were getting progressively worse and the location was losing money. A new manager had just been hired, and we agreed that I could be a local resource to help him acclimate. I would provide status updates on the turnaround in exchange for the facility participating in my research.

I was granted access to employees at every level of the company. Over the course of three and a half months, I spent more than 100 hours in the facility, which provided abundant opportunities for employee observation, and I had dozens of informal conversations with employees. I also interviewed AB's corporate leaders, customer service employees, and human resources staff to provide context for the research setting. I reviewed historical data relating to productivity, turnover, employee engagement, as well as having access to CPC in the form of weekly conference calls to review the facility's progress on change implementations and operational key performance indicators. In addition to this abundance of data, I administered a cross-sectional quantitative survey and conducted 22 semi-structured follow-up interviews.

One initial observation was a toxic work climate had evolved at the warehouse. Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) explained that toxic working conditions can occur at

the interpersonal, occupational, and organizational levels. Because of abusive supervision, employees experienced toxic interpersonal conditions, and they also experienced occupational toxicity in a lack of autonomy and systematic control in the form of technology that tracked their every move. Cox (2000) suggested a healthy organization is indicated by efficient operations and the integration of supportive departments like Human Resources and Information Technology. My participants experienced the antithesis—toxic organization conditions in the form of a faltering operation that necessitated a customer mandated turnaround plan. Cox (2000) defined many symptoms of a toxic climate that were prevalent in the warehouse: absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, low morale, distrust, apathy, and poor communication.

In Figure 6 below, I have created a timeline to illustrate what was happening, from my point of view. I began my research after AB had weathered the storm of an abusive leader. Residual abusive behaviors were slowly receding during the first part of my research. AB was in the process of restructuring its management at the end of 2019. For most of November and December, I was focused on assisting with the implementation of the turnaround plans and research observations. At the end of the year, AB hired people for the two key operational roles: Vice President of Operations and the facility manager for the research site. This team's supportive leadership style dramatically changed the work climate. Because my research data was collected after the organization instituted a change in leader behaviors, it reflects the effect of the new leaders and not solely the toxic climate.



**Figure 6. Research Timeline**

A toxic work climate is not unique to AB Logistics. In July of 2019, the Society for Human Resource Management commissioned a survey of American workers. In the report’s foreword, the SHRM’s President and CEO, John C. Taylor, Jr., stated, “What became clear is that a bad workplace culture can derail an organization, creating a toxic atmosphere that leaves employees frustrated and produces a very real bottom-line impact” (as cited in Mirza, 2020, p.2). Below are some of the survey’s findings that are relevant to my research:

- One in five people surveyed have left a job due to workplace culture.

- Of those who left a job because of the culture, 58% claim managers are the reason they ultimately left.
- 76% of respondents say their manager sets the culture of their workplace.
- Nearly three in 10 employees lack trust in their manager to treat them fairly.
- One in four employees don't feel respected and valued at work.
- Three in 10 workers say their manager doesn't encourage a culture of open and transparent communication.
- One in four employees don't feel safe voicing their opinions about work-related issues. (Mirza, 2020)

In returning to my participants' narrative accounts, findings similar to the SHRM data emerged, which illustrates that my participants were experiencing a toxic work climate and lacked psychological safety in the past during the time of the abusive facility manager ran the warehouse.

As time progressed, I abandoned the comparative case study to focus my research on the turnaround at hand. As the work climate was shifting, I observed that the leader behaviors aggravating the toxic work climate were lessening. Therefore, I had all the data I needed to answer my research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety?

### **Research procedures**

My research consisted of a cross-sectional quantitative survey, semi-structured follow-up interviews, and observations. Over the course of three and half months, I

administered a work climate survey, completed more than 100 hours of observations, participated in dozens of informal conversations, and conducted formal semi-structured interviews with leaders and frontline employees. The online survey was collected from 127 respondents and 22 formal interviews were completed. The voluntary online survey was offered to employees in the Midwestern distribution center, as well as throughout the organization. This was done to contrast the primary site with the rest of the company. The survey was administered from January 2–23, 2020, using the Performance Assessment Network (PAN) cloud-based testing software. An email was sent to all employees with instructions and a link to the survey. For employees without a company email, a link to the survey was loaded on computers in the facilities. The goal of the survey is to assess correlations between employee perceptions of their leader’s behaviors and their perceptions of psychological safety.

Interviews were conducted with both organizational leaders and individual contributors. I began the semi-structured interviews on January 25 and completed them on February 14. Most interviews lasted about 30–45 minutes; however, some of the leader interviews were significantly longer because I was also collecting background information.

### **Questionnaire measures**

The questionnaire was a combination of van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) 30 question Servant Leadership Survey (SLS), which represents eight dimensions of

leader behavior, and the seven-question Team Learning Climate subsection of Edmondson's (1999) Team Learning and Psychological Safety Survey. The SLS measures the leader-follower relationship from the perspective of the follower (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 251). Edmondson's (1999) scale looks at the followers' perceptions of psychological safety.

#### Edmondson's Team Learning and Psychological Safety Survey

Psychological safety was measured using the seven items of the instrument developed by Edmondson (1999) on a seven-point Likert-style response format (1-very inaccurate to 7-very accurate). Representative scale items include the following: Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues; People on this team sometimes reject others for being different; It is safe to take a risk on this team. Questions 31, 33, and 35 were reverse scored (see Appendix A). Edmondson's (1999) survey has shown high internal reliability with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .78 to .82 (Triplett & Loh, 2018). These seven survey items are questions 31–37 of my survey instrument in Appendix A.

#### van Dierendonck's Servant Leadership Survey (SLS)

Multiple assessments are available to classify leader behavior. The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (Stogdill, 1963) and Multifactor Leader Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1995) are the two most commonly used instruments. The SLS model presented by van Dierendonck (2011) best fits this author's research agenda. Research suggests "that although all three instruments likely share an overarching leadership factor, the SLS scales of courage, forgiveness, humility, and authenticity

are likely measuring a different aspect of leadership than those of the MLQ and LBDQ” (Smith, Nichols, Green, & Sun, 2016, p. 48). Van Dierendonck’s (2011) model recognizes that personality and external factors influence a leader’s motivation and that a leader’s behaviors influence not only the dyadic relationship of the leader and follower but also the broader organizational culture. Followers are thereby impacted on three levels: “on the individual level, self-actualization, positive job attitudes and increased performance; on the team level, increased team effectiveness; and on the organizational level, a stronger focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility” (van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1243).

In developing the SLS measure, van Dierendonck (2011) started with a comprehensive review of servant leadership literature. He found 44 attributes in the various extant models. From there, he identified six core servant leadership characteristics: servant leaders empower and develop their followers; servant leaders demonstrate humility; servant leaders are authentic; servant leaders accept people for who they are; servant leaders provide guidance and direction; servant leaders are stewards who work for the betterment of the whole society. His approach was the first to address the construct’s perceived paradox. In addition to servant behaviors, the SLS accounts for the leader behaviors accountability, courage, and forgiveness, which makes it unique in the servant leadership literature (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Thirty questions were used to operationalize the eight SLS scales. Representative scale items and their definitions are listed below. All questions used a 6-point Likert-style response format (1—strongly agree to 6—strongly disagree). The SLS measure makes up questions 1–30 of my survey instrument in Appendix A.

Empowerment was measured with seven question items that assess the degree to which employees feel their manager motivates and encourages personal development. Representative items include the following: My manager gives me the information I need to do my work well; My manager encourages me to use my talents; My manager helps me to further develop myself.

Accountability was measured with three question items that assess the degree to which employees feel they are held accountable for performances that they can control. The items are the following: My manager holds me responsible for the work I carry out; I am held accountable for my performance by my manager; My manager holds me and my colleagues responsible for the way we handle a job.

Standing back was measured with three question items that assess the degree to which employees feel a leader prioritizes the support of others and give them appropriate credit. The items are the following: My manager keeps himself/herself in the background and gives credits to others; My manager is not chasing recognition or

rewards for the things he/she does for others; My manager appears to enjoy his/her colleagues' success more than his/her own

Humility was measured with five question items that assess the degree to which employees feel a manager has a proper perspective about their abilities and accomplishments. Representative items include the following: My manager learns from criticism; My manager tries to learn from the criticism he/she gets from his/her superior; My manager admits his/her mistakes to his/her superior.

Authenticity was measured with four question items that assess the degree to which employees feel their manager acts consistently with their inner thoughts and feelings—their true selves. Representative items include the following: My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses; My manager is often touched by the things he/she sees happening around him/her; My manager is prepared to express his/her feelings even if this might have undesirable consequences.

Courage was measured with two question items that assess the degree to which employees feel their manager takes risks. The two items are the following: My manager takes risks even when he/she is not certain of the support from his/her own manager; My manager takes risks and does what needs to be done in his/her view.

Forgiveness was measured with three question items that assess the degree to which employees feel their managers can empathize with others, and they do not hold grudges. The three questions, which were reverse-scored, are the following: My manager keeps criticizing people for the mistakes they have made in their work (r); My manager maintains a hard attitude towards people who have offended him/her at work (r); My manager finds it difficult to forget things that went wrong in the past (r).

Stewardship was measured with three question items that assess the degree to which employees feel a manager is willing to take responsibility for the larger institution and go for service instead of control and self-interest. The items are the following: My manager emphasizes the importance of focusing on the good of the whole; My manager has a long-term vision; My manager emphasizes the societal responsibility of our work.

Previous studies using the van Dierendonck (2011) measure have shown high internal reliability for each dimension with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .91 to .69: empowerment (.89), accountability (.81), standing back (.76), humility (.91), authenticity (.82), courage (.69), forgiveness (.72), and stewardship (.74)" (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

## **Interviews**

Of the 22 interviewees, 11 also took the voluntary survey. In this sample, I have results from both employees who experience high psychological safety or perceive a

lack of psychological safety in their work environment. Within the individual contributor group, results ranged from 2.43–5.57, which ensured that my interviews provided me a full spectrum of employee perspectives as it related to how leaders' behavior affected perceptions of psychological safety. The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted following the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin (2012). Interviews were conducted in-person and recorded and transcribed. After each interview, I spent a few minutes capturing my initial thoughts about the interview and how its content related to the overall research findings. Often this was just a few bullet points or a short paragraph, but the process helped me capture unique comments and connections while the interview was still fresh in my mind. I found that this step facilitated my writing process as well as the eventual coding process and theme development. It also allowed me to reflect on holes in the data and adjust my subsequent interviews to account for the gaps. Once an interview was completed, transcription was done using Temi transcription service.

Interview questions included the following:

- Tell me about a time when your leader empowered you to solve a problem or implement one of your ideas?
- Have you ever wanted to share an idea but felt you could not because of your boss? Why?
- Tell me about a time when you felt vulnerable at work?
- What does your leader do that helps the team to function effectively?

- What does your leader do that prevents the team from functioning more effectively?
- What is the worst behavior you've ever seen from your leader?
- What is the best behavior you've ever seen from your leader?

### **Observations**

In November 2019, I began my dual-purpose role as AB Logistics consultant and doctoral student researcher. On a typical week, I would spend 8 to 10 hours at the facility. This would generally take place in two or three smaller blocks of time. Sometimes I looked at a familiar work process (e.g., Are the different products slotted on the pick lines efficiently); other times I would just be walking the warehouse looking for safety hazards, for damaged product, or at the facility's appearance and general housekeeping. Regardless of what my consulting task was, I was always observing the leaders-follower dynamic. I tried to plan many of my sessions around shift start-up meetings so I could observe the communication between the supervisors and subordinates. As people became more familiar with me and my role, I was often approached by employees that had a story to tell. In some cases, it was just people venting, but in many instances, people were constructively trying to help. During these visits to the facility, I documented issues I encountered with pictures and notes on my phone. I also took reports of problems that came to my attention during the informal conversations and passed them along to the appropriate AB resource via email (e.g., HR for personnel issues or IT and management of operational concerns). I

kept a separate journal of the issues I encountered and the observations I made that were relevant to my research.

## **Data analysis**

### Quantitative

The survey design allows for correlations to be computed between the employees' perceptions of the SLS leader behavior dimensions and employees' perceptions of psychological safety. Psychological safety is normally framed as a group-level measure because people who work closely together will have comparable perceptions of shared experiences and their work environment (Edmondson, 1999). To achieve the group perception, individual scores are generally aggregated. Alternatively, the current research will consider psychological safety as an individual level cognitive state, as it was originally conceived (Kahn, 1990; Schein & Bennis, 1965). This allows the researcher to consider the relationship between the individual's perceptions of psychological safety and their perceived leader's behavior. Statistical techniques, (e.g., regression analysis) are used to examine relationships within the database.

The initial process of cleaning and organizing the data revealed several anomalies in the raw data for the measure of psychological safety. Preliminary analyses revealed *negative* correlations between some items (after recoding). Additionally, an initial check of the scale's reliability produced a *negative* of -.63. Standard practice in such cases is to review the data entry and data recoding (Lord & Novick, 1968; Nichols, 1999). Given that the measure of psychological safety has a significant history of

reliability and validity (Edmonson, 1999; Edmonson & Lei, 2014), it seemed highly unlikely that the scale reliability would be negative in the present sample. In-depth investigation of the online data collection processes and the initial recoding by a research assistant led to the tentative conclusion that the scale items were presented in an alternate order (not as prescribed in the scale), and thus the recoding of individual items was inaccurate. This conclusion could not be absolutely verified as inquiries to the online survey organization provided little insight. But alternate recoding of scale items, as suggested by this conclusion, produced a scale reliability ( $\alpha = .74$ ) very much in line with the history of the measure. Thus, the scores derived from the alternate recoding were used in all analyses of the measure of psychological safety.

#### Qualitative

The transcripts were analyzed using the conventions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to identify themes in the empirical data. I went through the transcripts line by line looking for words or phrases that might indicate action, commonality with other interviewees, and interesting statements relating to perceptions of psychological safety, leader behavior, and the work climate. This initial coding process was completed in Microsoft Word using the comments tool, and then the comments were extracted using a DocTools plugin. The initial codes were then transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where the concepts, topics, and quotations could be filtered and sorted into theoretical categories. Themes emerged in the data review through a first-, second-, and third-order coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and with consideration of my observations over three and a half months in the facility.

Ultimately, four leader behavior related themes emerged that affected the employee's perception of psychological safety:

- **Abusive Behaviors:** Abusive supervision was a key contributor to the facility's decline.
- **Supportive Behaviors:** Supportive leadership behaviors (servant leadership) were critical to the turnaround.
- **Vital Communication:** Communication played a crucial role in both the facility's decline and eventual turnaround.
- **Felt Ambiguity:** Organizational ambiguity hampered employees' ability to feel psychologically safe during the transition.

### ***Summary***

This chapter summarized how data was collected through my observations, a survey, and semi-structured interviews to examine the relationship between leader behavior and psychological safety. This experience has enriched and biased my interpretation of study findings. The subsequent two chapters will delve deeper into the research findings and look at the effects of different types of leader behavior. Chapter 4 will present the results of the survey, and Chapter 5 will offer findings from the grounded theory analysis of the qualitative interviews and observations.

## Chapter 4: Survey Results

The goal of the work climate survey was to assess relationships between employees' perceptions of their leaders' behaviors as well as their perceptions of psychological safety. (A summary of the sample characteristics of the survey participants is provided in Table 1 below.) I assumed I would find that servant leadership behavior is predictive of psychological safety. The analysis confirmed this and illustrates that some of the eight behavioral dimensions of servant leadership have a more significant impact than others.

### **Sample Characteristics**

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Survey Participants (N = 127)**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	43	33.9%
Male	84	66.1%
<b>Age</b>		
18 – 24	6	4.7%
25 – 34	36	28.3%
35 – 44	29	22.8%
45 – 54	37	29.1%
55 – 64	17	13.4%
> 65	2	1.6%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	35	27.6%
Unmarried	85	66.9%
Not say	7	5.5%

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Education</b>		
Some HS	4	3.1%
HS Degree	43	33.9%
Trade Sch	9	7.1%
Bachelors	52	40.9%
Masters	11	8.7%
PhD	6	4.7%
Not Say	2	1.6%
<b>Income</b>		
< 25k	17	13.4%
25k – 50k	65	51.2%
50k – 100k	27	21.3%
100k – 200k	7	5.5%
>200k	2	1.6%
Not say	9	7.1%
<b>Role</b>		
Leader	36	28.3%
Contributor	91	71.7%

The vast majority of the forklift operators in the warehouse are male, but my survey results (in Table 1 above) reflect a different ratio (84 male, 43 female). In order to get a balanced perspective on the organizational context, I interviewed leaders, customer service employees, inventory control team members, and human resources. Many of those ancillary roles are filled by women. The majority of employees—80.2% or 102 of the 127 participants—fell in three age brackets encompassing ages 25–54. Most employees were unmarried (66.9%). The two largest

categories as it related to education were high school (43 of 127) and bachelor's degree (52 of 127). Over half of the participants earned between \$25,000 and \$50,000 annually. Contributors made up 71.7% of the respondents.

### **Scale Reliabilities**

The Psychological Safety Scale exhibited acceptable reliability of Cronbach's alpha = .74. The overall reliability for the SLS was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .94). Reliability analyses were also performed for all eight dimensions. Results (in Table 2 below) indicated acceptable reliabilities. Reliabilities ranged from .89 (empowerment) to .63 (the two-item courage scale) with all but two over .70.

**Table 2. SLS Subscale Reliabilities**

<b>SLS Dimension</b>	<b>Number of Items</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>
Empowerment	7	.89
Standing Back	3	.74
Accountability	3	.78
Forgiveness	3	.73
Courage	2	.63
Authenticity	4	.68
Humility	5	.88
Stewardship	3	.77

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Means and standard deviations for psychological safety and servant leadership measures are displayed below in 3. Recall that the measure of psychological safety

could vary theoretically from 1 to 7, while the measure of servant leadership could vary between 1 and 6.

**Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Psychological Safety and Servant Leadership Measures ( $N = 127$ )**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Psychological Safety	4.91	1.19
Total Servant Leadership	4.41	.75
Empowerment	4.59	1.01
Standing back	4.54	1.02
Accountability	5.08	.87
Forgiveness	4.22	1.15
Courage	3.87	1.18
Authenticity	4.06	.97
Humility	4.36	1.08
Stewardship	4.73	.95

In recent years, numerous studies have examined psychological safety at the individual level (see Edmonson & Lei, 2014) and used versions of Edmonson's (1999) scale to assess the construct. They report sample data similar to that reported here. Ortega, Van den Bossche, Sánchez-Manzanares, Rico, and Gil (2014) studied teams in a healthcare context and reported a mean ( $N = 107$ ) of 3.91 ( $SD = 0.49$ ). Kark and Carmeli (2009) had a sample of graduate students ( $N = 128$ ) and reported a mean of 4.54 ( $SD = 0.75$ ). Siemsen, Roth, Balasubramanian, and Anand (2009) assessed the psychological safety of 191 manufacturing employees and reported a mean of 5.48 ( $SD = 1.36$ ).

There are relatively few published articles using the SLS as an empirical measure of servant leadership (but see Smith et al., 2016). During the scale development process van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) collected data from approximately 1,600 respondents in the UK and the Netherlands. They reported sample means ranging from 3.62 ( $SD = 0.94$ ) to 4.86 ( $SD = .70$ ).

So, results here suggest that, within this sample, respondents reported relatively high levels of psychological safety and servant leadership. The overall mean for Psychological safety (4.91) was well above the theoretical midpoint of 3.50, and the mean for total servant leadership (4.41) was above the theoretical midpoint of 3.00. Also, results reveal that the mean rating for the accountability dimension of servant leadership was substantially higher than any other dimension of the servant leadership scale, while the mean for the courage dimension appeared numerically lower than the other dimensions. A paired *t-test* comparing those two dimensions within this sample indicated a significant difference between the two scores ( $t = 9.88, p. < .00$ ). This exploratory analysis might suggest that while the reliability analyses indicated conceptual similarity between these two dimensions, they can vary significantly at times.

### ***Correlation Analysis***

Preliminary analyses also included an examination of the intercorrelations of all study variables. These are displayed in Table 4 below. Results revealed that there are

several statistically significant correlations, as one might expect, among personal characteristics. The one correlation important to further analyses is the statistically significant relationship between role and psychological safety ( $r = .19$ ). Hence, the role will be included as a covariate in the regression analyses.

**Table 4. Intercorrelations of Study Variables**

	PS	Role	Gender	Age	MS	Ed	Income	Tenure
Serv Leader	.52*	.17	-.05	.01	-.03	.01	.09	.09
Psych Safe		.19*	-.05	.08	-.13	.04	.13	.00
Role			.05	.04	-.23**	.20*	.26**	.32**
Gender				-.12	-.09	-.04	.03	-.14
Age					-.15	.01	.35*	.48**
MS						.27*	-.29**	-.05
Educ							.22*	-.04
Income								.00

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

The statistically significant correlation of .52 between the overall measure of servant leadership and psychological safety is an initial test of this study's guiding theory. Further bivariate correlations between psychological safety and the SLS dimensions are reported in Table 5 below. Results support that psychological safety is significantly related to 7 of the 8 dimensions of servant leadership. Courage is the only dimension of servant leadership not statistically significant with the psychological safety measure ( $r = .10$ ). Humility ( $r = .51$ ) and empowerment ( $r = .49$ ) had the strongest associations. In the context of the SLS, courage is about taking risks and a willingness to make changes (Green et al., 2015). In a general sense, it may

seem like a team's overall perception of their leader's courage would help them feel protected as they do their jobs to the best of their ability, even making mistakes at times. However, the data here do not support that intuition.

**Table 5. Bivariate Correlations of Psychological Safety, Total SLS and SLS Dimensions**

	<b>Psychological Safety</b>
Total SLS	.52*
Empowerment	.49*
Standing back	.39*
Accountability	.38*
Forgiveness	.34*
Courage	.10
Authenticity	.39*
Humility	.51*
Stewardship	.35*

\* $p. < .00$

### ***Regression Analysis***

A further test of the relationship between psychological safety and servant leadership was accomplished through two linear, stepwise regressions. Both used the organizational role variable as a covariate on the first step of the regression. The initial regression used the summary servant leadership measure as the independent variable and controlled for organizational role in the first step. Results are in Table 6 below. This analysis reveals that the overall servant leadership measure accounts for 23% of the variance in psychological safety after organizational role is controlled.

**Table 6. Regression of Organizational Role and Servant Leadership on Psychological Safety**

	Step 1			Step 2		
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>
<b>Covariate</b>						
Organizational Role	.19*	.04	.04*	.11		
<b>Independent Variable</b>						
Servant Leadership				.50**	.27**	.23**

\* $p. < .03$  \*\* $p. < .00$

A follow-up analysis regressing the eight dimensions of the SLS on psychological safety is reported in Table 7. This final regression provides some insight into how the dimensions of the SLS predict the measure of psychological safety. The dimensions of authenticity ( $\beta = 0.22$ ) and humility ( $\beta = 0.37$ ) have statistically significant contributions to the regression equation that accounted for 26% of the variance in predicting psychological safety after controlling for organizational role. The six other measures (empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, courage, and stewardship) did not statistically contribute to the regression equation. These findings validate Edmonson's (2003) notion that humble leaders contribute to the perception of psychological safety. Hu, Erdogan, Jiang, Bauer, and Liu (2018) also highlighted the positive implications of humble leadership, and the findings here can be seen to support their assertions. Analyzing the individual scales within an intact measure can sometime be misleading since the assumption is that the individual factors all contribute to some overarching concept, but some tentative conclusions can be inferred from the findings relevant to authenticity and humility. It may be notable that

both of these characteristics are grounded in perceptions of honesty and selflessness. These findings imply that contributors feel most psychologically safe not with a conspicuous courageous leader, but with a more reserved humble, honest leader.

**Table 7. Regression of Organizational Role and Dimensions of SLS on Psychological Safety**

	Step 1			Step 2		
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>
<b>Covariates</b>						
Org. Role	.19*	.04	.04*	.10		
<b>Independent Variables</b>						
Empowerment				.17		
Standing back				-.12		
Accountability				.12		
Forgiveness				.19		
Courage				-.10		
Authenticity				.22*		
Humility				.37**		
Stewardship				-.24	.30**	.26**

\*  $p. < .03$ ; \*\* $p. < .01$

### **Summary of Survey Results**

As expected, servant leadership was positively related to psychological safety, and leaders perceived more psychological safety than individual contributors at AB Logistics. The analysis confirmed both of these predictions. In cases where the servant leadership dimensions were less influential (courage, standing back, stewardship), it may be related to employees' line of sight or the way the behaviors

affect them individually. For example, when leaders show courage or stand back, this often occurs when they are managing up. Employees may not have visibility of behaviors if they most often occur at a different level in the organizational hierarchy. In the case of stewardship, often leaders have to make decisions that may harm individuals. A leader may be acting as a good steward when they run mandatory overtime to meet a customer's expectation. However, this may negatively affect an employee's psychological safety due to their loss of autonomy.

As it relates to the two dimensions—authenticity and humility—that statistically predicted psychological safety, previous research has connected both dimensions to the construct. The relation between humble leadership and employee engagement was fully mediated by psychological safety (Walters & Diab, 2016), and a climate of authenticity at the unit level in a hospital setting was buoyed by psychological safety and mitigated burnout for nurses facing disgruntled patients and family members in the emotionally charged healthcare setting (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2013). While the research context may differ slightly, it was not surprising to see that authentic and humble leader behaviors predict psychological safety.

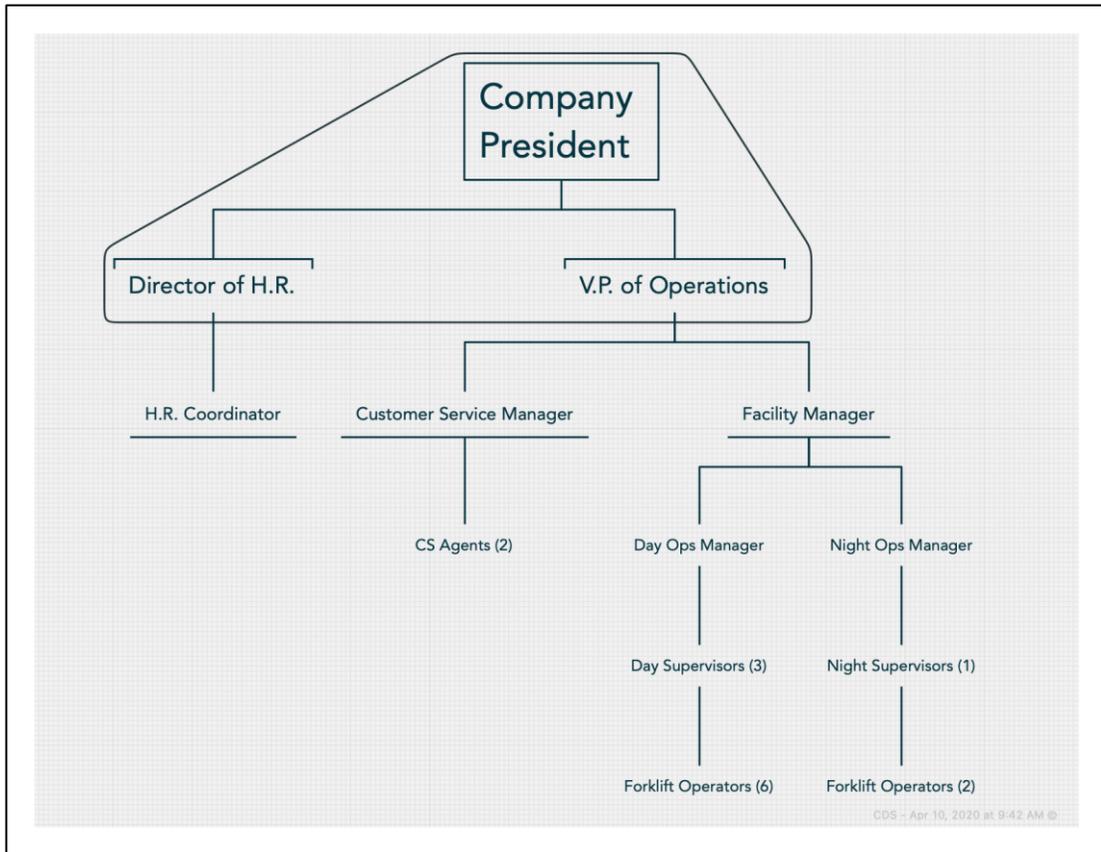
In the next chapter, I will explore leader behavior from the perspective of my employee interviews. Their narrative accounts will provide a more personal perspective on the relationship between leader behavior and psychological safety.

## **Chapter 5: Qualitative Findings**

This chapter will discuss the findings from the qualitative data—interviews and observation. This section will begin with a list of the 22 individuals participating in the interviews representing a wide range of company roles. Next, I will present a general overview of the qualitative study findings as well as how the coding scheme emerged and the aggregate study dimensions were created. Before delving into the specifics of the qualitative findings, I then provide evidence to suggest that the organization shifted from a toxic climate to one that was more conducive to the development of psychological safety. The chapter will then proceed to present study findings that answer the research question exploring how leadership behaviors influence individual perceptions of psychological safety.

### ***Interview Participants***

Figure 7 (below) represents a limited organizational chart to help identify who participated in semi-structured interviews. The top three roles, Company President, Director of HR, and V.P. of Operations (inside of the boundary) are physically located in the distal corporate office. All other roles are located at the distribution center where I completed my research.



**Figure 7. Organizational Chart**

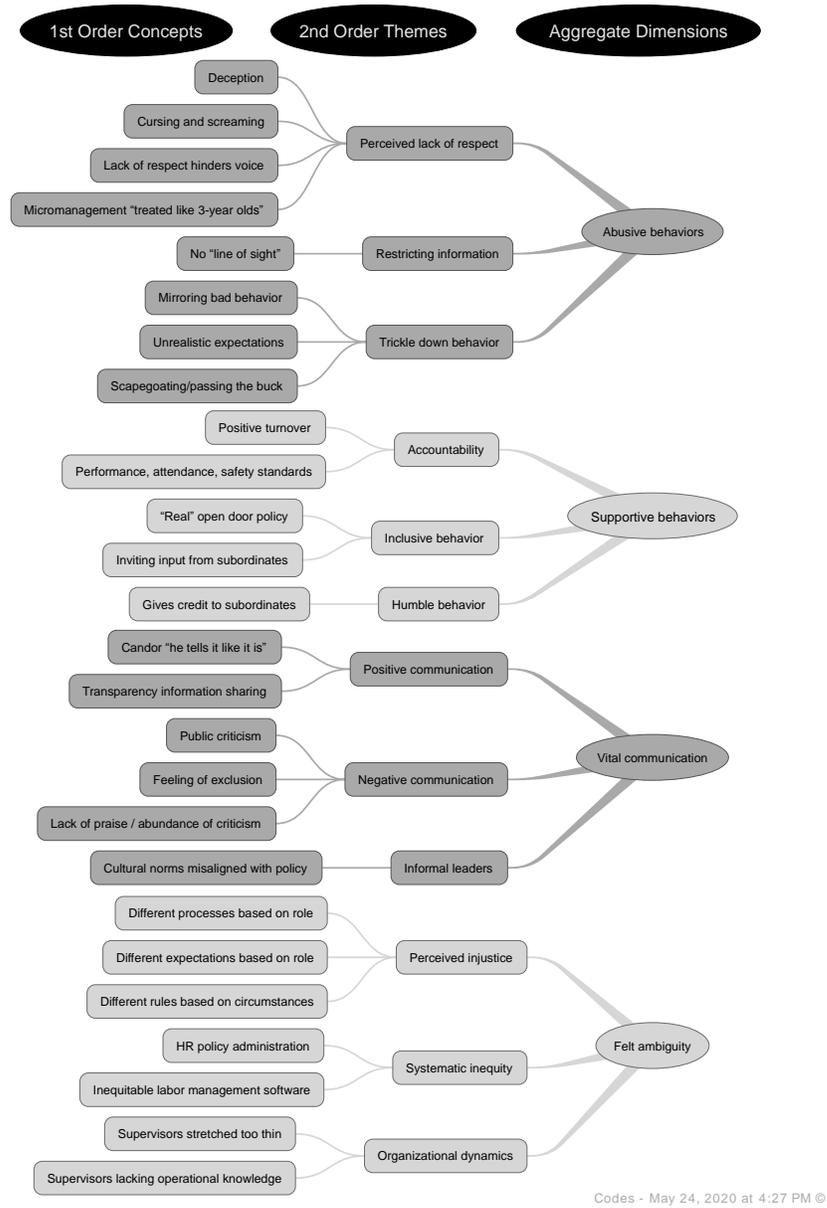
***Overview of Interview Findings and Coding Scheme***

Because I began my research after an abusive leader had been removed, I observed the consequences of abusive supervision in the form of individuals’ withered perceptions of psychological safety. In interviews and informal conversations, I also recorded the collateral damage created when others observed a leader’s abusive behaviors. People also commented on the negative effect those behaviors had on the work climate. I was in the midst of the research process when the transition to a supportive leadership regime took place. During this transition, I witnessed the

invigorating impact behaviors like inclusiveness, humility, authenticity, and accountability had on individuals and the collective perception of psychological safety. I also found that communication played a vital role in both the deterioration of the facility as well as its eventual turnaround. Lastly, the narrative accounts suggest that AB Logistics frontline employees struggled to find sufficient stability to put down roots. The employees suggested in the interviews that their felt ambiguity was a result of circumstances like high turnover rates, constant change, and inconsistent policy administration. While these conditions may not be related to a specific leader behavior, employees suggested the conditions are downstream effects of a leader's behavior. For example, a leader's behavior may lead to employee turnover. The high turnover may impact training and continuity, which leads to the felt ambiguity. The leader's behavior can have secondary, tertiary, etc. effects. What I saw was often the leader behavior also played a role in the situational factors that affected employee psychological safety.

After completing the employee interviews, they were transcribed and coded to identify aggregate themes in the empirical data. I began looking at the transcripts for examples of the SLS eight dimensions of servant leadership as well as examples of Nembhard and Edmondson's (2006) inclusive leadership theory. I then identified emerging themes in the data. In addition to the interviews, my observations over three and a half months in the facility contributed to these findings. The coding process,

which reduced 118 first-order concepts to 24 second-order themes and 4 aggregate dimensions, is illustrated in Figure 8 below.



**Figure 8. Coding Scheme in the Development of Aggregate Dimensions**

This is an example of how the process worked. Four first-order codes (deception, cursing and screaming, lack of respect hinders voice, and micromanagement) were organized into the second-order theme of disrespect, which was aggregated under the dimension of abusive supervision. A second example is five first-order codes (positive turnover, employees are held accountable to policies, “just letting it happen,” not caring or stretched too thin, supervisors held to different standards) were organized into the second-order theme of accountability, which was aggregated under the dimension of supportive behaviors.

The coding process identified four leader behavior dimensions that affected the employee’s perception of psychological safety.

- **Abusive Behaviors:** Abusive supervision was a key contributor to the facility’s decline.
- **Supportive Behaviors:** Supportive leadership behaviors (servant leadership) were critical to the turnaround.
- **Vital Communication:** Communication played a crucial role in both the facility’s decline and eventual turnaround.
- **Felt Ambiguity:** Organizational ambiguity hampered employees’ ability to feel psychologically safe during the transition.

### ***A Toxic Work Climate***

One of the first days I was back in the facility, CPC was performing a planned internal safety compliance audit on the warehouse. AB had known about the visit for

weeks. I was shocked by the lack of a sense of urgency and the general appearance of the warehouse. The place was dirty and looked shabby. I found damaged inventory and/or evidence of theft in more than 100 locations. Historically, the facility would have been free of product damage and in pristine condition for a scheduled CPC visit. This was my first indication that the work climate was damaged. Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) suggested toxic working conditions are a combination of interpersonal conditions, occupational conditions, and organizational conditions.

The warehouse employees experienced toxic interpersonal conditions in the form of abusive supervision. They were exposed to toxic occupational conditions in a lack of autonomy in their work and the disruption to their personal lives because of the amount of mandatory overtime they were forced to endure. They were subjected to organizational toxicity through systematic control in the form of technology that tracked their every move, inadequate resources, and unrealistic expectations.

### **Internal employee engagement survey**

The organization completed an internal employee engagement survey approximately nine months before I began my research, which was shortly before the abusive facility manager was fired. Below are employee responses to the open-ended question—“What is one thing I’d like to see changed?” In some cases, employees did not limit their response to “one thing.” Their answers, in Table 8 below, provide insight into the toxic interpersonal, occupational, and organizational conditions the employees endured.

**Table 8. What Is One Thing That I Would Like To See Changed?**

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The way people are spoken too. I have heard comments made by bosses that have discouraged me from joining. There certain limits to the way a person is to talk to employees. It has been difficult for me to watch and at times overwhelming. The morale is steadily decreasing.
That employees are treated with more respect and concern.
Not enough accidents are reported, and I would like to see that change.
Monday through Friday, 6am to 4pm, so I can feel like I have a life outside of work, our current schedule of 6 12-hour days is a lot and leaves no time for my family
More notice on overtime
Not working 6 12-hour days / mandatory overtime
Be more understanding when it comes to the amount of overtime expected from employees in regard to the Work/Life balance and people who take Public Transportation (i.e.: Bus, Taxi, etc.).
The way work is dumped on us.
Too much mandatory overtime
The pay and direct deposit is needed
The pay
Yearly raises, and the people that actually been here for years should be making more than the people who just started working
More equipment (walkies, forklifts, and working scanners).
Much of the equipment malfunctions on a regular basis. I had to ask a dozen people about specific gun functions before one of them actually knew what they were talking about. There could be a way for employees to trade shifts one day for the other, but also some sort of voluntary overtime. That way those who want to work more can, and the company won't get behind on orders. If the voluntary overtime was like a buffer between regular schedules and mandatory overtime, I think that moral would improve overall.
Training is horrible. All my answers are based on present situation. It could be better with lots of changes. No one has respect for management. No consistency. I been here almost 3 years without a raise. 4 weeks ago, my schedule changed 4 times in one-week. Supervisors don't handle people with respect at all. They have fired way too many good people. They push speed over substance. The case pick area is a mess. Workers need a say in the workplace.

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**Abusive leader behaviors**

For over two years, an abusive facility manager (AFM) ran the warehouse. He spent about a decade in the military, and his Drill Sargent demeanor hadn't worn off. A

peer from another department frequently had to collaborate with the AFM, which often led to turf wars. The peer described their encounters:

He had a way of making it seem like, I'm running this; this is mine. Somewhere along the way, he was very much in control of something, somewhere. (AB Manager)

While it was compulsory to maintain a level of professionalism with other managers, his direct reports were subjected to a dysfunctional environment. One employee from another department suggested the following:

I overheard him one day telling one of them to put his foot in their asses out there. I mean that's, that's a little extreme, and he was always screaming at them in front of everybody. (AB Customer Service Employee)

The AFM's outbursts were not reserved solely for members of his management team.

Another employee remembered a conflict during a shift start-up meeting.

We had a meeting where the [AFM] is down in the dock office. I guess he thought he was still a drill sergeant or something. I mean, you know, he is swearing and all this, it was kind of frightening because some of the workers down there let him know they wasn't going to tolerate what he was talking about doing. He was talking about holding their paycheck until they did [what he wanted]. (AB Forklift Operator)

Yet another employee recalled an outburst where the AFM called an impromptu all-hands meeting:

He stood on a chair in the breakroom. I thought he was going to have a stroke. I mean, veins popping out everywhere....He was inviting everybody out to the parking lot. He was going to whip their ass, and I'm like, calm down. (AB Forklift Operator)

When the AFM's reign finally ended, a sense of relief was experienced by the team.

He said he was coming in here to make a name for himself. Boy, he did. The single most positive thing I ever seen on the warehouse as a whole was the day he got fired. And that ain't no lie. I mean, it was like angels sang. Everybody was in a good mood. They're like, things are going to change now. (AB Forklift Operator)

AB logistics should have addressed the abusive leader much sooner and created a zero-tolerance policy for the type of behaviors he had normalized.

In my interviews and observations, I saw ample data to justify my claim that abusive supervision had created an environment with low psychological safety. I also found evidence that the work climate propagated low psychological safety. For example, I asked an employee, "What was it about the boss that made it difficult to feel like you could speak freely or go to them with an idea?"

Because of the, I guess a feedback that I received from other employees. Um, how they will make them feel—how they would, uh, not listen. (AB Customer Service Employee)

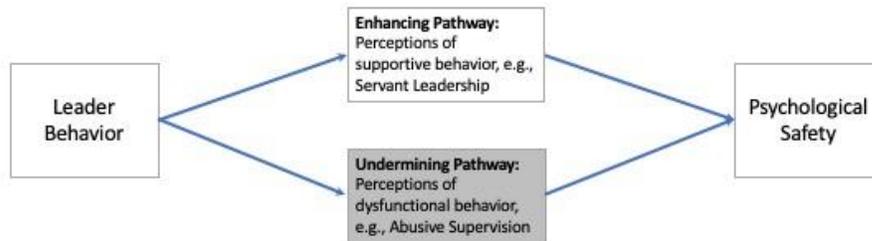
In Table 9 below, supplemental direct quotations from the transcribed interviews are listed that are evidence of the role leaders' behaviors played in creating the toxic work climate and how the behaviors negatively affected the employees' perceptions of psychological safety. Employees saw their leaders being abusive in behaviors such as using scare tactics and screaming at supervisors in front of other employees. Additionally, they reported feeling invisible to the leaders. They reported seeing supervisors as having no restraints based on accountability.

**Table 9. Employee Quotations Reflecting Dysfunctional Leader Behavior**

<b>Leader Behavior</b>	<b>Excerpts that captured abusive supervision's effect on psychological safety</b>
Abusive supervision	[They were] using so many scare tactics and it's just, you just make upsets people.
	I was told that [my safety] doesn't matter, you know that, yeah. I was a really angry.
	I think the old leadership regime had, you know, there were issues with that where they would be intimidating and people wouldn't want to go to them with the problems or people went to them with problems and nothing happened.
	You can't just snap at me and think I'm just going to sit there because this is my job and you'll fire me. That's not a good reason to talk to somebody as if, you know, they are less than you because you're in a role. A lot of times I see it when corporate comes because now it's like y'all's bosses are here. Oh. So now you know how I feel to work under the light. You know when corporate is here, now it's real, and it's like, okay, did I give you a reason to cuss at me. Because if you cuss at me, I'm going to cuss back at you. I'll get another job in another warehouse.
	I overheard him one day telling [a supervisor] to put his foot in their ass out there. And I mean that's, that's a little extreme, you know, and he was always screaming at them in front of everybody
	They'd belittle people and they'd make them feel like, like, it's their fault when they didn't give them the knowledge. They gave them the expectation but didn't set them up for success.
	People don't want to feel like this is a prison, which is what people were comparing it to. They don't want to be treated like three-year-olds.
	I think the old leadership regime had, you know, issues where they would be intimidating and people wouldn't want to go to them with the problems, or people went to them with problems and nothing happened.
	He was the all-knowing and everybody else around him didn't know shit.

<b>Leader Behavior</b>	<b>Excerpts that captured abusive supervision's effect on psychological safety</b>
	<p>He got on the radio and basically would like curse them out.</p> <hr/> <p>He's talking to the supervisors, and they all come over with their tail between their legs and like, man, there's no amount of money for me to walk around in their shoes.</p> <hr/> <p>People don't want to feel like this is a prison, which is what people were comparing it to. They don't want to be treated like a three-year-old.</p>
Accountability	<p>People won't come to you anymore with issues if they don't think you are going to do anything about it, and that's the environment that we had.</p> <hr/> <p>Who's holding them accountable? And it's like, you know, to me it's kinda like, you know, the supervisors are like police who goes to police in Chicago. Yeah. Nobody.</p> <hr/> <p>It is amazing what had become acceptable in this building by us just letting it happen.</p> <hr/> <p>The supervisors are either not caring, or they're just too stretched to address the situation.</p>
Inclusiveness	<p>In their minds, we did not exist. I mean we weren't included in anything down there.</p>

The behaviors demonstrated by the dysfunctional manager and his team are consistent with the literature on abusive supervision. The behaviors were detrimental to the team's psychological safety and represent the undermining pathway in Figure 9 below.



**Figure 9. Behavioral Undermining Pathway**

The local HR coordinator described a phenomenon where the AFM’s behavior was a contagion for his supervisors. His behavior cascaded across the operation and had residual effects long after he was gone.

If you want respect you have to give respect, especially when you are doing it in an open forum where other people can hear it because it trickles downhill. If a supervisor sees a manager treating people inappropriately or not being respectful, don’t be surprised when within a month the supervisor is out there doing the same. You have pretty much made bad behavior acceptable. (HR coordinator)

### Micromanagement

The employees felt a lack of autonomy and like they were constantly being scrutinized. More than a decade ago, AB implemented a labor management system

(LMS). It is the ultimate tool to micromanage a workforce you do not trust. The system is built on time studies and standards created by an industrial engineer. The LMS essentially grades an operator's productivity based on the planned versus actual performance. The problem is that no one believes in the system:

Two weeks in a row we had LMS meetings and went over all this stuff, and I still don't fully understand everything. Like when I'm reading somebody a paper on how this percentage doesn't line up, so they didn't pass, and they're getting written up, or I'm going to terminate them based on them not knowing to press a button on the gun, I mean, a lot of that I don't feel like falls on them as much as it falls on the company. (AB Supervisor)

Another leader suggested that the LMS is a poor way to rate whether someone is proficient because employees are trained in how to function in normal circumstances, and things were seldom normal. New employees did not know how to troubleshoot when they encountered an exception. When the inventory is not accurate—and it was not—employees frequently encountered hurdles they had to overcome. The LMS created a perverse incentive where an operator who took a shortcut and left the inventory mess for the next person was rewarded, while the conscientious individual who tried to do the right thing and fix a problem was punished if they weren't proficient with the LMS, according to the supervisor.

### ***Evolving Toward a Healthy Work Climate***

Due to my research timeline, it is not possible to say that AB logistics completed a transformation from a toxic climate, where employees perceived low psychological safety, to a healthy climate, where they felt psychologically safe. What I am

comfortable suggesting is that this process began when a supportive leadership team was put in place in the warehouse. The evolution was in its infancy during my research. Using a baseball analogy, it was the second or third inning of a nine-inning game, but every indication pointed to the organization continuing to build a healthy environment through supportive leader behaviors and the relationships they create.

### **A psychologically safe microclimate**

Even before the regime change, there was a good omen. During the darkest days at the distribution center, when many employees had all but given up, one supervisor, I'll call him Abner, continued to advocate for the employees. Abner embodies the sentiment behind the quotation, "A leader is a dealer in hope," despite the Machiavellian source of the quotation, Napoleon Bonaparte. His authenticity and dedication translated to the frontline staff, and it was reciprocated with loyalty and productivity during a period when those traits were in short supply:

If we have four supervisors, and you know there is only one who seems to care, you are going to go to him. Abner truly does care about people....It is genuine. (HR Coordinator)

Abner's manager agreed:

These guys, they feel comfortable coming to Abner. You know what I mean? And that's good because they don't feel comfortable going to others.

His impact on the employees is proof that you can lead regardless of your position in the organization.

The position was Abner's first real job after college. The job was far removed from the marketing degree he had toiled over. He had some previous warehouse experience working in his family's business, and he was excited by the challenge a leadership opportunity at AB Logistics presented. The abusive supervision, grueling hours, and ceaseless waves of employees with problems took their toll:

There were times I just wanted to give up. I'm like, man, this can't be what the real world is like. This isn't normal, and it wasn't normal.  
(Abner)

When I asked why he persevered, he gave me two reasons. He was raised to finish what you start, and he felt a deep connection to the employees. Intuitively he understood the role he played in providing them a sense of optimism:

We're all family. More or less, we're here more hours than we are at home. Some of these operators are like they're my family because I hang out with them 12 hours a day, six days a week. (Abner)

Abner said he had been with the company for 15 months, but he got off to a rough start because he did not have some of the skills he needed. People would come to him wanting help, and he did not have a technical competency, like proper training in using the inventory management scanning software to solve their problems. Despite not having the appropriate task skills in his leadership toolbox, he quickly made progress with the employees using his relational tools:

When I first started, it took a while to get my feet under me. It was all new to me. I just put a foot forward every day and came in here with a good attitude, and I think that rubs off on a lot of operators. (Abner)

He attributes growing up in the family business for his leadership style. He wasn't sure that what had worked for him in a small family business setting would translate in his new environment, but he only knew one way to act, and the toxicity around him was not going to change who he was:

I mean everybody's a person at the end of the day. I mean you just gotta find the middle ground with everybody. (Abner)

Abner is glad he did not give up and quit:

It was very disheartening, but I just muscled through....As much as people were like, man, this place is never going to change—look now. We've changed! (Abner)

Abner's experience reveals that psychological safety can exist in pockets, even in the most toxic environments. Leaders can look for opportunities to use authentic supervisors, like Abner, to help develop these microclimates as a strategy for creating a healthy work environment and fostering psychological safety.

### **Changing attitudes at AB**

In 1998, when the warehouse AB manages was constructed, it sat all alone in a cornfield. Today, it is in a bustling logistics park with 18 other distribution centers that account for more than 11 million square feet of storage. The park employs 6,000 people (City of Edwardsville, 2019). The park's prosperity has created a hiring and retention challenge for AB Logistics. Some of the difficulty relates to the proximity of so many firms competing for the same talent, and some of it relates to the economic environment where anyone who wants to work is working. Additionally, in

a low unemployment market, qualified candidates are less willing to accept lower wages, mandatory overtime, poor leadership, and unpredictable hours:

We absolutely have all of the demographic and socio-economic challenges. We are not hiring kids enrolled in the local college to work in our warehouse. You are bringing in people from rough backgrounds, from rough parts of the community. But you know what? Give them something to believe in, give them somewhere to work where they are comfortable, and they will be fine. (HR Director)

This new people-focused management mantra represents a recent shift at AB. They are trying to provide a more staff-centric environment and relate more to the employees by understanding what motivates them. It is one thing to have those aspirations, it is another to be able to change ingrained behaviors, which have been modeled from the top and codified by the organization over time. Many of the things AB is trying to do today are the type of things I wanted to try a decade earlier. Seeing AB Logistics transition to a staff-centric approach is like watching someone finish writing a book I had the idea for a decade earlier—better late than never.

The HR Director suggested that to implement their new approach, AB needed to reframe the roles and expectations for all organizational leaders, beginning with the frontline supervisors:

I absolutely believe leadership is relational....If I asked any one of them, “What is your primary responsibility as a supervisor?” I venture to guess most of them would say, “get the trucks loaded.” That’s the problem. That is task management, not people management. (HR Director)

The distribution center employees have been whipsawed by the frequent changes in local leadership, the never-ending revolving door of new hires, the surprise visits from an unhappy client, and an onslaught of well-meaning corporate support personnel—each with their own ideas on how to fix the myriad of problems. Ambiguity and change were omnipresent. Employees struggled to find a footing in the organization, and for too long, leaders weren't helping, according to the HR director:

When you treat people like shit, you get what we got, and some of our leaders have not had that paradigm shift. They are still functioning like “Do what I say because I said so.” “Do what I say because I said so” works in an environment where people have no choices. It works in an environment with a 12% unemployment rate. When you have to feed your family, and there is no way for you to make a living other than the job you have today, you are going to do what that guy says. When you are operating in today's environment, where you can walk out the door and have another job in five minutes, maybe even for more money than you are making, “Do what I said because I said so” does not work. (HR Director)

### **Leadership change at AB Logistics and a shift in psychological safety**

About six weeks into my onsite research, something changed. AB brought on a Vice President of Operations (VP) to help the corporate office address the chaos at the dysfunctional facility, as well as to maintain the 12 other locations the company manages. My first introduction to the VP was in a meeting with an outside consulting firm that was trying to sell its training services. At one point, the VP interrupted and suggested that the problem was much simpler than the consultant's proposed solution:

The problem is leadership and treating people with respect. (VP of OPS)

In a relatively short period, after the Vice President of Operations and the new facility manager were hired, the distribution center's work climate began to improve. I attribute this to the way the new leaders viewed and treated their employees. They viewed them as allies, not adversaries, and treated people with dignity and respect, not abuse and contempt. During December and January, the distribution center made tremendous progress in implementing the 30/60/90-day plan and closing the performance gaps in CPC's key performance indicators, as well as building relationships with employees.

### **Supportive leader behaviors**

I identified four key behaviors that the new leadership team exhibited: inclusiveness, humility, authenticity, and accountability. As the VP and the new leadership team took over, I observed them acting differently. They were much more inclusive than what the employees were accustomed to. Walking around the warehouse, they would engage every employee they encountered. The previous manager might walk the length of the building, encountering several people, and speak to no one. The new team had a true open-door policy where people were welcomed. The previous manager often retreated to his office and hid behind the closed door, especially when there was conflict. When operational issues were being discussed, the new team always went to the source and asked the employees for input on solving the problem. This departure from the top-down solutions people were accustomed to fostered buy-in from the employees. The new team was also humble and admitted mistakes and

gave credit to others. Under the new leaders, it was acknowledged that the equipment employees had was insufficient, and they openly communicated about the challenges of procuring more. The SFM always gave credit to his supervisory team and the employees for the turnaround. In this new environment, employees responded by engaging at a different level. They were more forthcoming with ideas and suggestions about how to fix problems. I witnessed forklift operators displaying more employee voice behaviors, like asking a question when they encountered an inventory problem, whereas before they often just went around the issue. This was an indication that psychological safety was budding. Even the general appearance of the facility changed as employees began picking up trash and fixing damaged inventory as they encountered it.

Eight weeks into his tenure, I sat down with the new supportive facility manager (SFM) and told him that he was getting a lot of credit for being the antidote for an ailing warehouse. I was curious if he understood the scope of the facility's problem when he joined the organization, what he attributed the recent operational success to, and what he thought about the evolution of the facility's work climate. He humbly gave the credit to the managers who came before him, and to the employees who stuck with the company:

I've been really pleased with the way the team here has responded to our efforts. They could have just as easily told us, you know what we've seen this too many times, for too long, we're going to stay jaded. You guys can just pound sand and whenever you're gone, well I guess we'll still be here for the next guy. But they really responded, and kudos to them for giving people like me another chance. (SFM)

The SFM said the organization, to their credit, fully disclosed the challenge he would be facing:

Can you imagine if they'd tried to sugar coat it?...If you show up like it's just going to be business as usual, and you're walking through this place on day one, you're like, well I'm glad I haven't unpacked because I'm out of here. (SFM)

The SFM said he was more astute at the task side than the relational side of leadership. He suggested a catalyst for the facility's progress was the promotion of a safety supervisor (Dean), into the critical role of dayshift operations manager. Having the SFM's business acumen and experience buttressed by someone like Dean allowed the new message to resonate with the employees:

[Dean] is really good at identifying on a personal level. What I really admire is the fact he has the people skills first. He's a natural. (SFM)

Shortly after Dean's promotion, the VP of Operations role was created. The SFM suggested that the creation of the VP role signaled to everyone that AB Logistics was committed to the turnaround at the highest level. One of the supervisors commented on the impact of the VP's authentic approach on front line employees:

I mean, you can even see in his demeanor; the way he carries himself; how he is with the operators out on the floor. He's just, he's great. He listens to them. He doesn't tell them a story. They all respect that. (AB Supervisor)

The SFM said with that team in place, his job was easy. All he did was reaffirm what the others had been saying: that things are changing. The path was not always clear,

and the evolutionary process encountered several challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, but the team pushed ahead.

If you're not sure of the problem, if you're not sure what to do, just do what you think in your heart is right, and then you figure out what's left. So that's kind of where we are right now. We've walked the walk. We're eight weeks in, and we are making [the employees'] days better. (The SFM)

The leader behavior dimension from the SLS that was cited most frequently in my interviews, by both leaders and individual contributors, was accountability. The facility's deterioration had happened gradually in a leadership vacuum. The local HR coordinator made the following comment:

People were coming and going and doing whatever the hell they wanted in this building. That didn't just happen overnight. It took years. (HR coordinator)

The changes in leadership meant a new approach for everyone. The HR coordinator suggested management was suddenly being held accountable for their reports' behavior and performance:

Following up on things like safety issues or attendance has helped get some of those bad apples out of the building. With that, you don't have the cancers in a group affecting other people on the floor. (HR coordinator)

Informal leaders play a huge role in cultural norms. During new hire onboarding, employees would be introduced to rules and policies that they soon found were only aspirational:

In our orientation class, we set an expectation for safety equipment and dress code. Then they see everyone in track pants. In three days, guess who is wearing track pants? (HR coordinator)

The shift in accountability and resulting positive turnover allowed people who were doing things right and were invested in the organization to ascend out of the negative climate and become role models. While accountability is often regarded with a negative connotation, many of the employees celebrated the shift with the SFM at the helm. One employee shared the following:

We've gotten rid of some of the folks that were not being productive. They just didn't care. We're getting rid of those guys and, it's bringing the rest of the group around to realize: Hey, these guys are not kidding around? So, either get with the program or get prepared to get outta here. It is a good feeling man. (AB Forklift Operator)

About two months into the turnaround, I spoke to a forklift operator who suggested the warehouse had made progress, but he still felt there was room for improvement. Even in an environment with debilitating employee turnover, he saw a need for more accountability and even using progressive discipline as it related to his peers. He shared an example of a load that was returned to the facility because the weight was not distributed properly:

That frustrates me. Can we get a supervisor to come look at it, take pictures of it, and find out who did this load and let's make sure it doesn't happen again? (AB Forklift Operator)

The comment was made in the context of accountability, but he was also alluding to a training deficit and how failure to follow-up creates a Band-Aid solution instead of a continuous improvement process:

It's like they don't care... Reload it and get it out of here. Just fix it. We're not going to worry about who made the mistake. We'll just fix it. I'm just like, well, there's too many wrongs with this scenario here. (AB Forklift Operator)

The same operator suggested supervisors often used workarounds that were improper when they encountered a problem like fixing inventory accuracy issues:

You're shortcutting just to fix one issue and not taking the time to go through the steps and do it totally correctly. When your team, you know, the people under you see that, they will think, if he doesn't care and why should I? (AB Forklift Operator)

Despite residual challenges like these, employees soon recognized the shift in approach from their new boss. One operator said the following:

[The SFM] came in and was like "Hey, I'm [SFM]. What can I do to make you-all's life more easy?" And he just talked to us. Whatever he said he'd do—he did it. Not once did I ever even hear him yell or anything or even get mad. He just said this is the way it is going to be and within two weeks you started seeing a difference. (AB Forklift Operator)

The SFM said he had been doing a lot of coaching with his supervisory team because their behaviors were not aligned with his, and some of the abusive behaviors still lingered. To shift their paradigm, he would challenge them to explain when they had seen him modeling the questionable behaviors, and they could not. The supervisors grappled initially to come to terms with their new leader:

I was like, man, I don't really know this guy. I can't even feel him out cause he's a hard to read guy, but you could tell that he's looking at everything, and he's just waiting to ask the right question at the right time. (AB Supervisor)

As they gained familiarity, they came to understand they were going to be held to a higher standard, but they were always treated with respect, and expectations were always realistic. Eventually, the supervisors bought in:

It's just, it seems so simple. It's just his personas, just his presence. He came in here, and he means business, and it looks like people are ready to work for him. (AB Supervisor)

When the new operations manager was promoted to the day shift role, his predecessor moved to the overnight operations manager position (ONM). The local HR coordinator was concerned that the ONM's approach and the lack of oversight on nights were a bad fit. She predicted confrontation with his subordinates. The ONM had been coached multiple times about his abusive tendencies, and the overnights were like "the wild west," she said. The shift saw immediate productivity results from the ONM's move. However, the HR coordinator was not buying it:

Productivity may have gone up, but it is not going to sustain. It is not going to keep us from having tremendous turnover. (HR coordinator)

The SFM, however, was optimistic that his coaching was having a positive effect:

I think he is going to do well. Jack Welch has a saying, and I'm not threatening [ONM] in any way, shape or form, but Jack says, "You either change the people or you can change the people." I understand the way it's going to be here, and I think he will learn, and if not, that's unfortunate. (The SFM)

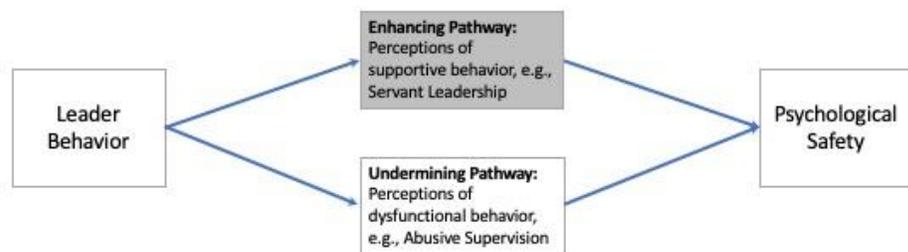
I believe leaders modeling these supportive behaviors (inclusiveness, humility, authenticity, and accountability) created the type of environment that allowed leaders to develop inclusive relationships with employees, and psychological safety began to emerge. This comes out in the narrative accounts when people detail experiences like how they now feel comfortable speaking up to leaders, or they reported feeling included by supervisors attending to their feedback and really listening. Additionally, they felt trusted to do their jobs well by being given responsibilities and having their input actively sought. Employees often discussed their interactions with new leaders and how they were personally impacted or how a leader’s actions were perceived by the team. These actions and the underlying behaviors tamed a hostile work climate and promoted psychological safety. Supplemental examples of these exchanges can be seen in the employee quotations in Table 10 below.

**Table 10. Employee Quotations Reflecting Supportive Leader Behavior**

<b>Leader Behavior</b>	<b>Excerpts that captured supportive leader behavior’s effect on psychological safety</b>
Inclusiveness	<p data-bbox="508 1407 1370 1480">People are very decent actually when you sit down and actually get to know somebody.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="508 1491 1370 1564">They’re open to listening to the recommendations, and they’re not stuck in the old ways.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="508 1575 1370 1768">If anyone brings me an idea, I will never say yeah, I thought about that was my idea. No, this was absolutely so and so’s idea, you know, and that makes them feel like part of the team. That makes them feel like they're part of the solution instead of part of the problem.</p>

<b>Leader Behavior</b>	<b>Excerpts that captured supportive leader behavior's effect on psychological safety</b>
	<p data-bbox="516 344 1356 485">Supervisors getting, uh, getting their hands dirty helps... You know, they're not just sitting behind a desk in the office all day—soaking up the heat when it's cold and the AC when it's hot. They're actually on the floor helping.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 506 1364 611">But these guys, they feel comfortable coming to Abner. You know what I mean? And that's good because they don't feel comfortable going to others.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 632 1347 737">When people listen, it makes you want to do your job better because, you know, they take an interest in, you know, you as an individual.</p>
Empowerment	<p data-bbox="516 764 941 795">He trusts me to [solve problems].</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 816 1347 957">They actually ask us if we have any kind of input, and they don't make you feel bad about it. They'll tell you if you have an idea, try it. If it doesn't work, learn from it. But don't keep making the same stupid mistake. Learn from it and move on.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 978 1339 1010">Being in a position where I'm given authority to make decisions.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 1031 1339 1136">When she's gone on Wednesday, I'm the captain of the ship and it's my job to make sure that everything is taken care of before I leave.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 1157 1364 1304">They actually ask us if we have any kind of input, and they don't make you feel bad about it. They'll tell you if you have an idea, try it. If it doesn't work, learn from it. But don't keep making the same stupid mistake. Learn from it and move on.</p>
Accountability	<p data-bbox="516 1325 1356 1430">People are looking around and all of the bad people are easing right on up out of here. You know, we get new groups in here that want to be here.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 1451 1356 1524">We hold people to a schedule now. We don't have people coming and going as they please anymore.</p> <hr/> <p data-bbox="516 1545 1364 1650">Getting the right people in here. Some of the workers before didn't want to work. They just came in here and screwed off all day. Better candidates I think are one reason we are more positive.</p>

The supportive behaviors and employee-centric approach exemplified by the new leadership team had a positive effect on psychological safety and represent the enhancing pathway in Figure 10 below.



**Figure 10. Behavioral Enhancing Pathway**

### Inflection point

The new regime's day-to-day leadership would likely have accomplished the same turnaround outcomes eventually, but the timeline was accelerated by an impromptu event. Superbowl Sunday occurred a few months into the SFM's tenure. This was the type of event that historically derailed the operation, due to employee call-offs, and created a backlog of work that could take weeks to dig out:

I was worried about attendance on Superbowl Sunday. What did our new facility manager do? He said look guys, let's figure this out. You

guys come to work as you are scheduled to work, and we will watch the second half of the game in the break room. It is on me. You know how many call-outs he had? None. Not only that. He came in on his day off and watched the game with them. (HR director)

The HR director said many people would have taken a myopic view of the decision to pay 50 people to watch television for two hours, but the corporate leaders recognized it as money well spent. It would have taken significantly more in overtime to get caught up after a mass call-out event, and it generated goodwill and kept the turnaround momentum going:

The fact that he had enough respect for their time and participated in it is exactly what they appreciate. It was fantastic. (HR director)

In addition to getting to watch the second half of the game, anyone who worked their shift that day was placed into a drawing for a \$250 gift card, and one of the supervisors won \$100 on a scratch-off lottery ticket on his way into work that day, so he bought pizza for everyone. When asked why he “hosted” a Super Bowl party, the SFM said the following:

The truth is, you ask anybody, and this is a huge deal. This is like one of the biggest social events of the year. It’s the only thing that is not a national holiday that people really care about. I thought, you know, what can we do? It’s unfair. I need them here. They have to be here. What’s the middle ground? (The SFM)

At the time, the SFM was under a lot of pressure. The facility’s performance was importing, and they were starting to create positive momentum, which was rebuilding credibility with CPC. The facility could not afford to stumble. After calculating the

hours and potential impact on productivity, the SFM said he knew it was the right decision for the operation, but he didn't realize the impact it was going to have on morale:

Even if you weren't here and you just heard about it, you think people care about me as opposed to what they've usually got in store for us. That overrides a whole lot of stuff that has happened. (AB Forklift Operator)

### **Vital communication**

Leader communication is a key variable in the employee sensemaking process. How leaders communicate can enhance or undermine an employee's perception of psychological safety. I found communication in the warehouse was much more complicated than the words a leader speaks. The employee sensemaking process takes a leader's words into account, along with a leader's body language, perceptions of the environment, peers' opinions, personal history, etc. Communication played a crucial role in both the facility's decline and eventual turnaround.

### Dysfunctional communication

Throughout my research observations, I attended dozens of pre-shift communication meetings. A common theme was negativity. In nearly every meeting, I heard supervisors threaten the employees: "If you don't (wear your seat belt...go to break on time...fill out forklift inspection sheets...etc.), I'm writing you up." One particular meeting I attended on the overnight shift began with these usual threats, and then the agenda moved to safety. There were new procedures for a pedestrian walkway being implemented to keep foot traffic out of high danger areas where trucks were being

loaded and unloaded. It meant operators had a longer walk to the time clock. The policy change was not explained as a safety measure. From the employees' perspective, they were only told they had a significantly longer walk to avoid being late. When asked if there would be additional grace time allowed, they were told no. As frustration rose, the employees and supervisor began shouting. The meeting ended abruptly when the supervisor said, "If you don't like it, go see HR," and then he retreated to the office. Shifts started in two waves. An hour and a half later, when the second wave reported, the scene repeated. This time, before it deteriorated to shouting, an operator asked a simple question: "Are they changing the walkway for safety reasons?" The new policy was accepted without further questions, which illustrates the need to be transparent.

Another theme from the interviews was the role perceived respect played in communication:

When you come into a workplace, people pay attention to how you react to them. The most important thing is respect, and when you don't have that, then people tend to shy away. They won't talk to you. They won't inform you of anything. (AB Forklift Operator)

Managers' behaviors and their willingness to listen plays a key role in how employees felt about the environment. One employee shared the following:

People won't come to you anymore with issues if they don't think you are going to do anything about it, and that's the environment that we had. Where people just let things fester and fester and their attitude kept getting worse and worse. (AB Forklift Operator)

Much of what people referred to as respect related to a supervisor's behaviors and tone during communication and the impact of feeling talked down to or belittled.

#### Supportive communication

Dean, the new day shift operations manager, is frequently cited as playing a huge role in changing the hostile climate because of his leadership style and communication.

He credits relationships for the turnaround, not his management skills or logistics expertise:

Man, this is a people business. It's all about the person. I'm green. I don't have warehouse experience prior to this gig, and my operational experience is minimal...I delivered on what I was saying. They needed that. They were shutting down. They need to understand what's going on. They need to understand the why and how they impact it. (Dean)

Historically, communication was minimal between the management and employees, and when the communication did happen, it was generally negative:

If someone is a Rockstar employee, we are leaving them alone, so really the only reason supervisors are going to someone is because they did something wrong. I can't tell you the last time I heard about someone going up to an employee and saying, "So hey, what's going on, or how's your kids?" (HR coordinator)

In addition to treating people like human beings rather than pieces of equipment, Dean focused his startup meetings on setting expectations and helping his team understand the business. He showed them where they were in the schedule, as it related to work in process, and where they needed to be. He shared future projections about order demand and how that might impact them in the coming days. Employees

began to recognize the link between individual performance and group outcomes like mandatory overtime. The employees appreciated the shift in approach. One operator told me the following:

The morning meeting used to be just the most negative thing ever. But now, I think the people on the floor feel better about the work that they're doing because they know that it's actually gonna make a difference. (AB Forklift Operator)

Dean's changes frontloaded accountability. He made sure each employee understood expectations then held them accountable. He communicated the why and was willing to listen to their concerns or questions.

Another common theme relating to the new management approach was patience. An operator shared a story about a problem peer:

One dude, he comes in mad every day. Dean says, "Let him walk it out, and he'll cool off. In 10 or 15 minutes, he'll go to work, and he'll work his ass off." And he does! (AB Forklift Operator)

The operator suggested that Dean's tolerance was beyond what he expected from a manager and that he did not think he could exhibit the same kind of patience if he was in charge, but he admired the effort:

If you can't make it with Dean; you can't make it. It is simple as that. He's trying to give everybody a shot. (AB Forklift Operator)

In Table 11 below, supplemental direct quotations from the transcribed interviews are listed that are evidence of the role leaders' communication played in employees'

perceptions of psychological safety. Employees cited poor communication practices, including deception and lack of follow-through, as common practices under the abusive leader. Notably, they reported effective sharing of information and clarity in the information communicated to them as welcome changes under the new supportive team.

**Table 11. Employee Quotations Reflecting the Effect of Leader Communication**

<b>Leader Behavior</b>	<b>Excerpts that captured communication’s effect on psychological safety</b>
Dysfunctional communication	<p>There are people in the management team that don’t know how to talk to people, and that’s a problem.</p> <hr/> <p>There’s not as much blame, deception, and deceit, and just straight lies to you.</p> <hr/> <p>They don’t know how to talk to other people. They don’t know how or because nobody’s ever shown them how to talk to people.</p> <hr/> <p>And then when your team, you know, the people under you see [leaders not following through] and then they will think, if he doesn't care and why should I?</p> <hr/> <p>They were always changing a rule every other day.</p>
Supportive communication	<p>The way he does things...it’s clear and structured</p> <hr/> <p>[Jill] listens to you, you know, she, she can see both sides and she's not, you know, she's neutral.</p> <hr/> <p>It’s easier to digest information if you have information.</p> <hr/> <p>[The SFM] is very reserved, calm and collected and that, that presence he carries is good.</p> <hr/> <p>There’s not as much blame, deception, and deceit, and just straight lies to you.</p> <hr/> <p>Even when it’s not a positive situation, he finds the positive in the negative situation.</p> <hr/> <p>Whether it’s something that they want to hear, even if it’s something that they don't want to hear, he’s transparent about it.</p>

Leader Behavior	Excerpts that captured communication's effect on psychological safety
	He's explained enough of the business that they understand their impact.
	It is communication, you know, working with each other and being a team, it's not so much of everyone for themselves. I think everybody's working together now.
	When people listen, it makes you want to do your job better because, you know, they take an interest in you as an individual.
	It is communication, you know, working with each other and being a team, it's not so much of, you know, everyone for themselves. I think everybody's working together now.

### **Felt ambiguity**

The final emergent theme was related to chronic turnover, change fatigue, issues with organizational structure, and inconsistent policy administration, all of which made it difficult for employees to find a consistent structural foothold and feel stable enough to develop psychological safety. Due to the increased CPC scrutiny, the local leadership team was so inundated with conference calls, new quality control and safety audits, as well as surprise visits from CPC that it was difficult to run the business, let alone focus on the employees.

### Chronic turnover

CPC's muscular vendor management approach might be short-sighted. AB's margins do not allow it to compete for the top talent. Its pay scale is in the bottom half of what can be found in the logistics park. As a result, the best talent is working elsewhere, and employees are easily lured away. When AB has resorted to hiring inexperienced operators, they have essentially become a farm system for the competition. AB trains

and certifies employees only to watch them move across the park as soon as the ink dries on the experience section of their resume. The chronic churn in employees significantly contributes to the location's poor performance and is likely costing both AB and CPC more in the long run.

This is a longstanding problem. More than a decade ago, when I was a manager at the facility, I completed a needs analysis as part of an independent study for my MBA program because I was frustrated by AB's chronic turnover. The distribution industry averaged 14.9% in voluntary turnover at the time. Our warehouse had a voluntary turnover rate of 71.2% in 2008. The total turnover rate for the industry was 24.4%, and our warehouse turned over 108.1% of its operational workforce (Bares, 2009). I did not believe that was sustainable then. During this research timeframe, the annual turnover rate had bloated to more than 300%. This created a constant resource strain for recruitment and training, and it was difficult to have any type of shift continuity. Work demands and increasing CPC expectations created an urgency to get people into functional roles:

I've been here almost four years and I think I personally was part of the last group that came in that got decent training. Um, anyone that came in after me, they were not trained well in any function. (AB Forklift Operator)

Overworked supervisors got burnt out and were often replaced with external hires who were little help to the staff because they didn't have the required functional skills, and there was no one with time to teach them. Because terminations are

confidential, the rumor mill generated a healthy distrust of management. Supervisors saw so many faces come and go that it was difficult to integrate new hires, let alone build relationships with them. At one point, the environment was so dysfunctional that a supervisor terminated the wrong employee because he mistook him for another new hire.

#### Change fatigue

Each successive facility manager and new supervisor put their own spin on workflow, protocols, and procedures. Employees struggled with continuity and hitting the mark on expectations, given that the target was in perpetual motion. This challenge was magnified under the spotlight of the 30/60/90-day turnaround plan, which included bringing in subject matter experts from all over the organization and from outside the company. Each of these well-intentioned experts had ideas and recommended additional process tweaks:

Most of these changes are things that we've tried before, and they didn't work then, but nobody is listening to us. (AB Supervisor)

An egregious example of an expert recommendation that went awry happened when a resource from the corporate office recommended taking down a large section of storage racking that was dedicated to completed orders waiting to ship. The vision was to make a parking area for forklifts and other equipment. However, there was no contingency plan for where to stage pallets that were waiting to be loaded. This created an Easter egg hunt effect as operators searched throughout the facility to find all of the components for their loads. As an illustration, one of the few holdovers

from my tenure approached me and asked for help. He had a 17-pallet load. He had 4 missing pallets that he had just spent 30 minutes looking for:

This should have been a 20-minute load. Now it's going to take me a couple of hours. They keep talking about all the money they are losing on overtime. Why not get people to do it right the first time? (AB Forklift Operator)

It took several days of diminished productivity before a new process was implemented to rectify this *ready, fire, aim* change.

#### Inconsistent policy administration

Due to the dynamic nature of the consumer product market's demand, the facility had adopted a bend but don't break approach. This was especially true around the end of each quarter when sales figures impacted CPC's stock price. Telling CPC "No!" was not an option, so sacrifices were often made to meet expectations. One veteran employee sardonically said this:

Like our rule, anything goes a quarter close. You know, last week it was a rule. This week you can get by with it because it's quarter close. (AB Forklift Operator)

These inconsistencies made it difficult to enforce policies and hold people accountable. If something is a priority (e.g., safety, inventory control, etc.), it must be a priority all of the time, not just when it is convenient. Also, as previously mentioned, the labor management system AB used to track employee productivity was administered inconsistently. It was viewed as unjust by both operators and supervisors. When the SFM joined the organization, he put an end to "anything goes

at quarter close” and put the LMS on hold until he (and everyone else) was confident in the system’s performance results as well as the process for administering discipline.

### Organizational structure

Historically, the corporate office had been very involved with the location’s management. That intensified as the location’s performance backslid over time. A long-tenured employee said the following:

I don’t think they’ll ever let anybody have any responsibility. I think this company will always be micromanaged from [the corporate office]. (AB Forklift Operator)

This began to change with the onboarding of the new VP of Operations, which allowed a senior leader to dive deep enough into supporting the site to understand the challenges it faced at a more granular level. This structural change created a communication conduit to a decision-maker, and it freed the company president to focus on strategy and organizational furtherance.

With this deeper level of insight, the warehouse was able to get approval for structural changes that helped the overwhelmed supervisory staff. The promotion of some exemplar employees to new shift lead roles made the operation more efficient.

One of these new leads contributed the following:

The management was spread too thin, but I also believe that, um, because of them being spread so thin that they, they lacked the thoroughness in everything that they were doing. When they brought

us leads on, it took all of the pressure off of the supervisors because we can relate better to the operators. (Operations Lead)

In addition to having these competent coaches on the floor to answer questions, the facility also revamped its new hire onboarding process. They transitioned to a mentor/mentee training system that allowed new hires to have a known resource to follow up with. Both of these structural changes created a resource for employees to go to without the risk of it being perceived as challenging authority, which mitigated their vulnerability and fostered psychological safety.

### ***Summary of Findings***

According to Chamberlain and Hodson (2010), “Toxic working conditions include interpersonal conditions, occupational conditions, and organizational conditions” (p. 456). Their model suggests key factors are supervisory conflict, lack of autonomy, and organizational chaos. The participants experienced all of these undermining conditions to a high degree. However, toxicity most often manifested in poor communication or communication-related behaviors like avoidance. Galford and Drapeau (2011) have suggested that loss of trust, which is closely related to psychological safety, often has “roots in incomplete communication about complicated situations” (p. 55), and that “trust is often lost due to inaction rather than the wrong action” (p. 215). This was especially relevant for the research participants as the chronic leadership churn, created by turnover in supervisor and manager roles, left the operation rudderless and the team waiting for direction. With the creation of the VP of Operations, the hiring of the SFM, and the promotion of Dean, the

distribution center’s leadership stabilized. The new regime also brought an employee-centric approach. They viewed employees as allies, not adversaries, and treated people with dignity and respect, not abuse and contempt. While four leader behaviors were key—inclusiveness, humility, authenticity, and accountability—the new team modeled all of the tenets of servant leadership. In **Error! Reference source not found.** below, I’ve listed the eight dimensions of leader behavior from the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), as well as a definition for each (Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, & Baggerly-Hinojosa, 2015, p. 86), and an example of its use by AB leaders from every level of the organization.

**Table 12. SLS Dimensions and Examples**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Empowerment	A motivational concept focused on enabling people and encouraging personal development.	The SFM showed patience with his team while they grew the skills to succeed in the new leadership paradigm
Accountability	Holding people accountable for performances that they can control.	The new regime enforcing safety, attendance, and performance policies
Standing back	The extent to which a leader gives priority to the interests of others by giving them the necessary support and credit.	Giving employees credit for their ideas. “That makes them feel like they're part of the solution instead of part of the problem.”
Humility	The ability to put one’s own accomplishments and talents in a proper perspective.	The SFM giving credit to his team and the employees for the turnaround.
Authenticity	Closely related to expressing the “True Self,” expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings.	Abner’s innocent authentic leadership created a pocket of psychological safety through inclusive relationships in an otherwise unsafe environment
Courage	The ability to take risks and try out new approaches to old problems.	The SFM hosting a Super Bowl party that had not been approved by the corporate office

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Forgiveness *	The ability to understand and experience the feelings of others, and the ability to let go of perceived wrongdoings by not carrying a grudge into other situations.	Dean's approach to the operator who showed up angry every day: "Let him walk it out, and he'll cool off. In 10 or 15 minutes, he'll go to work, and he'll work his ass off."
Stewardship	The willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and go for service instead of control and self-interest.	The corporate leadership letting go of control and making the commitment to create a VP of Operations role to better serve all stakeholders.

*Source:* Adapted from Green et al., 2015, p. 86

Note: \* Forgiveness was originally labeled "interpersonal acceptance" in this paper

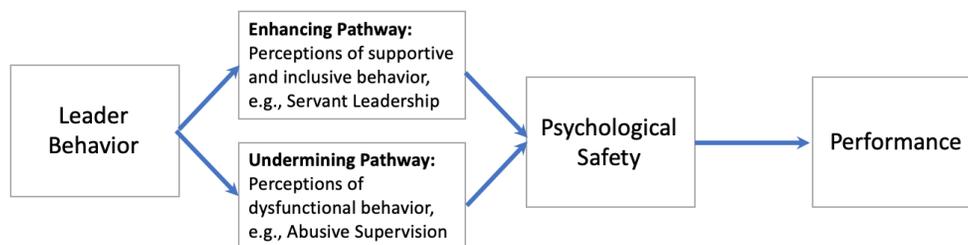
Over the course of three and a half months, I witnessed the consequences of abusive supervision and the subsequent rejuvenating effects of supportive leadership behaviors. Perhaps I was just witnessing a change in morale, job satisfaction, or engagement. Eleven of my 22 interview participants took the voluntary work culture survey I covered in Chapter Four. The survey included the psychological safety scale. Four of the participants were leaders, and the other seven were individual contributors.

The psychological safety scores of the seven individual contributors were examined (mean for all seven = 4.02, *SD* = 1.17). Four were designated as low in psychological safety and three as high in psychological safety based on a median split of their scores (*md* = 3.71). For the three designated as low in psychological safety, *M* = 3.21 and *SD* = .062. Those designated as high had a mean of 5.10 and *SD* of 0.70. While this is a small sample, it does give me confidence that my interviews reflect a wide range of employee perceptions and that psychological safety was truly emerging.

In the next chapter, I will use relevant literature to explain the findings that emerged from the data and the effects I witnessed of undermining and supportive behaviors on psychological safety. Specifically, I will explain why abusive leader behaviors created a toxic work climate and destroyed psychological safety, and why supportive leader behaviors created a healthy climate where psychological safety could emerge.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The first two chapters of this paper discussed the challenge of leadership and the literature relevant to a model where perceptions of psychological safety mediate the relationship between leader behavior and organizational performance (see Figure 11 **Error! Reference source not found.** below).



**Figure 11. Perceptions Affecting Psychological Safety (Repeated)**

The third chapter detailed the methodology I used to answer my research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety? The preceding chapter discussed the finding from my field research and how the employees' perceptions of their leader's behavior are related to, and may even move in tandem with, their perceptions of psychological safety. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings by integrating them in the literature. Theory is used for interpreting the data, explaining why these findings are unique, and describing how psychological safety impacts performance. Theory is also utilized for supporting my model and providing direction for building on the existing literature.

## ***Fostering Psychological Safety***

In this section, I will try to distill my research into a summary of what transpired with the warehouse research participants. Because this organization was in the midst of a transition from a climate driven by fear and abusive leader behaviors to a climate driven by supportive leader behaviors, my observations and interviews provide a unique perspective on the research question: What is the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions of psychological safety? For many reasons, some born out of business necessity and others out of antiquated leadership philosophy, the organization had a flawed relationship with its employees. The problem was exacerbated by external factors and an oppressive customer.

### **Business necessity**

Leaders often have to make choices that conflict. This tradeoff is known as the competing values framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 2011). Sometimes the choices come down to decisions like the following: Does a leader focus on profit or sustainability? Do they focus on quality or efficiency? Do they focus on productivity or employee morale? These decisions can have negative consequences for employees, (e.g., Do I buy equipment or miss payroll? Do I default on the loan or cut benefits? Do I fail to meet the customer's expectations or run mandatory overtime?). Leaders often make decisions and implement organizational policies that directly and indirectly affect followers (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Psychological safety is potentially susceptible to those distal leaders' decisions, and it is a key component for thriving employees, healthy work climates, and productive sustainable organizations.

Given all of the contextual factors that can affect psychological safety, maintaining it can be an enigma. With the research participants, it was exacerbated by the stress of chronic change. When Cataldo, Raelin, and Lambert (2009) looked at how organizational context and psychological safety impact change, they found that employees must maintain a sense of cohesion and not become lost in ambiguity, which can be achieved by balancing autonomy and structure. Their findings suggest that for change to become ingrained, employees must feel their status is safe throughout the process. The distribution center employees were chronically inundated by change at both the micro- and macro-levels. They dealt with changing leaders, changing peers, and changing processes, not to mention the tectonic shifts that have been happening as a result of the Amazon effect and VUCA world we live in.

### **Leadership in contrast**

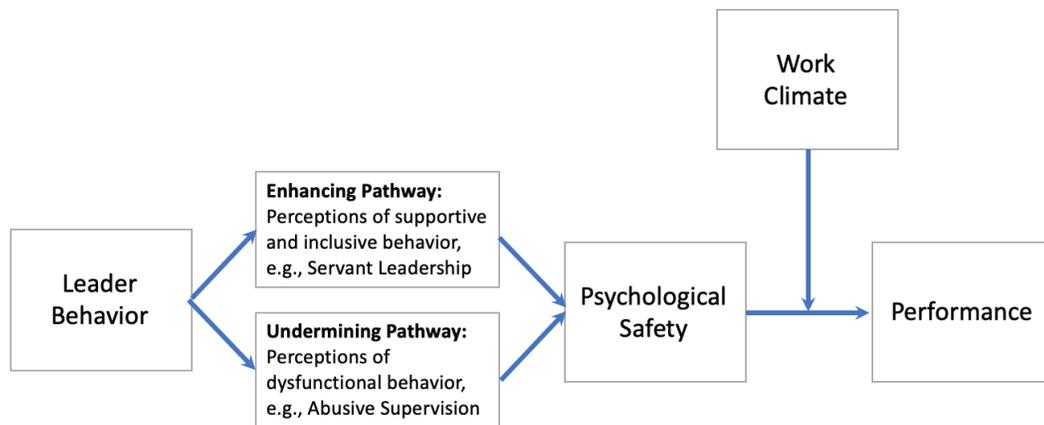
Whether it was the corporation's intent or not, at the boots-on-the-ground level, leaders were still using an antiquated, authoritarian management approach. Douglas McGregor (1960) expressed his views of human nature in two assumptions he saw in leaders. They are popularly known as Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X represents a pessimistic opinion of followers and assumes they are lazy and need to be micromanaged or punished to get work done. The abusive facility manager (AFM) falls into this category. Employees were not valued. They were used up and discarded, as evidenced by a turnover rate greater than 300%. In contrast, Theory Y leaders have an optimistic opinion of their people, and they assume they have good intentions. They take a more relational approach, which builds trust with followers

(McGregor, 1960). The new supportive facility manager (SFM) falls into this category.

A catalyst for psychological safety to emerge is the positive leader behaviors that build inclusive relationships between leaders and followers. On the other hand, negativity and dysfunctional behaviors destroy bonds with employees and followers' perceptions of psychological safety. Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is at the core of every relationship, and it is one of the most challenging things leaders do. According to Bakhtin (1981), "Language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's" (p. 293). Therefore, no matter your intent, good communication is 50% reliant on the receiver's interpretation. Followers are constantly engaged in the sensemaking process of interpreting a leader's words and deeds. In her paper, "Surviving Toxic Work Environments," Stalcup (2013) shared the best advice she ever received from a mentor: "Most people commit sins of omission not commission. They are not out to get you; they just aren't thinking about you" (p. 1145). Leaders must be cognizant that they are always on stage and proactively manage any potential for a perception reality disconnects because of the implications to employees' potentially fragile perceptions of psychological safety.

Through social mechanisms (e.g., social exchange, social learning, and social identity theories), employees develop shared beliefs, knowledge, and meaning as they observe

peers and the environment for clues about acceptable behavior and organizational values. These aggregate perceptions form the work climate through a sensemaking process. The organization's work climate then moderates the relationship between psychological safety and performance. In other words, the aggregate level of team psychological safety is represented in a positive or negative work climate, which functions like a valve that is encouraging or restraining productivity. This relationship is represented in Figure 12 below.



**Figure 12. A Model of Leader Behavior and Psychological Safety**

I believe the first half of this model helps fill the information gap around how psychological safety develops or is destroyed (Edmondson & Lei, 2014); the second half of the model shows that work climate is part of the reason psychological safety is a phenomenon that exists at the group level (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), which has implications for psychological safety affecting work performance.

If “Leadership is about one person (the leader) getting other people (the followers) to do something,” (Kort, 2008, p. 409), then I believe psychological safety is a lever that can spur action. Psychological safety has been defined as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking,” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). Brown and Leigh (1996) explained why psychological safety’s effect is substantial:

When employees perceive that the organization accommodates their psychological needs in the workplace, they are likely to respond by investing time and energy in the work of the organization. This leads to prediction of a direct positive relationship between psychological climate and employee effort. (p. 361)

Psychological safety functions like a yoke in an airplane. When the plane’s yoke is pulled back, the aircraft rises. When the yoke is pushed forward, the nose of the plane dips. In an organizational context, leaders move the yoke through relationships they create with followers and the signals their leader behaviors send. When leaders exhibit the kind of supportive behaviors that develop inclusive relationships, perceptions of psychological safety increase and the work climate improves. When leaders display dysfunctional behaviors, it has a detrimental effect on relationships with employees and the work climate because psychological safety is inhibited or destroyed.

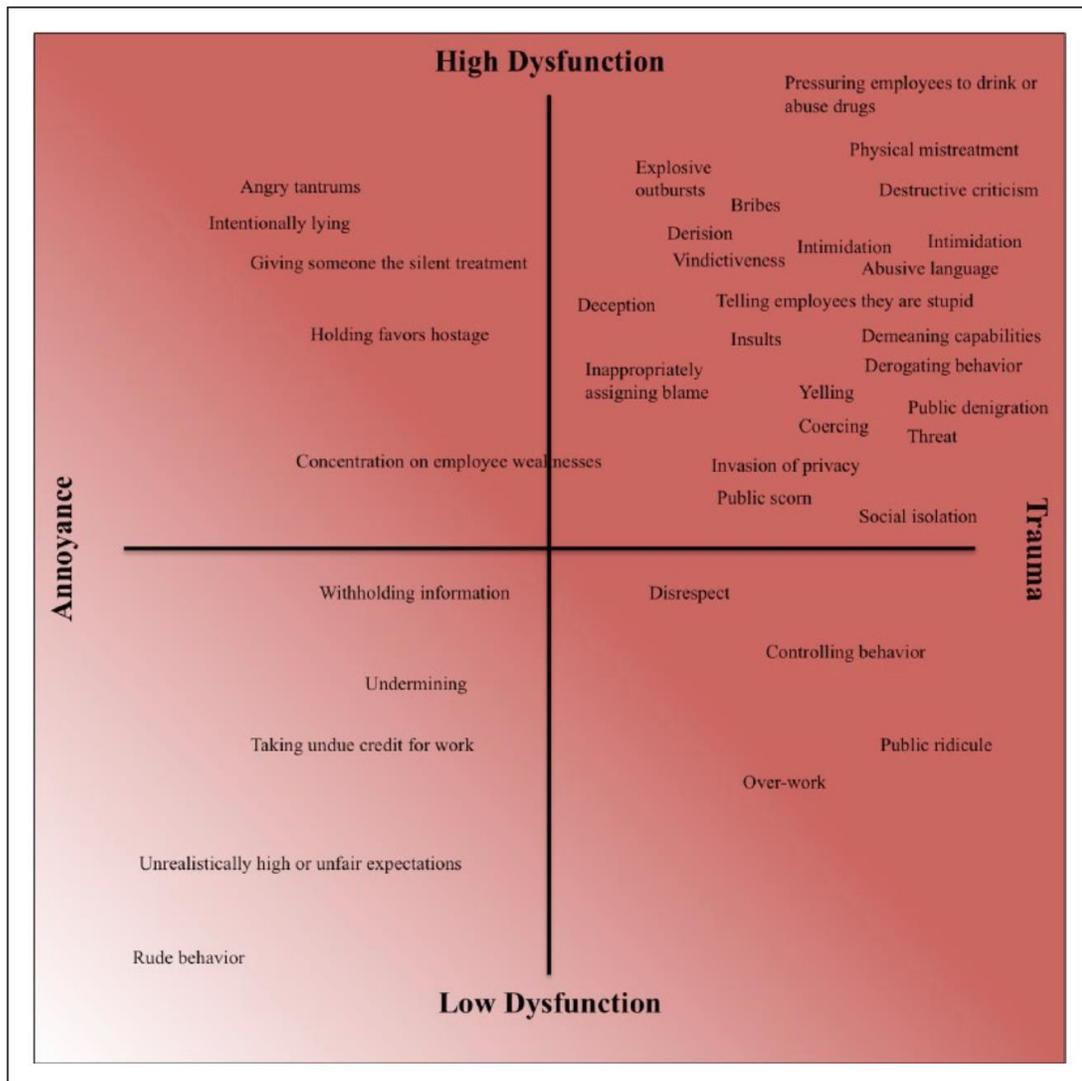
In the balance of this chapter, I will discuss how my findings regarding the specific dimensions of leadership affecting psychological safety are consistent with the existing literature. I will also revisit how the components of my model, which is one of this paper's primary contributions, fit into the literature in the model's context.

### ***Leader Behavior***

Given the earlier discussion on leader behavior in the literature review and how the contrasting Facility Manager's behaviors played out in the warehouse environment, it is not surprising that research supports the leader role as crucial in creating psychological safety. According to Edmondson (2004a), "Leader behavior sets a salient example for how to behave, and beliefs about how leaders will use their power is likely to affect psychological safety" (p. 15).

### **Abusive leader behaviors**

Research shows that a leader's negative actions and behaviors are more impactful than positive actions and behaviors (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, & Vohs, 2001). These powerful effects of negativity can only be overcome by a superior force of numbers of positive interactions (Cameron et al., 2011). Negative interactions create emotional responses in employees that are remembered more frequently and with more intensity than positive events (Dasborough, 2006).



Source: Adapted from Rose et al, 2015

**Figure 13. Visual Taxonomy of Dysfunctional Leader Behaviors**

In Figure 13, Rose et al. (2015) have attempted to detail a taxonomy of known dysfunctional leader behaviors that have been identified in the literature. The researchers outlined the level of dysfunctional behavior, from high to low, with the effect the behavior has on the employee.

### Trickle-down effect

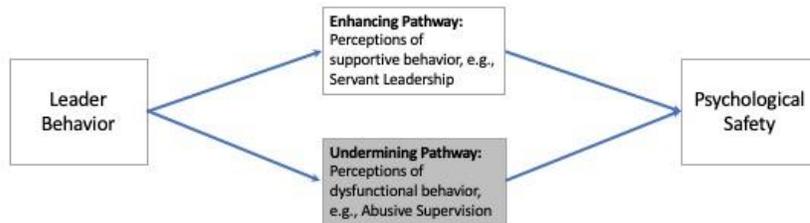
A significant challenge facing organizations is the nefarious way abusive leadership tends to trickle down. This cascading effect where toxic leaders abuse their supervisors and the supervisors mimic these behaviors with their own employees, has been identified by Mawritz et al. (2012). Nearly 70 years ago, Shartel (1951) suggested the best predictor of the leader's behavior is the behavior of the leader's boss. This phenomenon was a reality in my research from the period when the AFM was managing the warehouse. These cascading dysfunctional relationships can lead to employee deviance (Mawritz et al., 2012). Greenberg (1997) noted that when employees perceive injustice, they are more likely to engage in deviant behavior. Additionally, organizational citizenship behaviors are behaviors exhibited by employees that are beyond the scope of regular job duties; these are often unrecognized by the leaders and provide some value to the organization (Organ, 1988). When followers perceive supervisory abuse, they are less likely to carry out discretionary behaviors on behalf of the organization (Tepper, 2007). According to Rose et al. (2015), "A sort of 'double whammy' for the organization might be realized under a dysfunctional leader. First, OCBs are withheld and, second, counterproductive workplace behaviors are enacted" (p. 76).

The residual effects of an abusive leader may linger for years beyond the leader's tenure (Rose et al., 2015). A groupthink dynamic can also emerge that creates enduring communication and work climate problems for managers that are based on the results of prior leaders because of the enduring nature of fear-based memories

(Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). This should be particularly chilling for leaders when they consider research on communication and social networks. Social network theory looks at a group as the sum of all the individual relationships that comprise the whole (Roussin et al., 2016). According to Cross, Ernst, and Pasmore (2013), the key communication components of a network can be made of as little as five percent of the network. Therefore, a fraction of employees could be responsible for perpetuating an old reality and harming team psychological safety.

### **Justice theory**

Tepper's (2000) seminal work on abusive supervision established that employees' perceptions of abusive were a source of supervisory justice violation. Research indicates that implied contract violations like these "decrease employees' trust in supervisors, satisfaction with jobs, intentions to remain, and perceived obligations to organizations and increase behaviors such as revenge, sabotage, and aggression" (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 346). Dekker (2012) suggested that psychological safety is a key component of a just culture, which would imply that when employees perceive injustice, it negatively affects their psychological safety. Organizational justice reflects the extent employees feel valued. It evolved from fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), which suggests employees keep a running tally and make subjective (van den Bos, 2003) cognitive comparisons of supervisory behavior (Klaussner, 2014) that can result in a perception of being slighted and a heightened sense of injustice. This development is modeled by the undermining pathway in Figure 14 **Error! Reference source not found.** below.



**Figure 14. Behavioral Undermining Pathway**

At times, these affronts can seem benign, but to the employees, the perceived slight is real. Multiple people complained about having limited smoke breaks, but there seemed to be a different standard for supervisors. One operator added the following comment:

I don't think it's right that if I go smoke a cigarette, I'm getting written up. But the only reason you see me out there smoking a cigarette is because you are out there smoking a cigarette. You know what I mean? It's like a pot calling the kettle black.

In other instances, the injustice seemed more legitimate and even systemic. The message from multiple leaders, including at least two experts from AB's corporate headquarters, was putting the onus on the employees to manage their peers. On several occasions, when people would complain about the amount of overtime, the

stock company answer seemed to be some version of “if everybody was pulling their weight, we wouldn’t be in the position to need overtime.” While the statement may have been factual, and it may have been intended to ramp up positive peer pressure, it was not perceived that way. After one of these encounters, I asked the employee about the conversation. He said that he had a family crisis and did not have arrangements for his son on the weekend for his mandatory overtime shift. He was going to have to call off and take the progressive discipline for attendance:

I do my work. I’m one of their best pickers. You’d think they could help me out. But no. What, now I’ve got to do your job too? These dudes got no credibility with me.

To the employee, it was an abdication of responsibility and a breach of contract as it related to roles.

### **Supportive leader behaviors**

Senior leaders also influence organizational potency through the behaviors they display while executing their roles (R. E. Quinn, 1988). They do this, in part, by setting the tone for communication that trickles down through the organization (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). When I began my observations in November, shift start-up meetings were one-directional and filled with threats and bad news. By the time I concluded my observational research in February, the tone had completely changed. The meetings were more of a dialog and focused on information sharing and support. This transition mirrored, in both style and timing, the opposing communication styles of the facility managers. Leaders often need to leverage

different tools when faced with complex choices. Research shows that the leader's task-focused behaviors have a direct impact on firm performance, while their relationship-focused behaviors are related to employees' attitudes, which indirectly impact a firm's performance (Wang et al., 2011). This phenomenon frequently played out during the implementation of the 30/60/90-day plan. An expert would implement a process from another facility, like optimizing a pick line's product slotting, but the change would fall short of the anticipated performance bump. However, those productivity gains were often realized as the work climate improved and employees perceived more psychological safety. According to Hooijberg and Quinn (1992), leaders are cognitively complex and must utilize a diverse set of skills. They must have the ability to effectively wear multiple hats, and in some cases, these roles are at odds (Hooijberg & Quinn, 1992). When the facility manager decided to act autonomously and host an employee Super Bowl party, he was balancing being a good steward of the facility budget and the customer's supply chain with being empathetic to his employees. He was balancing his task and relational skills. This behavioral complexity allows a leader to engage all stakeholders, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy, which enhances their ability to communicate and affect change (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000).

### **Inclusive leadership**

Leaders, regardless of their hierarchical role, have an inherent disadvantage because of their positional power, and the perception their role may create in a follower's mind. The innate distrust of authority and a leader's ability to administer rewards and

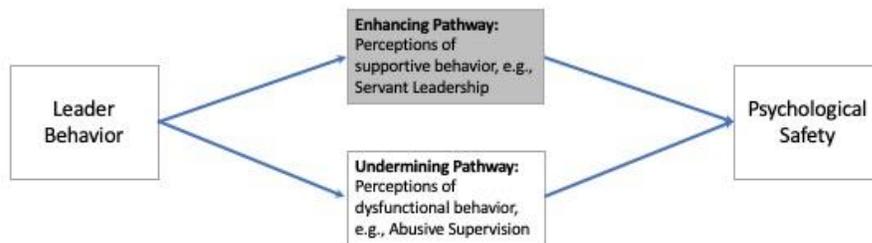
punishments may inhibit communication (Detert & Burris, 2007) because employees are likely to only speak up when the benefits outweigh the risks (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). A leader's perceived accessibility is key to a subordinate feeling safe to speak up (Edmondson, 1999), as is the leader taking time to consider ideas, and employees feeling like the leader taking action is an actual possibility (Milliken et al., 2003).

Edmondson (2004b) called out three leader behaviors as antecedents that are likely to enhance psychological safety:

- Accessibility, which involves leaders making themselves approachable.
- Inviting input, which involves seeking others' opinions and being open to discussion.
- Modeling openness and fallibility, which involves owning mistakes and setting an example.

Nemhard and Edmondson (2006) labeled these three leader behaviors *inclusive leadership*, which is defined as “words and deeds by a leader or leaders that indicate an invitation and appreciation for others' contributions” (p. 947). In a study that investigated leader inclusiveness, psychological safety, and employees learning from failure, the findings showed leader inclusiveness was positively associated with reported levels of psychological safety, and it enabled performance, with psychological safety mediating the relationship (Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012). In yet another inclusive behavior study, Carmeli and Gittell (2009) found three components of high-quality relationships—shared goals, shared

knowledge, and mutual respect—enabled psychological safety to flourish. None of these inclusive behaviors were modeled by the abusive regime in the warehouse. However, these are the type of exemplar behaviors employees referenced when describing what the SFM and the new leadership team did that allowed psychological safety to emerge. These behaviors are modeled by the enhancing pathway in Figure 15 **Error! Reference source not found.** below.



**Figure 15. Behavioral Enhancing Pathway**

Interestingly, I think psychological safety was taking root even before the regime change. Abner, the lone sentry, was hired toward the end of the abusive facility manager’s reign. Research shows that psychological safety can emerge in microclimates within unsafe teams (Roussin et al., 2016). Abner’s authentic innocent

approach, reflected in the following passage, built inclusive relationships with his team:

I mean, everybody's a person at the end of the day. I mean, you just gotta find the middle ground with everybody. (Abner, AB Supervisor)

This created followers out of subordinates. People worked for him out of respect, not fear. He created a pocket of psychological safety in an unsafe environment and was a harbinger of things to come.

### **Servant leadership**

There are many ways to categorize leader behaviors, but the model of servant leadership, proposed by van Dierendonck (2011), is unique within the literature because it bifurcates leadership behaviors into distinct categories: “servant” behaviors and “leader” behaviors. This model takes the servant/leader paradox, which has been criticized as generating “semantic noise” (Northouse, 2016, p. 240) and turns it into a strength. The additions of leader behaviors (i.e., accountability, courage, and forgiveness) make this servant leadership model more robust and more accurately reflect the real-world challenges facing leaders. The SFM’s approach at the distribution center exemplified the leader behaviors identified by van Dierendonck (2011). For example, he developed a new standard of accountability, demonstrated courage when he hosted an unauthorized Super Bowl party, and showed forgiveness in the form of patience with the supervisory staff as they struggled with the new leadership paradigm and increased expectations.

Ultimately, both “servant” and “leader” behaviors are about building relationships and creating a healthy work climate, which has a significant impact on organizational outcomes. Servant leadership is about helping followers to self-actualize, find satisfaction in their work, and become more effective (van Dierendonck, 2011), but leading is also about doing hard things, having difficult conversations, and holding people accountable. While it may seem counterintuitive, one of van Dierendonck’s (2011) leader behavior dimensions—accountability—was as effective as the servant behaviors in the qualitative data at creating a psychologically safe work climate. The logic is that leader behaviors will create conditions with clear expectations and perceived organizational justice will be experienced through the equitable treatment of all. Also, conditions are created where learning from failure is encouraged and celebrated, not punished.

Research on autocratic leadership, which is defined as “the centralization of decision-making and directive power in a single dominant leader” (De Hoogh, Greer, & Den Hartog, 2015, p. 687), supports why this phenomenon may take place. Autocratic leadership has been shown to facilitate team functioning in some contexts, and, at times, it may even benefit psychological safety by removing ambiguity and providing structure, which satisfies followers’ desire for predictability and safety (De Hoogh et al., 2015). While the SFM was the antithesis of an autocratic, domineering leader, his firm and consistent style removed ambiguity and created a sense of security for his employees.

### Accountability

In my interviews, across all levels of AB Logistics, the need for accountability was frequently cited. In hindsight, I wonder if everyone was asking for the same thing. Accountability is a socially construed reality (Orbuch, 1997) based on an individual's subjective feelings (Hall et al., 2003). It is not a mandate by someone in power or easily measurable (Hall et al., 2003). As a result, employees may report incongruencies relating to what it means to be held accountable (Tetlock, 1985). Often accountability has a negative connotation and is associated with disciplinary actions. Research on its effect has been mixed. For example, Fandt (1991) found that employees who were held accountable performed better than workers who were not held accountable.

Other researchers have shown that accountability increased anxiety (Hall et al., 2003), led to reduced voice behaviors (Van Hiel & Schittekatte, 1998), and reduced prosocial behavior (Mitchell, Hopper, Daniels, Falvy, & Ferris, 1998). Given the vagueness around accountability, I think what the SFM brought to the organization (that was attributed to accountability) was a sense of cognitive structure clarity, clear realistic performance expectations, and an understanding that there are consequences for the actions that are within an individual's control. When he took action, it was impartial. His accountability behavior reminds me of a Robert Ingersol (1881) quotation: "In nature, there are neither rewards nor punishments—there are consequences."

## ***Vital Communication***

The goal of communication in every healthy relationship should be to have a dialogue. In the absence of psychological safety, communication in organizations risks becoming a monologue, or what Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) called “defensive silence” (p. 166). After years of abusive leadership, this is what was happening at AB. The relationship had deteriorated to one-directional communication, which eventually became part of the work climate as employees felt no one was listening and resigned to their fate. “Repeated episodes of fear-driven silence can eventually lead to ‘habituated silence’ that may resemble resignation or acquiescence but is actually a manifestation of fear’s long shadow at work” (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009, p. 176). The researchers also suggested that employees may get in such a rut that they forget that contributing is an option (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Employees, when faced with stress and threats, embrace avoidance tactics, according to Tepper et al. (2009). Abusive supervision predicts employees’ emotional exhaustion and inhibits voice behaviors. (Xu et al., 2015). This pattern of avoidance and exhaustion was present with both supervisory staff and employees as a result of the abusive manager’s behaviors.

## **Conservation of resources theory**

Conservation of resource theory helps explain what was happening with the warehouse employees who were chronically exposed to abuse. The theory suggests that employees try to collect and protect their resources (Hobfoll, 1989). To preserve their limited resources and mitigate psychological discomfort, employees adopt

avoidant or passive strategies (Tepper et al., 2009). Emotionally exhausted subordinates often reduce their effort and have a detrimental effect on morale (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). Once they reached a point of depletion, silence allowed them to conserve their remaining resource (Hobfoll, 1989). This silence, a passive intentional counterproductive work behavior, is a huge impediment to individual and organizational performance (Bolton, Harvey, Grawitch, & Barber, 2012).

### **Employee voice**

Even under normal circumstances, when leaders are not exhibiting abusive behaviors, employees utilizing their voice is tenuous. “One of the most fundamental challenges organizations face is how to manage the interpersonal threats inherent in employees admitting ignorance or uncertainty, voicing concerns and opinions, or simply being different” (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 39). This is why it was so impactful when AB went to a mentor-mentee training model and created the role of working lead. It created a safer place for employees to ask questions and provide feedback.

Psychological safety mediates the relationship between a leader’s behavior and the employee’s decision to contribute their thoughts or remain silent (Detert & Burris, 2007). In an abusive climate, like AB’s, even the simple acts of approaching a leader to ask for help or making a suggestion can be perceived as challenging authority (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). The new regime’s inclusive behaviors began to mitigate those employee fears:

They actually ask us if we have any kind of input, and they don’t make you feel bad about it. (AB Forklift Operator)

### **A leader's role in promoting employee voice**

Unfortunately, not everyone experiences the freedom to speak candidly. "Giving a voice to all people is the foundation of an organization that is willing to experiment and learn. But, in fact, whistle-blowers, creative deviants, and other such original voices routinely get smashed and silenced in organizational life" (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 129). Employee voice behavior has been defined as a constructive challenge (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) suggested that when employees make a conscious choice to speak up, it is an extra-role behavior and should not be viewed as a dissenting voice but rather as a positive. It takes courage for employees to speak up. Detert and Burris (2007) suggested that because this discretionary effort to speak up risks being viewed as subversive, leaders are key to removing barriers that inhibit communication and can promote employee voice by guaranteeing there will not be negative consequences for individuals who take the risk. Additionally, a leader's openness to change influences an employee's motivation to share ideas and feedback (Edmondson, 2003). The new regime modeled these open behaviors according to an employee,

They're open to listening to the recommendations, and they're not stuck in the old ways. (AB Forklift Operator)

Detert and Burris (2007) found management openness to be the most influential leader behavior for promoting employee voice. It stands to reason that these open behaviors create a scenario where employees perceive less risk to their welfare and are more likely to engage in voice behavior (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). An

organization's Human Resources practices and the organizational structure have also been shown to impact employee voice (Milliken et al., 2003). However, "even where large groups of employees come to share perceptions about the overall environment for speaking up, it is unclear which leaders and/or which organizational structures and policies have contributed most to these perceptions" (Detert & Treviño, 2010, p. 251).

Attributions of behaviors that shut down or encourage voice are either direct or indirect, according to Detert and Trevino (2010). They reveal that the direct influences are generally attributed to the follower's immediate boss from firsthand interactions. However, the indirect influences are frequently attributed to leaders above their supervisor in an organization's hierarchy, like in the distribution center where the abusive manager's tyrant behavior affected employees down the chain of command (Detert & Treviño, 2010). This is another example of the Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) vicarious acquisition of fears phenomenon. I documented this symptom of an unhealthy climate when I asked an employee, "What was it about the boss that made it difficult to feel like you could speak freely or go to them with an idea?"

Because of the, I guess, feedback that I received from other employees. Um, how they will make them feel. (AB Customer Service Employee)

The abusive manager was the root cause of much of the communication breakdown by directly abusing his supervisory staff and the indirect impact those actions had on everyone else. Research has suggested it is not uncommon for employees to avoid

communication and other acts of vulnerability because of leaders above their immediate boss (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Ultimately, an organization's ability to mitigate counterproductive silence by encouraging employee upward voice is a key indicator of psychological safety and team effectiveness. Teams are more effective when they get input from all members, and psychological safety is evident when the team welcomes the ideas of people at the margins (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Because employee voice is often viewed unconstructively, Ford and Ford (2009) advised leaders to learn to recognize differing opinions and resistance as a counteroffer, not a challenge. They go on to suggest that a subordinate's pushback is often a symptom of followers being in an information vacuum. The warehouse employees were chronically left without the necessary information, which created ambiguity, anxiety, and limited their ability to perform.

### **Transparency**

Vogelgesang (2008) described transparency as a function of how leaders interact and share information. She suggested leaders need to be clear about why decisions are made and be open to receiving feedback as well as giving it. Ultimately, because employees are constantly engaged in a sensemaking process, she suggested leaders need to be aware that their actions may speak louder than their words if the two behaviors are not aligned. Transparency also relates to whether or not the information is disseminated widely to all stakeholders (Vogelgesang & Crossley, 2006). As the new facility manager assumed the helm, his team brought openness and transparency

to the facility. Historically, the employees were in an information vacuum. The new dayshift operations manager explained in the following:

[Employees] have to have a clear understanding of what the expectations are. That's the first thing. Then you have to get them to understand the business. When I run my startup meetings now, I talk about [how many orders we've picked, and how many we have left], projected volumes for the remainder of the week to ask for volunteer overtime. Then I tell them they dictate the tempo. So now they're invested. They can see the tie between individual performance and things like OT. (Dayshift Ops Manager)

From the employees' point of view, the shift to a transparent approach was key to the turnaround:

You're eight minutes into your shift, and you were already defeated when you leave the meeting, instead of that, he's coming and saying, well this is bad, but this is why it's bad. It's easier to relate. It's easier to digest information if you have information. (AB Forklift Operator)

Leadership research has shown that in times of crisis, like what the warehouse faced with the CPC-mandated 30/60/90-day turnaround plan, how a leader behaves and communicates can establish the foundation for future trust in the leader (Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001):

[Transparency allows subordinates] to know what the leader values and stands for, and that the leader understands who they are as well. Furthermore, if such insights reveal high levels of congruence between the attributes, values, and aspirations of both parties, the level of trust will deepen. (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004, p. 811)

This trust was critical to building relationships that fostered psychological safety and rebuilding two-way communication in the warehouse because people's willingness to

share information is based on interpersonal connections (Lawler, Mohrman, & Benson, 2001).

## ***Felt Organizational Ambiguity***

### **Perceived organizational support**

Employees are sensitive to how the organization treats them. This idea of perceived organizational support is part of the organizational support theory literature (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), and it is defined as employees' "general beliefs concerning how much the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Rhoades, Eisenberger & Armeli, 2001, p. 825). These perceptions have profound consequences on employees' outlook and behaviors (Rupp, 2011).

Perceived support is paramount to creating a climate that promotes psychological safety. In contrast, when employees do not feel supported, perceptions of psychological safety fade (Singh, Shaffer, & Selvarajan, 2018). In an informal conversation, an employee illustrated this lack of psychological safety and support when they commented,

Why bother speaking up. Nothing will get done, or somehow I'll be the one who ends up getting in trouble. (AB Forklift Operator)

In the presence of support, employees are more likely to exhibit voice behaviors and feel compelled to contribute by speaking their minds (Singh et al., 2018). From an employee's point of view, an organization that would give authority to an abusive leader or fails to take corrective action when a leader displays dysfunctional behaviors creates a scenario where perceived organizational support is negatively

affected (Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013). Perceived organizational support is an antecedent for psychological safety (Singh et al., 2018). Results of a meta-analysis conducted by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) suggest perceived organizational support is positively associated with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, positive mood at work, job involvement, in-role performance, extra-role performance towards the organization, and desire to remain with the organization. In a psychologically safe climate, employees are more engaged and likely to embed with the organization because of a good job fit (Singh et al., 2018).

Organizational support theory suggests followers tend to blur the line between actions of a leader and actions of the organization (Levinson, 1965). Therefore, it is important to consider how organizational structures and actions may affect employee perceptions, because employees who strongly identify their leader with the organization often attribute that individual's behavior to the organization itself (Shoss et al., 2013). How employees identify with their leader also impacts employee turnover intentions, which was a major Human Resources challenge facing AB Logistics. Psychological safety and the work climate play vital roles in employees feeling secure enough to bond with an organization. Singh et al. (2018) found that relational forms of social support, like perceived support from coworkers and supervisors, play a direct role in employees connecting to the organization, but the

organizational form of social support has an indirect effect on employees embedding in the organization through psychological safety.

Research also suggests that the organization's configuration plays a role in the type of environment employees encounter. A rigid organizational structure that employs micromanagement and centralized decision making may facilitate an environment where dysfunctional leadership thrives (Aryee et al., 2008). However, a contrasting organizational style may help mitigate abusive behaviors. "An organic structure, and corresponding culture, rich in elements that support employee empowerment and decentralized decision making could abate the occurrence of dysfunctional leadership behaviors altogether" (Rose et al., 2015, p. 78). An example of this playing out can be seen in AB's deployment of its labor management system. The system was intended to be a carrot and recognize high achievers with bonuses and provide baselines for all employees to have clarity on expectations. In reality, it became a stick for a despotic leader to micromanage his staff.

According to Shoss et al. (2013), having an awareness of dysfunctional leader behaviors, taking action when problems occur, and consistent messaging may be enough to positively impact the work climate. Taking these actions also increases the likelihood that employees would attribute the abusive behavior to its source and not the organization (Shoss et al., 2013). Because AB Logistics failed to take these actions, it paid a steep price for being slow to oust the abusive manager.

## ***Work Climate***

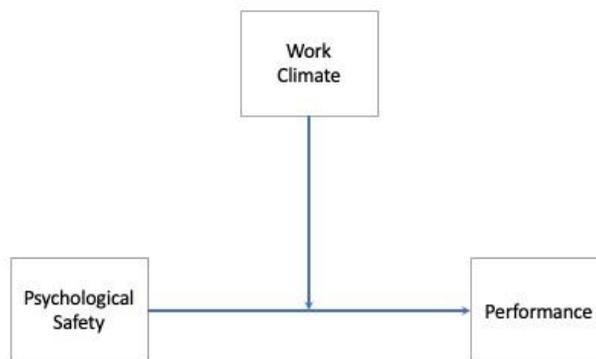
While the role of the organization is critical for creating a psychologically safe work climate, the specifics of what influence perception can be elusive. This might be because what is often visible to an organization is the collective impression of the group, while the actual drivers of a work climate are determined and hidden at an individual level. The psychological climate is a function of people's sensemaking process, which suggests that individuals may perceive identical situations differently (Jame, Hater, Gent, & Bruni, 1978). Psychological safety is defined as a "sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up...it describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). This observation of the role climate plays became particularly relevant as my research progressed and AB Logistics developed positive momentum. Edmondson and Lei (2014) suggested that psychological safety is most relevant at the group level. Edmondson (1999) has reasoned that people who work closely together will have comparable perceptions of psychological safety because groups are exposed to the same experiences.

If a climate is "a shared and enduring inference (attribution) about or perception of the psychologically important intangibles of the work environment," (Ashforth, 1985, p. 841), then it is difficult to distinguish between where psychological safety ends and work climate begins. It seems that a team high in psychological safety would be a

type of work climate—a psychologically safe work climate. Therefore, a team low in psychological safety would be a non-psychologically safe work climate. These two environments would be at contrasting end of a continuum. Depending on the types of behavior a leader displayed, it could potentially be labeled a hostile work climate. A hostile climate is defined as the following:

[A] consistent acrimonious, antagonistic, and suspicious feelings within the work group. A hostile climate in a work group is an affective construct that occurs at the group level of analysis, is a characteristic of the group, and is a group-level phenomenon. (Mawritz et al., 2012, p. 332)

That is what I believe was happening in the warehouse. The work climate was moderating the relationship between psychological safety and performance, which is modeled in Figure 16 **Error! Reference source not found.** below.



**Figure 16. Work Climate as a Moderator**

The psychological climate represents how the organizational environment is perceived and interpreted by its employees (James et al., 1978). Leader and follower behaviors are conditioned by the work climate where their relationship plays out, and by the effects of recurring misinterpreted interactions, that may eventually intensify (Chan & McAllister, 2014).

Kahn (1990) defined psychological safety as the employee's "sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (p. 708). Brown and Leigh (1996) attempted to capture Kahn's (1990) psychological safety and meaningfulness dimensions, which described the climate factors that affected whether employees engaged in their work. They consider six dimensions of psychological climate:

- The extent to which management is perceived as flexible and supportive.
- Role clarity.
- Freedom of self-expression.
- The employee's perceived contribution toward organizational goals.
- Adequacy of recognition received from the organization.
- Job challenge.

Each dimension is theorized to indicate how psychologically safe and meaningful the employee perceives their work climate (Brown & Leigh, 1996):

Dimensions of climate that are likely to be indicative of psychological safety include the extent to which: (a) management is perceived as flexible and supportive and employees feel they have control over their

work and the methods they use to accomplish it, (b) organizational roles and norms are perceived as clear, and (c) employees feel free to express their true feelings and core aspects of their self-concepts in their work roles. (Brown & Leigh, 1996, p. 360)

Research has shown that a psychologically safe climate has a critical impact on the performance of teams in diverse environmental settings (Bradley et al., 2012; Edmondson, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Walters & Diab, 2016). This is, in part, because “effective teaming requires its members to be comfortable in some uncomfortable situations like not being right, asking for help, or admitting mistakes” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 156). In today’s VUCA world, those uncomfortable situations are ubiquitous.

Often, work climate and work culture are used synonymously. However, researchers do draw distinctions. Organizational climate is the shared perceptions of—and the meaning attached to—the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience, the behaviors they observe and the tone set for the organization (Ostroff & Atwater, 2003; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Organizational culture is the shared understanding, values, and beliefs that are embedded in a workplace and are passed along to new employees through stories about how the organization evolved (Schein, 2010). Climate is the descriptions or perceptions of what happens, and culture explains why things happen (Schneider, 2000). Organizational culture and climate both focus on employees’ shared meaning around aspects of the organizational context (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2011). Considering these constructs is

important because they afford a framework for understanding the effect of leader behavior.

A work climate is more tangible than its culture. People sense the climate through social and symbolic processes like aesthetics, employees' mood and attitudes, and the perception they get from how people are being treated (Schneider et al., 2011).

Understanding work climate is critical to organizations because it is the employees' perceptions of the environment, rather than the reality of the environment, that affects their attitudes and behaviors (James et al., 1978). How the boss exerts influence determines the employees' level of perceived psychological safety and the type of work environment that is created. A work climate then molds behavior by setting the tone for what an organization expects (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). Climate is an individual perception of the organizational context, and culture is more of a collective impression (Martin, 2002), including symbolism about organizational values and beliefs (Hatch, 2011).

### **Social mechanisms and collective perceptions**

Many of the constructs covered in this paper (e.g., psychological safety, employee voice, servant leadership, abusive supervision) explain the pathway from individual experience to group perception using social theoretical perspectives. Employees' perceptions of aspects of the organizational context evolve based on sensemaking as the employees assess their interactions and observe peers and the environment for clues about acceptable behavior and organizational values and norms. Three primary

theories have been utilized in the relevant research to help explain how employees comprehend these connections and how a shared understanding evolves: Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Because these theories show up in multiple constructs in my research, I have elected to address them here, rather than having them littered throughout the paper.

#### Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), and it suggests people look at relationships through a subjective cost-benefit analysis lens. Both parties remain satisfied as long as the relationship continues to be mutually beneficial (Blau, 1964). Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) suggested that when a leader treats people fairly, employees are likely to think about their relationship with the leader in terms of social exchange rather than economic exchange and may reciprocate fair treatment by engaging in constructive behavior like upward communication. Perceived justice violations are an example of how social exchange theory is applied in research. When employees feel mistreated, they often try to correct the relational balance by withholding discretionary effort (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011).

#### Social identity theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explores how individuals identify as a group member and their “tendency to define who they are in terms of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’” (Priesemuth et al., 2014, p. 1517). Social identity theory has been used to account

for changes like Greenleaf's (1991) transformational argument that followers become servant leaders themselves.

### Social learning theory

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) has been used to explain how followers will emulate the behavior of leaders to ensure conformity to expected norms. A role-modeling process takes place when followers view leaders as credible, and the employees will begin to mirror the leader's thoughts, ideals, and behaviors. For example, Mawritz et al. (2012) applied social learning to develop their trickle-down model of abusive supervisor behavior.

Researchers have cautioned that focusing on a single theory can be myopic because some features may be overlooked due to the boundaries of a theory (Osborn et al., 2002). Taking individuals' experiences, feelings, and values and aggregating them into a group-level phenomenon is a complicated sensemaking process. Understanding how the process works is even more complicated with a tenuous construct like psychological safety. Edmondson theorizes that the group-level construct "takes time to build, through familiarity and positive responses to displays of vulnerability and other interpersonally risky actions, but can be destroyed in an instant through a negative response to an act of vulnerability" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 38). It is reasonable to assert that some combination of these social mechanisms (i.e., social exchange theory, social learning theory, and social identity theory) plays a role in how followers interpret leaders' behaviors and its effect on psychological safety.

Multiple researchers have documented these mediation processes (Mawritz et al., 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Peng, Schaubroeck, & Li, 2014; Priesemuth et al., 2014; Wo, Ambrose, & Schminke, 2015).

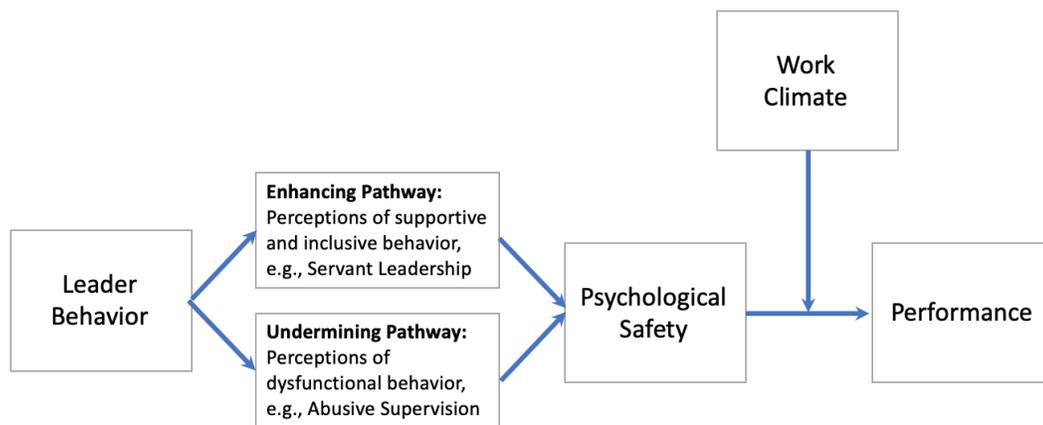
### **Climate change**

The leader was once the unquestionable authority figure in business, but a rebalancing of power has altered those traditional structures, according to Kellerman (2014) in the book *The End of Leadership*. Today, due to technology and interconnected society, she has noted that followers have the type of power and influence that was traditionally only available at the top level of an organization. Streamlined communication can mobilize messages and masses. Transparency is the expectation, and followers are emboldened and hold leaders to higher standards, according to Kellerman. Employees expect leaders to persuade or recommend, not mandate. The relationship has evolved from the days of Fredrick Taylor's (1911) command and control scientific method to more of a symbiotic structure where merit and trust—not positional authority—dictates a leader's influence. Kellerman (2014) suggested a leader's effectiveness and ethics influence direct reports more than a title. She proposed that followers are motivated for two reasons: They follow because they must, due to fear of reprisal, or, better yet, because they have been inspired. This assertion affirms the enhancing and undermining pathways between a leader's behavior and an employee's perception of psychological safety. This is tremendously important for organizations to understand because the type of rapport that develops between leaders and followers has business consequences. Baer and Frese (2003)

have established that psychological safety is not only a team-level construct, as defined by Edmondson (1999), but also a construct that affects the entire organization. Avolio, Waldman, and Einstein (1988) have suggested there is a considerable relationship between the leadership behavior existing in an organization and a firm's bottom-line performance. Ultimately, the relationships leaders develop and the type of work cultures they create have a business impact.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter, I showed how my findings regarding the specific dimensions of leadership affecting psychological safety are supported by and build on existing literature. I also showed how literature supports the components of my model and how they fit within the model's context. The first half of this model contributes to the literature by showing how leader behavior affects psychological safety's emergence or deterioration, and the second half of the model affirms the importance of psychological safety at the group level construct because of its relationship to work climate, which affects work performance.



**Figure 17. A Model for Fostering Psychological Safety**

Just as employees utilize a sensemaking process for understanding their environment, leaders, too, take cues from their surroundings. AB Logistics had a long history of taking employees for granted and utilizing a top down management approach. This culture had been codified for years. The expectations of how to behave were not so much in the form of directives. It was more covert. As a former leader at AB, I was never told to make people’s lives miserable, but I was expected to run mandatory 72-hour work weeks. I was never told to be uncaring, but I was expected to enforce a no-fault attendance policy, which did not account for family emergencies that left workers without childcare. It took courage to buck these historical norms. It helped when two like-minded people joined the organization in senior roles (i.e. V.P. of Operations and Facility Manager) and that they were aligned in advocating for an employee-centric approach. As a result, I witnessed a shift in the work climate that germinated through changes in the way leaders behaved. An inclusive leadership

approach built dyadic relationships between leaders and followers. These relationships fostered individual psychological safety, and social mechanism helped aggregate psychological safety at the group level. This manifested in a changing work climate that had a positive effect of the location's performance.

## **Chapter 7: Implications for Future Research and Practice**

### ***Impact and Significance of the Study***

This study is unique in that it took place during an unanticipated transformation where a work climate shifted in real-time during the research process. It supports the idea that leadership behavior affects perceptions of psychological safety, which is important to researchers and leaders interested in understanding the antecedents of organizational outcomes. Additionally, psychological safety is often perceived as incompatible with accountability (Edmondson, 2002). This study shows that accountability was key to employees perceiving their environment as being psychologically safe.

### ***Limitations***

Something went wrong in the data collection process with the instrument that was to be given to the staff to assess psychological safety and their impressions of eight dimensions of leader behavior. This creates an asterisk next to the survey results, even though I am confident in their accuracy as presented. Additionally, the survey data were collected at a single point in time. I was going to administer a second survey and collect key performance indicators (employee turnover rates, performance metrics, profitability, etc.), but the COVID 19 pandemic foiled those plans. The warehouse ships consumer products that are in high demand during a health crisis. The facility's volume more than doubled. The additional workload and stress hindered my access for follow-up assessments and would make any performance

comparisons irrelevant. Another limitation is the study was conducted at one facility, which potentially affects the generalizability of the findings. The study is also subject to the researcher's bias, and it is not possible to make causal inferences with this research.

### ***Strengths***

This study has some notable strengths as well. Leadership research has been criticized for not accounting for context (Avolio, 2007; Conger, 2004; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001), so this study considers environmental factor like the economy, the relationship with CPC, and technological advances that affected the organization (Kempster & Parry, 2011). By using a dimension-specific approach to leadership (van Dierendonck's [2011] eight dimensions of servant leadership), it helps close a gap in our understanding by identifying more specific sets of leadership behaviors that account for leadership's effectiveness (Yukl, 2012). Additionally, I collected multi-source data from owners, managers, supervisors, and subordinates, which mitigates the risk of same-source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Also, because I had unrestricted access to the facility, leaders, followers, and the customer, I provide a comprehensive picture of the turnaround.

### ***Implications for Research***

In general, there appears to be a *chicken-or-egg* relationship between psychological safety and work climate. I recommend research that can help us better understand this connection. Is one a precondition of the other? Relatedly, some research has shown it is possible to have too much of a good thing when it comes to leader behavior.

Leaders can reach a point of diminishing returns when it comes to their positive behavior and employee's work satisfaction, and in the case of negative treatment, there appears to be a threshold where more negative behavior does not compound the outcome (Cho, Diaz, & Chiaburu, 2017). Would those patterns hold true for psychological safety? Interestingly, consistently bad behavior from leaders may be better than sporadically just behavior. Coping with ambiguous or erratic leaders who toggle between dysfunctional and supportive behaviors during relational exchanges can produce anxiety (Matta et al., 2017). Having a better understanding of the boundary conditions for leader behavior as it affects psychological safety is critical to learning to maintain it.

It is also important to understand how followers' characteristics affect perceptions of leader behavior. For example, hardiness had been shown to affect how leader behaviors are associated with employees' work satisfaction. Hardy employees are more likely to be sensitive to a leader's behaviors than their less hardy peers (Cho et al., 2017). If we can identify employee characteristics that affect psychological safety, we may be able to take a more prescriptive approach and find "optimal doses" for leader behavior (Cho et al., 2017, p. 157). The last recommendation stems from the question of why leaders behave the way they do. What are the antecedent conditions or personality factors that cause them to exhibit certain behaviors? I think the personality construct locus of control might be promising for shedding light on leader

behavior. Understanding the root cause of leader behavior would have important implications for training and selection.

### ***Practical Implications***

This study has practical implications for how leaders can develop psychologically safe teams. It makes clear that there are consequences to leaders' actions, and that perceptions of psychological safety can be influenced by leadership behavior.

Accordingly, companies may gain insights on how to proactively enhance their efforts towards creating a healthy work climate. When companies provide the necessary resources and support, they can positively affect psychological safety, and employees are more likely to stay in the organization (Singh et al., 2018). Negative or positive bonds between individuals and their organizations emerge based on how employees perceive their organization cares for them (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizations can have a significant impact on employee's perceptions through leadership training and setting clear expectations for what behaviors will not be tolerated. Leadership training intent on fostering psychological safety should be structured on humility and authenticity. Negativity and abusive leaders destroy connections with employees and psychological safety. Positive leader behaviors build inclusive relationships with employees that allow psychological safety to develop. It is important to recognize that many factors could influence a person's perceptions of psychological safety. Leader behavior is only one piece of the puzzle, but it is an important piece for a leader to examine because they control it. Whereas other factors, like an employee's past experiences, the influence of people in their network,

or even past trauma an employee may have experienced with a person in a powerful position, are beyond a leader's influence.

While there may have been an overall shift in philosophy away from command and control leadership (Härtel et al., 2008), the thinking is still prevalent in many blue-collar occupations. A few months after the regime change, I asked AB's president about the facility's progress. He said he was still uncomfortable with the idea of a turnaround. The warehouse was operating better than it had in two years, but he was struggling to connect the dots. The president acknowledged the shift in employee morale, work climate, and performance, but the only significant changes he could identify were the three recent staffing moves: the promotion of a new operations manager on first shift, the creation of the V.P. of Operation role, and the hiring of a new facility manager:

I know the things you are researching are important, but it is just not in my vocabulary, and it is not something I understand. It is not in my DNA, but if you look at the things we are doing, you have to account for the way this new team is wired. I just can't comprehend how talking nicely to people and really giving a shit is going to get you from here to there. (AB President)

AB Logistics is not unique in being slow to adopt this paradigm shift to employee-centric leaders. In my 20 years working in logistics and distribution, I seldom witnessed healthy workplaces based on genuine bonds and positive relationships.

Leaders will face additional challenges with advances in technology. As leaders have more information at their disposal tempting them to micromanage their charges, will we see a resurgence in command and control leadership? A recent example is the United Parcel Service (UPS) utilizing data to optimize performance with the launch of its ORION analytics software. According to its website, “By the end of 2016, 55,000 ORION-optimized routes will have saved 10 million gallons of fuel annually, reduced 100,000 metric tons in CO2 emissions and saved an estimated \$300 million to \$400 million in cost avoidance” (UPS, 2016). They have accomplished this utilizing GPS tracking equipment and sensors on vehicles and the driver’s hand-held devices. The ORION data shows routes traveled, truck idle times, and even safety information, like seatbelt usage. What does this micromanagement and loss of autonomy do the UPS employees’ psychological safety? I hope my findings make leaders aware there are consequences when they face decisions with competing values.

Overall, I hope these contributions enhance team potency and help practitioners promote relationships and work climates that allow employees to thrive and psychological safety to flourish.

My experience has definitely enriched my understanding of the data, yet at the same time focused this understanding in a way that is consistent with my experience.

# Appendix A: Survey Instrument

## Work Culture Assessment Survey

### Introduction

This assessment will be used to gauge the culture at your company. All feedback will remain anonymous. Employees who fully complete the survey will be entered into a drawing for \$100 gift cards. You will be asked to voluntarily provide a name and a contact method. This will allow you to receive feedback from your survey and be notified if you win the gift card.

### Informed Consent

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to better understand work culture dynamics that allow individuals to flourish in workgroups.

**Procedures:** Upon your agreement to participate in this study, you will complete a brief survey that will take less than 20 minutes.

**Risks and Benefits Associated with the Study:** This study does not have any known risks. The potential benefits are identifying behaviors that will make your boss a better leader and help create a healthier work environment.

**Confidentiality:** These surveys are anonymous. The records of this study will be kept in a locked office at the university, preventing any breach of confidentiality. Should the study ever become published material, your name will in no way be linked to the study, nor will it mention your personal involvement.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your employer, this BU student researcher, or with Benedictine University faculty. You are free to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researchers or Benedictine University.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher(s) conducting this study is Ted McKinney. His dissertation advisor is Dr. Mike Manning. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please ask the student researcher at this time. If questions or concerns arise at a later time, you may direct them to Ted McKinney at 618.972.8668 and [tmckinn@gmail.com](mailto:tmckinn@gmail.com) or to Mike Manning at 575-621-4052 and [mmanning@ben.edu](mailto:mmanning@ben.edu). Questions and concerns may also be addressed to Alandra Devall, Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, Benedictine University, 5700 College Road, Lisle, IL 60532, 630-829-6295 or [adevall@ben.edu](mailto:adevall@ben.edu).

**Statement of Consent:** By checking below, you have agreed to the above information in its entirety. Checking also indicates that you are 18 years of age or more and that you have agreed to participate.

Check here to indicate consent

## Questionnaire

### Demographic Questions

Please Provide your name if you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview or would like feedback from your survey. Name: \_\_\_\_\_ and Email address:

\_\_\_\_\_ or phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) What gender do you identify as?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 2) What is your age?
  - a. 18-24 years old
  - b. 25-34 years old
  - c. 35-44 years old
  - d. 45-54 years old
  - e. 55-64 years old
  - f. 65-74 years old
  - g. Prefer not to answer
  
- 3) Are you married?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Prefer not to say
  
- 4) What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
  - a. Some High School
  - b. High School
  - c. Trade School
  - d. Bachelor's Degree
  - e. Master's Degree
  - f. Ph.D. or higher
  - g. Prefer not to say
  
- 5) How long have you been with your current organization? Years \_\_\_\_\_, Months \_\_\_\_\_.
  
- 6) What is your annual household income?
  - a. Less than \$25,000

- b. \$25,000 - \$50,000
  - c. \$50,000 - \$100,000
  - d. \$100,000 - \$200,000
  - e. More than \$200,000
  - f. Prefer not to say
- 7) What is your role with the company?
- a. Individual contributor (hourly employee or salaried employee with no direct reports)
  - b. Leader (supervisor, manager, etc.)

## Core Questions

### Likert Scale Scoring for core questions 1 – 30 (The servant leadership survey)

- a.  strongly agree
- b.  agree
- c.  somewhat agree
- d.  somewhat disagree
- e.  disagree
- f.  strongly disagree

- 1) My manager gives me the information I need to do my work well.
- 2) My manager encourages me to use my talents.
- 3) My manager helps me to further develop myself.
- 4) My manager encourages his/her staff to come up with new ideas.
- 5) My manager keeps himself/herself in the background and gives credits to others.
- 6) My manager holds me responsible for the work I carry out.
- 7) My manager keeps criticizing people for the mistakes they have made in their work (R).
- 8) My manager takes risks even when he/she is not certain of the support from his/her own manager.
- 9) My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses.
- 10) My manager learns from criticism.
- 11) My manager emphasizes the importance of focusing on the good of the whole.
- 12) My manager gives me the authority to take decisions which make work easier for me.
- 13) My manager is not chasing recognition or rewards for the things he/she does for others.
- 14) I am held accountable for my performance by my manager.
- 15) My manager maintains a hard attitude towards people who have offended him/her at work (R).
- 16) My manager takes risks and does what needs to be done in his/her view.
- 17) My manager is often touched by the things he/she sees happening around him/her.
- 18) My manager tries to learn from the criticism he/she gets from his/her superior.

- 19) My manager has a long-term vision.
- 20) My manager enables me to solve problems myself instead of just telling me what to do.
- 21) My manager appears to enjoy his/her colleagues' success more than his/her own.
- 22) My manager holds me and my colleagues responsible for the way we handle a job.
- 23) My manager finds it difficult to forget things that went wrong in the past (R).
- 24) My manager is prepared to express his/her feelings even if this might have undesirable consequences.
- 25) My manager admits his/her mistakes to his/her superior.
- 26) My manager emphasizes the societal responsibility of our work.
- 27) My manager offers me abundant opportunities to learn new skills.
- 28) My manager shows his/her true feelings to his/her staff.
- 29) My manager learns from the different views and opinions of others.
- 30) If people express criticism, my manager tries to learn from it.

**Likert Scale Scoring for core questions 31 – 37 (The psychological safety scale)**

- a.  very inaccurate
  - b.  moderately inaccurate
  - c.  slightly inaccurate
  - d.  neutral
  - e.  slightly accurate
  - f.  moderately accurate
  - g.  very accurate
- 
- 31) If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you (R).
  - 32) Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
  - 33) People on this team sometimes reject others for being different (R).
  - 34) It is safe to take a risk on this team.
  - 35) It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help (R).
  - 36) No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
  - 37) Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

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