

Whistleblower Psychological Safety in Hybrid Organizations

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Abstract

Hybrid organizations create distinctive conditions for organizational voice because employees alternate between physically co-located and digitally mediated work environments. Although formal whistleblowing systems may be available to all employees, the willingness to report suspected misconduct depends substantially on whether individuals believe that raising a concern can occur without interpersonal punishment, professional isolation, reputational damage, or managerial retaliation. This study examines whistleblower psychological safety as an organizational condition that influences reporting intention in hybrid workplaces. The paper integrates psychological safety, employee voice, organizational silence, and whistleblowing research to develop a context-sensitive explanation of ethical reporting under distributed work arrangements.

Because verified field observations were not available for the present study, a transparent simulation-based quantitative design was adopted rather than presenting synthetic observations as real organizational evidence. A dataset representing 240 hypothetical hybrid employees was generated across five explanatory constructs: psychological safety, managerial openness, reporting-channel accessibility, hybrid inclusion, and fear of retaliation. Whistleblowing intention was modeled as the outcome variable. Descriptive patterns, correlations, quartile comparisons, and multiple regression were used to evaluate the proposed relationships.

The simulation indicates that psychological safety has the strongest positive association with whistleblowing intention, while retaliation fear has a substantial negative association. Managerial openness and accessible reporting channels also demonstrate meaningful positive effects. The findings further suggest that formal reporting infrastructure is unlikely to be sufficient when employees anticipate social or career consequences for speaking up. The study contributes a hybrid-work perspective to whistleblowing research by emphasizing the interaction between ethical infrastructure, leadership accessibility, communication equality, and perceived interpersonal risk. Practical implications concern managerial responsiveness, confidential digital reporting, anti-retaliation credibility, equitable access to decision makers, and follow-up communication after concerns are raised.

Keywords: psychological safety; whistleblowing; hybrid organizations; employee voice; organizational silence; retaliation; ethical climate; reporting intention

1. Introduction

Whistleblowing occupies an important position within organizational governance because employees are often among the first individuals capable of observing practices that may involve fraud, safety violations, harassment, manipulation of information, abuse of authority, regulatory noncompliance, or other forms of misconduct. Formal policies can establish reporting channels, but the existence of a policy does not automatically produce employee willingness to use it. Reporting organizational wrongdoing ordinarily involves an assessment of personal consequences. Employees may ask whether their identity will remain confidential, whether managers will listen impartially, whether colleagues will distance themselves from the reporter, whether career opportunities will be affected, and whether organizational leaders genuinely protect individuals who raise uncomfortable concerns. Whistleblowing therefore represents not only an ethical or procedural decision but also an interpersonal risk decision.

Psychological safety provides a particularly useful framework for examining this risk. Edmondson conceptualized psychological safety as a shared belief that interpersonal risk taking can occur without unacceptable social consequences, while subsequent research has connected psychological safety with learning, voice, information sharing, and constructive participation. A large-scale meta-analytic review by Frazier and colleagues, drawing on more than 22,000 individuals across numerous independent samples, reinforced the importance of psychological safety as a meaningful workplace construct with identifiable antecedents and organizational outcomes. When applied to whistleblowing, the concept implies that employees will be more willing to disclose suspected wrongdoing when they believe that speaking up will receive serious, respectful, and procedurally fair consideration rather than hostility or retaliation.

The relationship becomes more complicated in hybrid organizations. Hybrid work disperses interpersonal interaction across offices, homes, digital platforms, scheduled video meetings, instant-messaging systems, and asynchronous communication. Such flexibility may expand organizational participation, yet it can also alter employees' access to supervisors and informal information. Some employees interact frequently with influential managers in physical locations, whereas others rely mainly on mediated communication. Informal conversations that traditionally allowed an employee to test a concern privately may become less available. Conversely, digital environments can provide traceable, confidential, or asynchronous channels that may reduce some forms of interpersonal pressure. Edmondson and Mortensen have consequently argued that psychological safety in hybrid workplaces demands deliberate managerial attention because differences in location and personal circumstances can create new interpersonal vulnerabilities.

Research on employee voice reinforces this concern. Detert and Burris found that managerial openness is associated with subordinate voice and that psychological safety helps explain why employees interpret certain leaders as safer recipients of challenging information. Liang, Farh, and Farh similarly demonstrated that psychological safety has particular relevance to prohibitive voice, meaning communication intended to prevent harmful practices or undesirable organizational outcomes.) Whistleblowing represents a more consequential form of speaking up because the information communicated may challenge powerful actors, expose serious violations, or trigger investigations. The potential personal costs may therefore be considerably greater than those associated with routine suggestions.

The present study addresses this problem by examining how psychological safety may shape whistleblowing intention within hybrid organizational arrangements. The paper does not claim to report observations from an actual company or employee survey. Instead, it develops and tests a transparent simulation model informed by established organizational-behavior research.

This design permits examination of theoretically plausible relationships without fabricating field evidence. Particular attention is given to psychological safety, managerial openness, accessibility of reporting channels, inclusion across work locations, and retaliation fear. Together, these factors provide a framework for understanding why technically sophisticated ethics systems may remain underused when the surrounding interpersonal environment is perceived as unsafe.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 Examining Psychological Safety as a Precondition for Ethical Reporting

The first objective is to evaluate whether psychological safety can reasonably be modeled as a central predictor of whistleblowing intention in hybrid organizations. Psychological safety reduces the anticipated interpersonal cost associated with delivering information that may be unwelcome to organizational authorities. In a whistleblowing situation, such confidence does not imply that employees expect the reporting process to be easy. Rather, it reflects a belief that organizational systems and influential individuals will permit the concern to be voiced without illegitimate punishment.

The study therefore distinguishes psychological safety from general job satisfaction or organizational comfort. An employee may be satisfied with working conditions while remaining unwilling to report misconduct. Likewise, an employee may experience occasional disagreement with management while nevertheless believing that serious concerns can be expressed safely. The analysis specifically considers whether increases in perceived psychological safety correspond with higher levels of simulated whistleblowing intention.

2.2 Assessing Leadership and Reporting Infrastructure

A second objective is to assess whether managerial openness and reporting-channel accessibility provide additional explanatory value. Managerial openness concerns whether leaders appear willing to receive criticism, unfavorable information, or challenging questions. Reporting-channel accessibility concerns whether employees can identify and practically use appropriate reporting mechanisms, including confidential digital channels.

This distinction is especially important in hybrid organizations. An organization may possess technically available reporting mechanisms while employees remain uncertain about their credibility. Alternatively, managers may appear personally receptive even though formal escalation channels are confusing or inaccessible. The study therefore treats interpersonal openness and procedural accessibility as related but analytically distinct components of whistleblower support.

2.3 Evaluating Hybrid Inclusion and Retaliation Fear

The third objective is to determine how hybrid inclusion and anticipated retaliation may affect reporting intention. Hybrid inclusion refers to the extent to which employees believe that their work location does not reduce their access to information, managerial attention, organizational participation, or ethical

reporting opportunities. Employees who primarily work remotely should not have to overcome substantially greater barriers to raising a concern than colleagues with frequent physical access to senior personnel.

Retaliation fear is evaluated separately because whistleblowing literature consistently identifies possible reprisal as an important component of the reporting decision. Previous research has examined disciplinary actions, interpersonal hostility, diminished supervisory relationships, professional exclusion, and other unfavorable consequences following disclosure. The study consequently examines whether retaliation fear weakens whistleblowing intention even where other organizational conditions appear supportive.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Psychological Safety, Voice, and Organizational Silence

Psychological safety developed within organizational scholarship as an explanation for why employees sometimes withhold potentially valuable knowledge despite possessing relevant information. Edmondson's work demonstrated that employees' willingness to discuss mistakes and interpersonal risks is shaped by the social context in which communication occurs. Subsequent evidence has broadened psychological safety beyond team learning to include employee engagement, information exchange, creativity, performance-related behaviors, and voice. Frazier and colleagues' meta-analysis provides strong evidence that psychological safety is embedded within a broader network of leadership, work design, relational, and performance factors rather than representing a marginal attitudinal variable.

Voice research further clarifies the behavioral consequences of perceived risk. Van Dyne and LePine distinguished employee voice from routine in-role behavior, emphasizing its discretionary and improvement-oriented nature. (Morrison later described employee voice as discretionary communication of suggestions, problems, concerns, or opinions directed toward individuals capable of influencing organizational outcomes. Silence represents the corresponding withholding of potentially relevant information. Employees may remain silent because they believe speaking up will be ineffective, socially costly, or professionally dangerous.

Whistleblowing lies near the higher-risk end of this communication continuum. Routine voice may concern inefficient processes or suggestions for improvement, whereas whistleblowing ordinarily involves suspected illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices

3.2 Retaliation and the Whistleblowing Decision

Whistleblowing research has long emphasized that actual reporting cannot be explained solely by moral beliefs or intentions. Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran's meta-analytic examination of 26 samples involving 18,781 participants demonstrated that factors associated with whistleblowing intentions do not necessarily have the same relationships with actual reporting behavior. Their analysis further indicated that retaliation is strongly connected with contextual characteristics surrounding disclosure. This finding makes the organizational environment particularly important when interpreting employees' willingness to expose wrongdoing.

Near and Miceli's work further shows that whistleblowing needs to be understood as an organizational process involving wrongdoing, reporting, recipient reactions, retaliation, and corrective

effectiveness rather than as a single isolated act. Rehg and colleagues similarly demonstrated that retaliation is affected by social support and power relationships, highlighting the vulnerability of employees who challenge wrongdoing without sufficient organizational backing. Earlier evidence reported by Rothschild and Miethe also indicated that individuals exposing serious organizational misconduct can experience severe management retaliation.

These findings provide a theoretical basis for treating psychological safety and retaliation fear as separate constructs. Psychological safety concerns whether interpersonal risk taking is perceived as acceptable, while retaliation fear captures the employee's anticipated probability of harmful consequences. An organization can communicate support for employee voice while still generating substantial fear if past complainants have been marginalized, confidentiality has been breached, or senior managers have reacted defensively to criticism.

3.3 Hybrid Work and the Architecture of Speaking Up

Hybrid work changes the architecture through which concerns reach organizational decision makers. In a conventional office environment, employees may rely on hallway conversations, informal meetings, personal observation of managerial reactions, or spontaneous contact with trusted colleagues before deciding whether to escalate an issue. Distributed working arrangements reduce some of these opportunities while creating new digitally mediated forms of communication. Hybrid organizations therefore need to consider not merely whether employees can technically contact managers but whether communication channels support confidential, psychologically safe escalation.

Location can also become a source of unequal organizational visibility. Employees who spend more time in an office may receive richer informal information and more frequent opportunities to develop trust with supervisors. Predominantly remote employees may depend more heavily on scheduled interactions and formal digital systems. If those systems are slow, impersonal, poorly explained, or perceived as monitored by implicated managers, remote employees may experience greater uncertainty before reporting wrongdoing.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulation Logic

The study adopts a simulation-based explanatory design. No real employees were surveyed and no organization is represented by the numerical results. The simulation was selected specifically to avoid presenting invented observations as empirical evidence while still allowing the theoretical model to be evaluated quantitatively.

A hypothetical sample of 240 hybrid employees was generated computationally. Each case represents an illustrative employee profile rather than an identifiable person. Five independent constructs were modeled: psychological safety, managerial openness, reporting-channel accessibility, hybrid inclusion, and retaliation fear. Whistleblowing intention served as the dependent construct.

Variables were transformed to approximate five-point response scales ranging from 1, indicating a very low level of the construct, to 5, indicating a very high level. The simulated relationships were informed by established theory rather than estimated from a real organizational dataset. Accordingly,

statistical significance in this paper describes the internal behavior of the simulation and must not be interpreted as population-level empirical evidence.

4.2 Construct Operationalization

The model was designed to represent the decision environment facing an employee who becomes aware of potentially reportable misconduct. Psychological safety captured confidence that concerns could be expressed without illegitimate interpersonal punishment. Managerial openness captured perceived willingness of leaders to hear difficult information. Reporting-channel accessibility represented ease of identifying and using confidential escalation mechanisms.

Hybrid inclusion measured equivalent access to organizational information, decision makers, and ethical-reporting opportunities across remote and office-based work arrangements. Retaliation fear represented anticipated professional, relational, or career-related consequences following disclosure. Whistleblowing intention represented the modeled likelihood that an employee would use an appropriate organizational reporting mechanism after observing serious misconduct.

Table 1: Constructs Used in the Simulation Model

Construct	Analytical Meaning	Expected Relationship with Reporting Intention
Psychological safety	Perceived interpersonal safety when expressing serious concerns	Positive
Managerial openness	Perceived managerial receptiveness to unfavorable information	Positive
Reporting-channel accessibility	Ease and confidentiality of formal reporting mechanisms	Positive
Hybrid inclusion	Equality of access across remote and office work arrangements	Positive
Retaliation fear	Anticipated career, social, or managerial reprisal	Negative
Whistleblowing intention	Propensity to report suspected organizational wrongdoing	Outcome variable

4.3 Analytical Procedure and Ethical Treatment of Simulated Evidence

Descriptive analysis was first used to examine the simulated distributions. Pearson correlations were then calculated to evaluate pairwise relationships among the constructs. Psychological safety scores were divided into four approximately equal groups to illustrate how reporting intention changes across progressively safer environments. Finally, multiple ordinary least-squares regression was applied to

estimate the simultaneous relationships between the five explanatory variables and whistleblowing intention.

No human participants, personal data, confidential corporate records, or identifiable information were used. Consequently, the analysis does not make claims regarding prevalence, causation, or actual employee behavior. Its purpose is theoretical demonstration and methodological exploration.

5. Analysis

5.1 Descriptive and Relational Patterns

The simulated constructs were centered near the midpoint of the five-point scale to avoid creating an artificially favorable or unfavorable organizational environment. Mean psychological safety was approximately 3.00, while mean whistleblowing intention was also approximately 3.00.

This configuration represents an illustrative organization in which employees are neither uniformly confident nor uniformly reluctant to report concerns.

5.2 Multivariable Estimation

Table 2 reports the simulated regression model. The five predictors jointly accounted for approximately 58.6% of the modeled variance in whistleblowing intention. Psychological safety generated the largest positive coefficient. Holding the other simulated variables constant, a one-unit increase in psychological safety corresponded to an estimated 0.428-unit increase in whistleblowing intention.

Retaliation fear produced a coefficient of -0.302 , indicating a strong countervailing relationship. Managerial openness and reporting-channel accessibility remained positively related to reporting intention after the other constructs were considered. Hybrid inclusion had a comparatively small direct coefficient in the full model. This does not necessarily imply that inclusion is unimportant. Conceptually, its influence may operate indirectly by shaping psychological safety, access to leaders, and trust in communication systems.

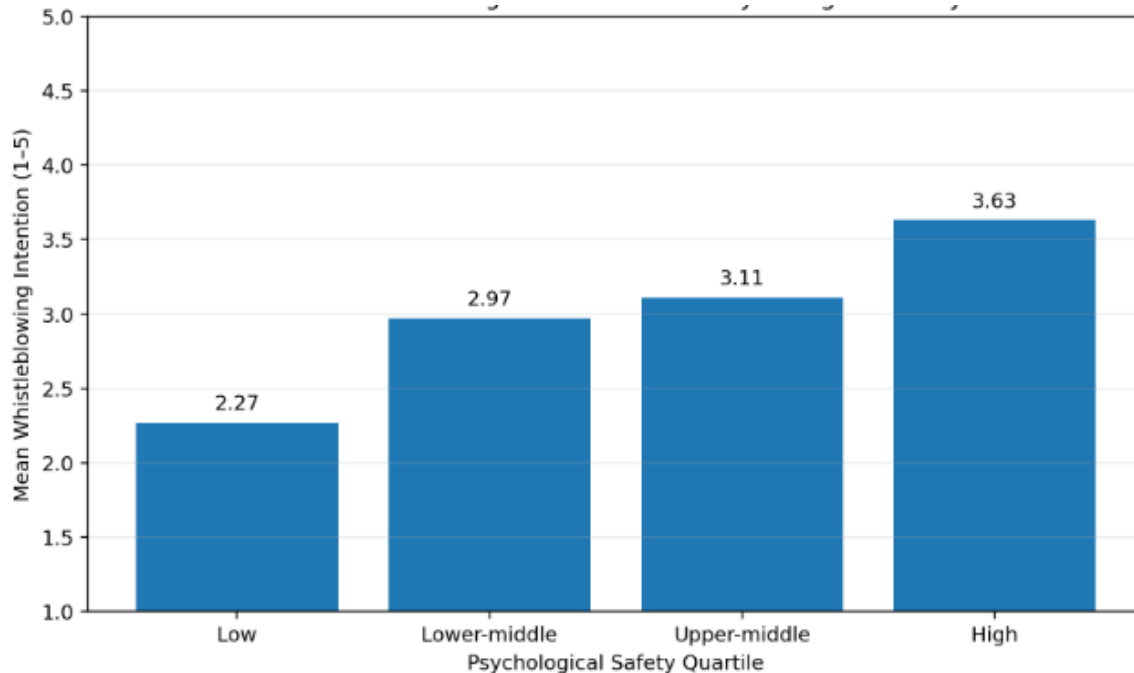
Table 2: Simulated Multiple Regression Predicting Whistleblowing Intention

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	Simulated p-value
Psychological safety	0.428	0.055	7.806	< .001
Managerial openness	0.189	0.053	3.541	< .001
Reporting-channel accessibility	0.203	0.043	4.746	< .001
Hybrid inclusion	0.038	0.044	0.857	.392
Retaliation fear	-0.302	0.045	-6.735	< .001

5.3 Psychological Safety Gradient in Reporting Intention

A useful interpretation emerges when psychological safety is divided into quartiles. Employees represented in the lowest simulated safety quartile had a mean whistleblowing-intention score of 2.27. The corresponding mean increased to 2.97 in the lower-middle group, 3.11 in the upper-middle group, and 3.63 among cases in the highest psychological-safety quartile.

Figure 1: Simulated Whistleblowing Intention Across Psychological Safety Levels



The graph demonstrates a clear positive gradient. The largest practical contrast is observed between the lowest and highest safety conditions, where mean reporting intention differs by approximately 1.36 scale points. The pattern illustrates why organizations should avoid evaluating whistleblowing systems solely by counting reporting channels.

6. Discussion

6.1 Psychological Safety as Ethical Reporting Infrastructure

The analysis suggests that psychological safety should be treated as part of an organization's ethical infrastructure rather than merely as an employee-well-being concept. Traditional governance approaches often concentrate on codes of conduct, hotline availability, investigation procedures, and formal anti-retaliation clauses. These mechanisms are important, but their usefulness depends on employee confidence that invoking them will not produce illegitimate personal consequences.

This interpretation aligns with Detert and Burris, whose research links managerial openness with voice partly through psychological safety. It is also consistent with Liang and colleagues' evidence that psychological safety is especially relevant to prohibitive voice—communication intended to prevent harmful organizational practices. Whistleblowing can be understood as an intensified form of prohibitive

communication because the employee seeks to interrupt conduct perceived as illegal, unethical, dangerous, or otherwise unacceptable.

The managerial implication is that leaders create reporting conditions through routine behavior long before a serious allegation is raised. When managers respond defensively to minor criticism, punish disagreement, exclude dissenting employees, or demand excessive loyalty, employees receive information about how a future whistleblowing disclosure might be treated. Conversely, leaders who respond constructively to ordinary concerns can gradually establish credible evidence that difficult information is legitimate.

6.2 Retaliation Fear and the Credibility Gap

The substantial negative coefficient for retaliation fear is particularly important. A formal statement prohibiting retaliation has limited value when employees observe informal forms of punishment. Retaliation does not need to involve dismissal to influence reporting decisions. Employees may fear reduced promotion opportunities, undesirable assignments, professional isolation, exclusion from meetings, negative performance evaluations, reputational labeling, or the loss of trusted relationships.

Whistleblowing scholarship has repeatedly drawn attention to this problem. Near and Miceli reviewed evidence concerning both retaliation and the organizational effectiveness of whistleblowing, while Rehg and colleagues emphasized the influence of power and social support on retaliatory outcomes. Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran further demonstrated that contextual variables play a particularly important role in understanding retaliation. These insights indicate that organizations need to evaluate the lived credibility of anti-retaliation policies rather than their mere presence in policy manuals.

For hybrid organizations, subtle retaliation may be even more difficult to identify because digital and physical participation can be selectively managed. A reporting employee might experience fewer meeting invitations, slower communication, restricted platform access, reduced visibility, or exclusion from informal office networks. Consequently, post-report monitoring should consider both conventional employment actions and changes in communication patterns, access, workload, project allocation, and professional inclusion.

6.3 Designing Psychologically Safe Hybrid Reporting Systems

The simulation also shows that reporting-channel accessibility contributes positively even when psychological safety and retaliation fear are included simultaneously. This finding supports a dual-system interpretation: employees require both a psychologically credible environment and a practically usable reporting architecture. A supportive manager cannot substitute completely for an independent reporting channel, particularly where the manager may be implicated in the alleged wrongdoing.

Hybrid organizations should therefore create multiple pathways through which concerns can be raised. These may include direct supervisors, ethics officers, compliance functions, independent digital portals, confidential hotlines, ombudsperson arrangements, or governance-level escalation for serious allegations. Employees working remotely should receive the same information concerning reporting routes, confidentiality, investigation procedures, and anti-retaliation protections as employees working regularly at organizational premises.

Accessibility should also include communication after disclosure. One source of employee uncertainty is not knowing whether a submitted concern has been received, categorized, or reviewed. Within appropriate confidentiality limits, acknowledgement mechanisms and procedural status updates can demonstrate that speaking up leads to institutional attention. Such responsiveness can strengthen trust not only for the original reporter but also for employees who observe how the organization handles difficult information.

7. Conclusion

Whistleblowing within hybrid organizations cannot be adequately understood as a question of whether employees possess access to an ethics hotline or written reporting policy. Reporting organizational wrongdoing requires employees to evaluate interpersonal, procedural, professional, and reputational risks. Psychological safety is therefore central because it influences whether employees believe that difficult information can be communicated without unacceptable social or career consequences. Hybrid work intensifies this issue by distributing communication across physical and digital settings and by potentially creating differences in managerial access, visibility, and informal organizational participation.

The simulation developed in this study indicates a strong positive relationship between psychological safety and whistleblowing intention and a substantial negative relationship between retaliation fear and the same outcome. Managerial openness and accessible reporting mechanisms provide additional positive contributions. These results are not presented as field evidence; they illustrate theoretically grounded relationships using synthetic observations. Their primary contribution lies in showing how whistleblowing decisions can be conceptualized as the product of an interdependent ethical system in which leadership behavior, reporting infrastructure, interpersonal safety, and retaliation expectations operate simultaneously.

For organizational practice, the findings suggest that psychologically safe whistleblowing requires more than policy compliance. Managers need to demonstrate receptiveness to unwelcome information during ordinary interactions, reporting systems need to be accessible regardless of work location, confidentiality claims need to be operationally credible, and potential retaliation needs to be monitored beyond obvious disciplinary actions. Hybrid organizations should pay particular attention to digital exclusion and changes in employee visibility because these may become subtle mechanisms through which reporting employees experience disadvantage.

Future empirical research should test the proposed framework using multisource and longitudinal evidence from genuine hybrid workplaces. Research should distinguish reporting intention from actual reporting behavior, compare remote-dominant and office-dominant employees, evaluate anonymous and identified disclosure channels, and examine whether leader accessibility moderates the relationship between psychological safety and whistleblowing. Such work could establish more precisely whether hybrid work creates new barriers to ethical voice or whether appropriately designed digital systems can improve the accessibility and safety of organizational reporting.

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