

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY EXPERIENCES OF HR LEADERS IN THE BURSA AUTOMOTIVE CLUSTER: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY ON MOBBING, EXCLUSION, AND PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- While psychological safety is widely recognized as a foundational driver of team learning, open voice, and sustainable organizational performance, its distinct operational realities within high-pressure, manufacturing-intensive corporate sectors remain underdeveloped in qualitative literature. This study explicitly aims to investigate how interpersonal risk-taking, safe communication, and systemic workplace trust are dynamically experienced, constructed, and negotiated by human resource leaders operating within the complex automotive manufacturing ecosystem of Bursa, Türkiye.

Methodology- Adopting a rigorous qualitative, interpretive, and descriptive inquiry paradigm, this empirical research explores the lived experiences of 15 HR leaders across various organizational seniority levels and managerial roles within the Bursa automotive supply chain. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach prioritizes rich, contextualized descriptions over statistical generalizations, capturing socio-structural nuances of a high-stakes manufacturing environment. Trustworthiness was ensured via Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria and the COREQ checklist.

Findings- Narratives demonstrate that psychological safety is a structurally conditioned phenomenon heavily constrained by autocratic governance, family-business politics, and institutional power dynamics. HR leaders navigate a persistent paradox between strategic partnership expectations and administrative compliance, inducing strategic self-censorship. Punitive error cultures trigger defensiveness, while learning-oriented climates foster accountability. Team solidarity serves as a buffer but remains vulnerable to political manipulation and toxicity. Systematic marginalization, organizational bypassing, and information withholding persist across all echelons, indicating that seniority provides insufficient protection against exclusion.

Conclusion- Cultivating psychological safety for HR leaders requires systemic interventions beyond individual interactions. Organizations must dismantle punitive feedback loops, formalize safeguards against bypassing, and institutionalize participative leadership to preserve managerial autonomy and professional legitimacy. The study is limited to a single industrial cluster and cross-sectional design.

Keywords: Psychological safety, Bursa automotive cluster, HR leadership, workplace exclusion, error management culture

JEL Codes: M12, M54, L62

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999), has emerged as a critical enabler of organizational learning, innovation, and performance. In high-pressure manufacturing environments such as the automotive industry, where rapid problem-solving, error reporting, and cross-functional collaboration are essential, the absence of psychological safety can lead to hidden errors, defensive behaviors, and diminished competitiveness. Türkiye's automotive sector, with Bursa as its historical and industrial heartland, exemplifies these dynamics through intense global competition, just-in-time production pressures, and a prevalence of family-owned supplier firms characterized by hierarchical and sometimes autocratic leadership cultures.

Human resource (HR) leaders occupy a particularly paradoxical position in such settings. They are simultaneously expected to serve as strategic business partners who challenge top management decisions and as administrative enforcers of organizational policies. This dual role creates unique vulnerabilities regarding voice, upward feedback, and professional legitimacy. While extensive quantitative research has examined psychological safety at the team and organizational levels, qualitative investigations focusing specifically on how HR professionals in manufacturing clusters experience and navigate psychological safety — particularly in relation to mobbing, exclusion, and decision participation — remain limited.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of 15 HR leaders working in the Bursa automotive ecosystem. Drawing on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it examines how autocratic leadership, family business dynamics, error management cultures, and power relations shape psychological safety for those responsible for both employee advocacy and strategic alignment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological safety has been robustly linked to team learning behavior (Edmondson, 1999), reduced defensiveness, and improved organizational outcomes (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). Recent reviews emphasize its context-dependent nature, particularly in high-stakes or culturally hierarchical environments (Dong et al., 2024; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Employee voice and silence are closely intertwined with psychological safety; when the climate feels unsafe, silence becomes a rational self-protection strategy (Morrison, 2023).

Workplace exclusion and mobbing further erode psychological safety. Bullying is embedded in power-laden relationships and is more likely to occur in permissive climates with power imbalances (Einarsen, 2000; Salin, 2003). In manufacturing settings with tight deadlines and interdependent workflows, these dynamics can be amplified. HR professionals are especially exposed because their role requires balancing employee well-being with management directives, often leading to role conflict and vulnerability to retaliation or marginalization (Bennett et al., 2024; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).

Family business contexts common in Turkish industrial clusters add another layer of complexity. Decision-making is frequently centralized, and HR functions may be viewed primarily as administrative rather than strategic (Casprini et al., 2024). Punitive error cultures, where mistakes are remembered and used against individuals, suppress reporting and learning (van Dyck et al., 2005), whereas learning-oriented climates promote accountability. Trust in top management has been shown to be pivotal for psychological safety perceptions across cultures (Dheer et al., 2026). This study builds on these foundations by providing a grounded, qualitative account of how these forces interact specifically for HR leaders in one of Türkiye's most competitive industrial regions.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive, and descriptive research design to capture the nuanced, context-embedded experiences of HR leaders. Bursa was purposively selected as a knowledge-rich setting due to its central role in Türkiye's automotive industry and its multilayered supplier network. Fifteen HR professionals holding leadership or managerial positions (HR Business Partners, HR Managers, HR Directors, and Group HR Managers) with 13 to 30 years of experience were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling. Participants represented both multinational subsidiaries and large local family-owned suppliers.

Data were collected via voice-recorded, semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–70 minutes. Interview protocols explored perceptions of voice opportunities, error and feedback cultures, relationships with top management, intra-team dynamics, and experiences of exclusion or mobbing. All transcripts were anonymized and assigned codes K1–K15. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Scientific rigor was maintained through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability), peer debriefing, thick description, audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. The study adhered to COREQ reporting standards, and ethical approval was obtained from the Bursa Uludağ University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (29 August 2025, Session No: 2025-07, Decision No: 10).

4. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis yielded five interconnected themes that illuminate how psychological safety is experienced and constrained for HR leaders in the Bursa automotive cluster.

Theme 1 – Open Expression of Ideas: Participants consistently reported that the freedom to voice concerns or ideas was heavily conditioned by organizational context rather than personal courage. Changes in top leadership often altered the space for expression, with increasing autocratization leading to greater self-censorship. Family business politics and HR's bridging role between employees and owners amplified caution. One participant summarized: "I can express about 60%; 40% I cannot."

Theme 2 – Error and Feedback Culture: The organization's response to mistakes emerged as a powerful indicator of psychological safety. In punitive climates, errors were remembered and weaponized, fostering defensiveness and blame avoidance. In contrast, learning-oriented environments normalized error reporting and framed mistakes as improvement opportunities. The critical distinction was not the occurrence of errors but whether they were personalized or treated as learning signals.

Theme 3 – Relations with Top Management and Decision Participation: This theme carried the highest evidential density. HR leaders described a structural paradox between the ideal of strategic partnership and the reality of administrative execution. In family-dominated firms, decision authority was often concentrated, and HR input was sometimes appropriated or sidelined. Conversely, in organizations with higher trust, HR leaders were involved early in strategic processes. Early and genuine participation in decision-making both signaled and reinforced psychological safety.

Theme 4 – Intra-team Safety: HR teams could function as islands of solidarity amid external pressures, with transparency and mutual support strengthening internal safety. However, this protection was fragile; gossip, toxic competition, and political maneuvering quickly eroded it. Professional boundaries and respect for expertise helped sustain team-level psychological safety.

Theme 5 – Mobbing and Exclusion: Exclusion manifested in both overt and subtle forms. Systematic criticism, bypassing in key decisions, information withholding, and being left out of restructuring processes created lasting psychological and even physical consequences (e.g., stress-related herniated discs). Notably, these experiences were reported even by director-level participants, indicating that seniority alone does not confer protection. Gender-based biases further compounded marginalization for some female HR leaders.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that psychological safety among HR leaders in the Bursa automotive cluster is a multi-level, structurally conditioned phenomenon shaped by leadership style, decision participation opportunities, error management culture, team relations, and exclusionary practices. The persistent tension between strategic partner aspirations and administrative compliance roles creates chronic vulnerability to self-censorship and marginalization.

Practical implications are clear: organizations must move beyond individual-level interventions. They should institutionalize safeguards against organizational bypassing, replace punitive feedback cultures with structured learning reviews, and embed participative leadership practices. In family business contexts, formal mechanisms that protect HR's advisory independence are particularly important. The findings underscore that psychological safety for those who facilitate it for others cannot be assumed; it must be deliberately designed and defended at the systemic level.

Limitations include the single-region, single-sector focus and the cross-sectional, self-report nature of the data. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, paired interviews with top management and HR leaders, and the development of context-specific measurement scales for manufacturing environments.

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