

Mechanisms and Conditions Through Which Workplace Learning Influences Employee Well-Being: Evidence from Early-Career Professionals

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ABSTRACT

In today's "twin transition" era, organisational success is largely reliant on the employee-centric ecosystem – encompassing mental well-being, performance, and job satisfaction. This paper aims to investigate the impact of psychological safety and structured feedback as a mechanism on the well-being of employees, as Gen Z is the future leader. This study encompasses early career professionals with an experience of 0-5 years. A qualitative design was used. The semi-structured interviews and one focus group of early-career professionals working in different sectors were used to gather data. The relationships between feedback processes and team-based learning interactions, and well-being outcomes were investigated using the Reflexive thematic analysis. Structured, developmental feedback increased role clarity and perceived competence, which reinforced work engagement and clarity of professional identity. On the other hand, the lack of consistent feedback and low psychological safety caused role ambiguity and emotional distress. This research contributes to a context-sensitive model.

Keywords: Workplace learning; Psychological safety; Developmental feedback; Employee well-being; Work engagement; Burnout; Professional identity; Organisational learning

INTRODUCTION

The present day organisations are marked with the faster digitalisation, hybrid working and constant renewal of competences. It is in this environment that learning at the workplace has evolved away from episodic training to an in-built, continuous, process influenced by interaction of feedback, problem solving and adjustive performance demands, which are collaborative. Although the concept of learning has been commonly described as a developmental asset that promotes interaction and organisational performance, there is also growing evidence that heightened learning-related demands can also result in psychosocial hazards, such as stress and emotional burnout. It is therefore important to understand the processes by which learning at workplace affects the well-being of employees to be able to achieve long-term performance.

Theoretical approaches to occupational stress offer an appropriate basis of analyzing this tension. Conservation of Resources theory (Stephen Hobfoll, 1989) assumes that human beings aim at gaining and preserving resources that they value, and when such resources are at risk or limited the stress ensues. In a similar way, the Job Demand Control model (Robert Karasek and Tores Theorell, 1990) explains that excessive demands and the lack of control are also causes of strain. In learning-demanding settings, the expectations of quick skills acquisition and performance adaption could take the form of demand unless they are balanced by other supporting relational and structural resources. The new literature on workplace wellness also suggests that reflective and mindful organisational practices have the ability to offset psychosocial threat (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2023), and the learning processes that modulate wellness are poorly studied.

The two mechanisms have been of special interest in the context of workplace learning; these are structured feedback and psychological safety. Feedback is a vital developmental instrument whereby employees decipher anticipations, gauge performance and build career. Perceived competence and engagement can be enhanced by timely feedback that is structured, timely and growth oriented. On the other hand, the ambiguity and emotional tension can be increased in case of inconsistent feedback or feedback based on evaluation only. Learning behaviours, which include

questioning, experimentation and reflection, can be achieved by psychological safety and this is a conception that people have the freedom to exchange ideas or raise concerns without the fear of adverse effects (Amy Edmondson, 1999). Learning can be collaborative and identity-affirming in psychologically safe climates, and silent and withdrawal-prone in unsafe climates.

Even though previous literature has studied the topic of workplace well-being, stress management and mindfulness-based interventions, there are fewer studies that use a mechanism-based approach to explore the impact of everyday learning processes on well-being outcomes. Such a disparity is especially relevant to early-career professionals, as most of them tend to face an increased level of evaluative pressure, role ambiguity, and problems with identity formation. In this cohort, the quality of feedback and team climate also can have a significant impact on work engagement, emotional exhaustion and clarity in professional identity.

In line with this, the current research paper aims to answer the following research question: How can structured feedback and psychological safety affect the well-being of employees in a workplace learning setting among early-career professionals? The study relies on a qualitative design on the basis of semi-structured interviews and a single-focus discussion with employees who have been in the field of work less than five years in various fields. The patterns of the relationships between learning mechanisms and three targeted outcomes of well-being, namely, work engagement, emotional exhaustion, and professional identity clarity, are identified with the help of thematic analysis.

This paper has three contributions to the scholarship of workplace learning and employee well-being. First, it proceeds a narrow, mechanism format elucidation of how learning procedures operate as either resources or demands. Second, it combines relational (psychological safety), structural (feedback systems) and identity dimensions in the framework of a coherent analysis. Third, it provides the practical implications of creating the feedback cultures and psychologically safe learning environments that would increase the sustainability of engagement and decrease the strain. Thus, the paper addresses demands of contextualised and theoretically-based studies into the relationship between how workplace learning contributes to, or undermines, individual and collective well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Workplace Learning as a Relational Process

The concept of a workplace learning is becoming more of a relational and socially entrenched phenomenon instead of a training event. Modern organisations in the impact of digital transformation and hybrid work arrangements are based on ongoing and practice-based learning that is included in everyday work interactions. The process of learning occurs by way of feedback discussions, teamwork in solving problems, observation, trial and error. These processes are relational processes which are influenced by the team dynamics, supervisor practices and organisational climate.

Nevertheless, learning is not necessarily developmental. Based on the resource based views of work stress (Hobfoll, 1989) and the demand and control paradigms (Karasek and Theorell, 1990), learning at the workplace may be a resource increasing motivation and development or demand that increases strain. Learning is a contributor to sustainable well-being but this will vary according to the structural and relational conditions of learning.

The present research conceptualises workplace learning as a relational process mediated by two important mechanisms, which include feedback quality and psychological safety.

Feedback Quality as a Developmental Mechanism

Feedback is one of the most ubiquitous ways of learning in the workplace. It determines the interpretation of expectations by the employees, the estimation of performance and the development of competence. Developmental feedback which is characterised by clarity, timeliness, constructive and growth orientation serve as resources that promote perceived competence and mastery of tasks. Motivationally, this feedback facilitates intrinsic motivation; it enhances efficacy by eliminating ambiguity and boosting efficacy.

On the other hand, inconsistent, evaluative and/or performance-focused feedback can be a demand. Under the conditions where employees are exposed to feedback mostly in form of monitoring or in form of criticism, learning

can be equated with anxiety and not development. In that case, doubt about expectations can increase the level of stress and decrease involvement.

Therefore, the quality of feedback becomes a conditional process: it can either make the learning processes in the workplace to strengthen competency and clarity, or it can also add to strain and ambiguity.

Psychological Safety as a Relational Mechanism

Psychological safety: It is generally believed that individuals are free to give ideas, questions and confesses without the fear of being sanctioned negatively (Edmondson, 1999). One relational base of learning at workplace is psychological safety and through this base learning behaviours such as experimentation, feedback-seeking and collaborative dialogue are facilitated.

Employees are also highly likely to engage in reflective learning and share open discussion, admit knowledge gaps and learn as a team with high rates of psychological safety. These circumstances enhance trust, group efficacy and emotional safety. Learning is collaborative but not self-defensive.

Quite the contrary, fear, over-judgment or interpersonal risk characterised climates inhibit voice and reduce the willingness to participate in developmental interactions. This process of learning may then turn into acting against real and this may heighten stress and emotional emptiness. Psychological safety is therefore not only affecting the behaviour of the learning process but also the learning process in terms of emotions.

Linking Learning Mechanisms to Well-Being Outcomes

Based on the demand-resource views, the research will be concerned with three outcomes of well-being in the case of the early-career professionals:

Work Engagement

Work engagement is an optimistic, satisfying professional condition that is marked by power and participation as well as devotion. The relations resources include developmental feedback and psychologically safe climates, which elicit motivation and long-lasting engagement in workplace activities.

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is one of the primary aspects of strain, which is characterized by weakness and exhaustion. Contexts of learning that are typified by overmonitoring, ambiguity in expectation or low psychological safety can escalate mental and emotional load, which leads to exhaustion.

Professional Identity Clarity

Professional identity clarity can be defined as confidence and coherence in terms of professional role and abilities. Feedback and social interaction tend to be used by early-career professionals in building their professional self-concept. Identity development can be strengthened by supportive learning mechanisms and create identity confusion under ambiguous or unsafe environments.

CONCEPTUAL PROPOSITION

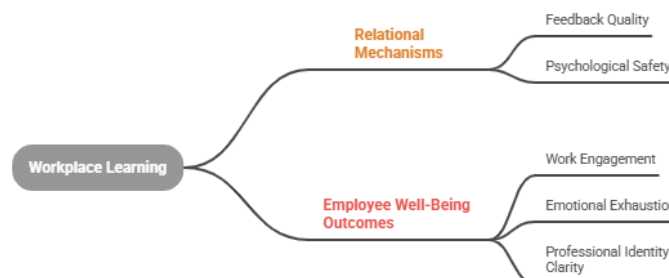
This paper makes a narrow conceptual postulation:

Quality of feedback and psychological safety: Relational mechanisms: Workplace learning influences work engagement, emotional exhaustion and clarity of professional identity among early-career professionals.

The mechanism-based lens allows the framework to abandon the traditional premise that learning is presumed to be good. It, instead, addresses the contextual and relational circumstances on which workplace learning contributes to sustainable well-being, or, conversely, adds to strain. This view is congruent with the recent demands of the learning scholarship in workplaces to both critically analyze how learning processes are enacted in practice and how they influence the individual and group outcomes.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Relational Mechanisms Linking Workplace Learning and Employee Well-Being

Workplace Learning and Employee Well-Being



The conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in figure 1. The model locates workplace learning as a socially constructed process that transpires in daily feedback activities and learning exchanges in teams. Instead of presuming learning as an inherently positive process, the framework defines two main relational processes that precondition its influence; feedback quality and psychological safety.

Quality of feedback entails how well the feedback is organized, developmental, concrete and growth based. Feedback increases role clarity and perceived competence when of high quality and creates ambiguity and pressure when of low quality and inconsistency.

Psychological safety is based on the mutual belief that employees are able to share their ideas, questions and even make mistakes without having to fear adverse repercussions. Psychological safety is high leading to open discussions and collective learning and psychological safety is low that may repress the voice and strain emotions.

These two mechanisms influence three focused employee well-being outcomes:

1. Work engagement- vitality, engagement and commitment to work.
2. Emotional exhaustion- feelings of exhaustion and fatigue.
3. Professional identity clarity -confidence and coherence over professional role.

The framework suggests that feedback quality and psychological safety as relational resources (or lack thereof) as demands determine the extent to which workplace learning promotes sustainable involvement and identity formation or leads to emotional burnout.

Arrows in the model indicate:

- Learning at the workplace: mediated by feedback quality and psychological safety.
- Relationship to feedback and psychological security → all three well-being outcomes.

The model does not believe that there are direct effects of learning on well-being, but rather it focuses on these mechanisms as pathways of explanation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question:

RQ1: What role is played by structured feedback and psychological safety in learning settings in the workplace among early-career professionals in terms of their well-being?

Through these two mechanisms of relation, the study aims to learn how daily learning interactions influence the primary well being outcomes, namely work engagement, emotional exhaustion and professional identity clarity. Instead of treating workplace learning as developmental in nature, the research takes a mechanism-based view to investigate the situational circumstances in which learning serves as a resource enhancing sustainable engagement or situations in which learning serves as a demand contributing to strain.

METHOD

Sample and Context

The sample consisted of young professionals that finished their postgraduate degree in management shortly before and that were in their first full-time positions in their corporations. This sample was chosen since the education-workplace transition is a crucial stage of professional identity formation, forming and the adjusting to the performance feedback system.

The sample contained employees working in different functions of corporate organisations in HR, finance, marketing (major representation) and operations (limited representation). A purposive sampling approach was utilized because the participants that were sampled had first-hand exposure to structured feedback, supervision and appraisal system within their first months of employment. Such a method facilitated the gathering of experience-based knowledge that was deeply related to the aim of the research that was the dynamics of feedback among early-career professionals.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews and 1 focus group discussion were utilized to obtain qualitative data. The study involved 22 participants (17 individual interviews and one focus group discussion with five participants).

Interviews were done soon after the participants had gone through their first onboarding and early performance review cycles, so their thoughts and reflections were current and experience-related. Interviews took around 40-50 minutes and the focus group discussion taken around 75-90 minutes.

The interview guide contained open-ended questions that enquired on:

- The experiences of getting feedback.
- Feeling of psychological safety on teams.
- Emotional reactions towards monitoring and evaluation.
- Effects of feedback on motivation, exhaustion and professional identity.

All respondents gave informed consent before taking part. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder with consent and transcribed in their original form to be analyzed.

The data was collected until theoretical saturation that is, no significant new themes were being created in the course of subsequent interviews.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative exploratory design was chosen in order to investigate the role of dynamics of workplace feedback on engagement, emotional exhaustion, and professional identity formation. Early-career professionals in HR, finance, marketing (major representation), and operations (limited representation) were interviewed semi-structured and in focused group discussions (FGDs).

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants in order to come in contact with the structured performance feedback systems. To investigate: a set of open-ended questions was created in the form of an interview guide.

- Type and quality of feedback obtained.
- Perceived team psychological safety.
- Affective reactions to monitoring and evaluation.

- Feedback and motivation effects and professional identity.

The interviews took about 35-50 minutes and were done by either face to face or video conferencing. Informed consent has been used to audio-record and transcribe sessions verbatim to be analyzed.

Ethical Considerations and Data Management

The study was done voluntarily, and informed consent was taken before data collection. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and the identifying information was eliminated in the process of transcription. Every respondent was identified by a coded number (e.g., P1, P2).

The audio tapes and transcripts were safely kept in online folders with passwords that were only accessible to the research team. The information was stored only to use it in academics and it will be stored safely as required by ethics of the institutional research.

No confidential personal information was gathered. The participants were made aware of their right to drop out without any repercussion.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was used as a part of a multi-stage coding procedure:

1. Familiarisation The transcripts were read more than once to get a general sense of what the participants experienced.
2. Open Coding- Significant pieces of text were labelled in order to create starting codes (e.g., monitoring anxiety, career clarity, encouraged inquiry).
3. Axial Coding - The similar codes were combined into themes of higher order like Feedback Quality, Feedback Pressure, Psychological Safety, Fear Climate and Identity Formation.
4. Theme Categorisation Themes were then categorised in Mechanisms (contextual drivers) and Outcomes (engagement, emotional exhaustion, professional identity).
5. Validation - Themes were compared between transcripts to establish internal consistency and idea compatibility with the study structure.

Research Design

The proposed research assumes the qualitative exploratory design to investigate the influence of structured feedback and psychological safety on employee well-being in learning environments at the workplace. In line with a constructivist epistemology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), the research presumes that workplace learning experience and the sense of well being is a socially constructed interaction, interpretation and professional socialisation.

The focus group approach was chosen to help obtain common interpretations and joint meaning-making processes. Learning at the workplace is relational and an intrinsic part of the team interaction, supervisor practices and feedbacks. The group discussion format thus allowed the participants to not only cogitate on personal experiences but also on general organisational norms that impact engagement and strain.

The work gave precedence to the richness of the interactional understanding than scope of representation. Since the study was exploratory and mechanism-based, and not testing the hypothesis in general, an individual focus group offered an adequate context of studying the relationship dynamics in depth.

Participants and Sampling

The respondents were those in early-career that had one to five years of full-time employment experience in various industries, both corporate and service and knowledge-based industries. Purposive sampling approach was used to make sure that the participants were exposed to structured workplace learning procedures like performance feedback schemes, mentoring schemes, team projects or official training programs.

The size of the focus group was seven participants, which allowed a thorough level of conversation along with the ability to have a good level of interaction and the ability to interpret it.

Data Collection

There was one semi-structured focus group session, which was approximately 90 minutes in duration. The discussion guide was structured on two focal learning mechanisms at the workplace:

- Structured feedback experiences (clarity, tone, developmental orientation, usefulness)
- Psychological safety perceptions (comfort in raising concerns, posing questions, and acknowledging errors)

The participants were also asked to consider how these experiences affected them:

- Work engagement
- Emotional burnout or fatigue.
- Professional identity and professional sense of belonging.

The dialogue provided flexibility into the participants to expound on the contextual aspects and interpersonal forces that influence their experience. This session was audiotaped with informed consent and transcribed word-to-word to be analyzed.

Data Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse data based on the six phases of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method has been chosen due to its flexibility in recognizing patterned meanings in the qualitative data and was also capable of aligning to the conceptual focus of the study. The analytical lens was used informed by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) perspective as a sensitizing approach, to focus the attention to the influences of feedback and psychological safety as perceived resources or demands, without assuming model testing.

The steps of the analysis were carried out in four steps:

1. Familiarisation: Reading of the transcript repeatedly to get a sense of immersion and first level analytical understanding.
2. Initial Coding: The descriptive and interpretive codes based on feedback quality, experience of psychological safety and well-being will be generated.
3. Theme Development: Themes represent an identification of related codes and development of a broader theme as to how participants related the mechanisms of learning in the workplace to engagement, exhaustion and identity development.
4. Refinement and Interpretation: Checking themes to coherence, exploring the relationships between mechanisms and effects and coming up with a conceptually integrated account.

The manual coding was a process of coding through the iterative comparison. The deductive sensitisation to the two focal mechanisms was combined with inductive identification of well-being patterns that were being created by the narratives of the participants in the analysis. Instead of measuring the responses, attention was drawn to the interpretive depth and the use of illustrative quotations to show how the conditions of relational learning influenced well-being experiences.

Trustworthiness

Various measures to increase credibility, transparency and analytical coherence were adopted in order to achieve methodological rigour in conducting the research.

To begin with, the analysis was accompanied with an audit trail, which documented decisions to be made in coding, theme development and theoretical reflections. This gave clarity on the way raw data were transformed into a greater order of themes.

Second, there were reflexive memos in the course of the coding in order to critically look at the way JD-R sensitising framework had an effect on interpretation. This was to make sure that theoretical direction did not limit inductive findings that came out of the narratives of the participants.

Third, the themes were subjected to the recurrent review in order to secure internal consistency and explicit correspondence between data extracts, codes, and final thematic categories. Special attention was paid to the consistency of the constructivist epistemological position and the theory-driven analytical framing.

Lastly, the illustrative quotes were employed to ensure that the voices of the participants were not lost and to show interpretive grounding of the data to enhance the credibility and reliability of the results.

Data Analysis

In keeping with the research objective, the present study utilized the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) to investigate the relationship that exists between structured feedback and psychological safety and the well-being of employees in the learning environment at work. The reason why thematic analysis was chosen was due to its flexibility and the ability to produce rich and contextualised information on the lived experiences of participants. This methodology is especially well adapted to the discussion of relational dynamics and meaning-making processes in the workplace settings.

The presented data were interpreted in the six-phase framework suggested by Braun and Clarke:

- (1) familiarisation with the data;
- (2) generating initial codes;
- (3) searching for themes;
- (4) reviewing themes;
- (5) defining and naming themes; and
- (6) producing the final report.

It used a theory-based sensitising lens which was based on the Job Demands Resources (JD-R) framework to inform the coding process (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R view was used to control the focus on the description of structured feedback and psychological safety by the participants as resources (learning-related) that supported engagement and identity clarity, or as the conditions that exacerbated the demands and emotional exhaustion.

First coding incorporated deductive focus on the two focal mechanisms (feedback quality and psychological safety) and inductive focus on well-being patterns that were identified based on narrative of participants. Codes were then narrowed down and grouped into themes which described the degree to which the conditions of learning at work influenced engagement, strain and development of professional identity.

Analysis was more interpretative than quantitative with illustrative quotations being used to show how the relational learning mechanisms were experienced in practice. Such theoretically informed but reflexive methodology made it possible to develop a mechanism-based account of the impacts of workplace learning on employee well-being in early-career professionals.

Table 1 presents an illustrative extract of the coding process, demonstrating how verbatim data were developed into initial codes and higher-order themes.

Table 1. Illustrative coding structure

Participant	Industry	Verbatim Quote	Initial Code	Higher-Order Theme	Category
P1	HR	"My manager gives me clear tips on what to improve."	Specific developmental feedback	Feedback Quality	Mechanism

P2	Finance	"They focus on numbers more than learning."	Target-focused feedback	Feedback Pressure	Mechanism
P3	HR	"I'm comfortable asking any questions."	Comfortable speaking up	Psychological Safety	Mechanism
P4	Operations	"We talk openly about mistakes in the team."	Open error discussion	Psychological Safety	Mechanism
P5	Marketing	"When feedback is clear, I'm motivated."	Motivated by clarity	Engagement	Outcome
P6	Finance	"Being constantly watched makes me anxious."	Monitoring anxiety	Emotional Exhaustion	Outcome
P7	Operations	"I now know which role fits me."	Career clarity	Professional Identity	Outcome
P8	Marketing	"Feedback sometimes feels like criticism."	Evaluative tone	Feedback Pressure	Mechanism
P9	HR	"Our leader is always open to questions."	Encouraged inquiry	Psychological Safety	Mechanism
P10	Finance	"Unclear expectations drain me."	Role ambiguity fatigue	Emotional Exhaustion	Outcome
P11	Marketing	"Constructive feedback boosts my confidence."	Confidence building	Engagement	Outcome
P12	Operations	"I hesitate to share new ideas."	Fear of judgment	Fear Climate	Mechanism
P13	HR	"Regular check-ins help me see progress."	Progress tracking	Feedback Quality	Mechanism
P14	Finance	"Appraisal times really exhaust me."	Appraisal stress	Emotional Exhaustion	Outcome
P15	Marketing	"Team discussions make work interesting."	Team-based enthusiasm	Engagement	Outcome
P16	Operations	"Feedback helps me see my growth."	Growth awareness	Professional Identity	Outcome
P17	Finance	"Negative reactions make people hold back."	Suppressed voice	Fear Climate	Mechanism
P18	Marketing	"When my work is recognized, I feel energized."	Recognition energy	Engagement	Outcome
P19	Finance	"High pressure affects my sleep."	Performance strain	Emotional Exhaustion	Outcome
P20	Operations	"I feel more confident in my role now."	Identity strengthening	Professional Identity	Outcome
P21	HR	"Supportive leaders make learning easier."	Supportive leadership	Psychological Safety	Mechanism
P22	Marketing	"If feedback lacks direction, it's discouraging."	Lack of direction	Feedback Pressure	Mechanism

FINDINGS

The review indicated that workplace learning had a effect on well-being by affecting two relational processes that included structured feedback and psychological safety. In line with a Job Demands resources (JD-R) lens, the participants reported such mechanisms to play either a learning-related resources role, which increased engagements

and clarity of professional identity, or to play a contextual-demand role, which increased strain and emotional exhaustion.

Structured Feedback: Developmental Resource or Performance Demand

Participants always differentiated developmental feedback and evaluative or inconsistent feedback.

When feedback was also specific, improvement-focused and dialogic, it also improved role clarity and perceived competence. Respondents indicated that they had better expectations, mastery of tasks and confidence in making decisions. This feedback minimised uncertainty, and offered guidance especially at initial stages of career that is defined by confusion. In such circumstances, the feedback was perceived as a source of learning that provided employees with energy and enhanced a feeling of professional development.

A large number of participants said that an atmosphere of growth and a conversation about feedback were more engaging and motivating towards improvement, when they were not related to the performance outcomes alone. This experience of feedback that was resource based was strongly linked to an increase in work engagement as was measured in energy, persistence and proactive learning behaviour.

On the contrary, when feedback is overly critical, inconsistent or solely evaluative it created pressure and anxiety. The respondents said that they were not certain about the performance criteria and did not want to gain more insight into the feedback that was not detailed. When this occurred, feedback was acting as a contextual request and enhancing perceived demands without offering any developmental feedback.

This kind of experience led to emotional pressure especially when there was no evaluation that was linked to useful coaching. In other cases (some of which concerned young professionals starting their careers), cumulative exhaustion was caused by repeated exposure to ambiguous feedback or high-pressure feedback. Therefore, the quality of feedback made the difference between the motivating and identity-affirming or the depleting and stress-inducing learning episodes.

Psychological Safety: Relational Climate Shaping Learning Experiences

Psychological safety proved to be an important relational condition that influenced the interpretation of feedback and learning interactions.

In organisations where openness and respect were the main features of the team, members said they felt free to ask questions, be able to make mistakes and to be uncertain. Such a relationship climate allowed working together to solve problems and fear of being judged negatively. Learning was explained as group and an experimentative as opposed to defensive.

Psychological safety worked as a relationship resource that enhanced engagement. The participants pointed out that they were more open to experimenting, getting advice and offering ideas when they felt safe to express them. This openness improved the team belonging and strengthened professional confidence. To the early-career professionals, safe environments helped them to explore themselves and understand direction in their careers.

On the other hand, there was a lack of psychological safety that aggravated strain. Participants in low-safety environments reported avoidance of questions, and not having the conversation of feedback and over-monitoring their behaviour. The threat of negative publicity limited learning behaviours and turned normal interactions into stressors.

In these situations, the learning in work places was no longer developmental but performance-based. Energy used emotionally was directed towards impression management in lieu of acquisition of skills. The lack of psychological safety hence acted as a demand situation that increased emotional drainage and diminished involvement.

Interplay Between Mechanisms and Well-Being Outcomes

There were three outcomes of well-being that were present throughout the accounts: work engagement, emotional exhaustion and clarity of professional identity.

Work Engagement

The highest level of engagement occurred when there was developmental feedback accompanied by high psychological safety. Respondents reported feeling energised, valued and motivated to give discretionary effort. The presence of resources in learning conditions created enthusiasm and persistence, which implies that motivational processes are influenced by relational conditions.

Emotional Exhaustion

When there was a co-occurrence of evaluative feedback and low psychological safety, emotional exhaustion developed. There was ambiguity, increased surveillance and the fear of making mistakes which led to a state of prolonged tension. Learning processes became emotionally demanding as opposed to being growth oriented.

Professional Identity Clarity

Development of professional identity was enhanced by positive guidance and encouraging conversation. Before and during the initial years of practice, individuals emphasized that feedback was more organized, which allowed them to know what was expected of them; and, through psychologically safe teams, they could participate realistically. A combination of these processes aided in identity consolidation at the formative career stages.

Comprehensively, the results indicate that workplace learning has a conditional effect on well being. The relational mechanisms that can either mobilise the motivational resources or escalate contextual demands are structured feedback and psychological safety. The effects of learning thus hinge on the excellence of developmental interplay that is entrenched in the organisational practices.

Table 2. Summary of themes and associated well-being outcomes

Higher-Order Theme	Sub-Themes	Linked Outcome
Feedback Quality	Developmental feedback, clarity, constructive tone	Engagement ↑
Feedback Pressure	Evaluative tone, excessive monitoring	Exhaustion ↑
Psychological Safety	Speaking up, collaborative discussion	Engagement ↑ / Identity ↑
Fear Climate	Judgment, hesitation, silence	Exhaustion ↑
Identity Formation	Role clarity, confidence growth	Professional Identity ↑

Notes: Arrows (↑) indicate increased levels of the respective outcome.

DISCUSSION

The results show that workplace learning has two relational functions on employee well-being, namely, structured feedback and psychological safety. In line with a Job Demands resources (JD -R) sensitising lens, respondents referred to these processes as being either learning-related resources that improved engagement and professional identity visibility or as situational demands that increased emotional strain. Experience of learning at the workplace was thus perceived as developmental as a consequence and not as developmental per se.

Theoretical Contributions

To begin with, the results dispute the notion that learning in the workplace is always positive. Although previous literature identifies learning and engagement as well as learning and performance, the current research demonstrates that learning may additionally act as a strain-inducing process when it is incorporated in an evaluative or psychologically unsafe climate. This duality enhances workplace learning scholarship by bringing about conditional perspective.

Second, the conceptual application of JD -R offers a mechanism-based solution to the effect that learning environments have on motivational and strain processes. Structuring feedback and psychological safety act as learning-related resources in the context of developmental and supportive but change to evaluative or fear-inducing demands. This framing seeks to offer a connection between workplace learning and well-being research by answering calls of integrative models between learning practices and employee health outcomes.

Third, the research moves the research on psychological safety forward by framing safety as a relationship enhancer to the quality of learning. Instead of using psychological safety only as a precursor to voice behaviour, psychological safety influenced the interpretation of feedback and the capacity to advance or deteriorate well-being by the process of learning.

Fourth, the results have a contribution to the research on early career development by identifying professional identity clarity as one of the major results of relational learning experiences. The interpretive signs presented through feedback and safe dialogue were used to formulate the understanding of competence and belonging by early-career professionals. This pushes identity research in the organisational contexts.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the findings on practitioners is that learning strategies should be focused on the quality of interaction. The practices of developmental feedback must focus on specificity, dialogue and growth orientation and not necessarily on evaluative assessment only. Equally, the process of development of psychologically safe team climates is necessary to maintain the engagement and avoid exhaustion.

The strategic plan of organisations that invest in regular learning systems must thus incorporate the relational competence training of managers, especially those in charge of early career workers.

FUTURE RESEARCH

These mechanisms can be examined in future research by examining the longitudinal impact of such mechanisms on engagement and identity development. The impact of interaction between the feedback quality and psychological safety could be investigated through quantitative research in JD-R-informed models. Comparative sectoral study can also help to explain situational factors in respective sectors. Further research with quantitative methodology is underway to give more concrete results of freshman study.

CONCLUSION

This paper considered the effects of workplace learning on employee well-being in early-career professionals around two relational processes, including structured feedback and the psychological safety. Going past assumptions of learning being developmental, the results show that workplace learning has a conditional impact on well being. The effect of it is subject to the nature of interactions in feedback and the nature of a relational climate within which learning is incorporated.

Conceptually based on Job Demands Resources (JD-R) framework, the paper indicates that structured feedback and psychological safety can be learning-related resources in case developmental, dialogic and supportive. In such circumstances, learning in the workplace improves engagement in the workplace and clarity of professional identity. On the other hand, evaluative and inconsistent forms of feedback, as well as low levels of psychological safety, increase contextual demands associated with learning and add to emotional exhaustion and reduced engagement.

The results have three important contributions. First, they prolong the learning scholarship in the workplace by incorporating the well-being outlook and illustrating dual possibilities of learning processes. Secondly, they fill a gap between engagement and psychological safety literature by defining relational processes that determine the results of motivation and strain. Third, they add on to the research in early-career development by emphasizing professional identity clarity as an outcome of well-being triggered by daily learning interactions.

In practice, the research highlights that organisations ought to place more emphasis on the quality of interaction in the learning systems. The practices of development feedback and the creation of psychologically safe third-party environments are not a marginal consideration but the key precondition of sustainable involvement and well-being of employees.

On the whole, the research moves towards a relational conceptualisation of workplace learning to place feedback quality and psychological safety as key process by which learning can be invigorating or depleting. Through foregrounding of such processes, the study provides a subtle design of learning settings that can be implemented at work to facilitate performance and employee welfare.

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