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Vocational Education and Training Organisation's Staff Members Perceptions of Positively Deviant Leadership and Organisation

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Abstract

Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations play a key role in preparing young people for the workplace and society of the future. This also means meeting multiple challenges: the skills needs of the world of work are changing rapidly, while the well-being of students is challenged by multiple global crises such as the COVID19 pandemic. These challenges and demands can best be met by skilled and enthusiastic staff in VET organisations: research shows that staff enthusiasm and job satisfaction are linked to organisational performance, efficiency and quality. Previous research has shown that positive leadership and organising are connected to VET organisations' staffs' experiences of holistic, active well-being at work, i. e., enthusiasm and work engagement. It is also suggested that psychological safety and community-related factors are among the mediating factors between positive leadership and work engagement. However, less is known about how positive leadership manifests itself according to staff perception and which factors in positive leadership and organisation are crucial fostering their work engagement. The present study focused on investigating positive leadership and organisation in VET from employees' perspective focusing on experiences of psychological and social safety. The study examined staff perceptions as a case study in one VET organisational unit, which received the best results of the entire VET organization (total 9 units) in the measurement of positive organisational index and work engagement. The perceptions of the staff in this top-unit were investigated by qualitative survey. The research data consisted of open-ended responses from staff members (N=15) which were analysed using data-driven content analysis. The results show that staff perceive the management and organisation of their unit as strengthening trust and fostering a sense of community. The small size of the unit was perceived as a factor contributing to a sense of community and safety. From the data-driven subcategories, four super-categories were formed, which are theoretically linked to basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Furthermore, the results indicated the manifestation of psychological safety. The results are consistent with previous studies on positive leadership but introduce a vocational training perspective. The study also provides new insights for the development of leadership in VET.

Keywords: positive organization, psychological safety, leadership, work engagement

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1. Introduction

Leadership in education and training, especially in VET is in many ways challenging and a unique area. It is a complicated combination of sometimes conflicting goals of educational responsibilities, good learning outcomes and high-performance targets (OECD, 2020). To achieve a balance between these goals a holistic, active well-being – enthusiasm or work engagement – of staff and students is an important foundation on which to build. In management, it is important to promote the well-being of the community and other organizational objectives at the same time.

At a personal level, work engagement is a complex whole, influenced by both personal and work-related demands and resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). On average, we spend more than half of our waking hours at work or in work-related tasks (Adams, 2019). Perceived work engagement and meaningfulness at work affect overall well-being, at the psychological, somatic, and social levels (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Thus, it seems fair to claim that it is in everyone's interest to promote practices that contribute to the work engagement and positive atmosphere of employees. These elements are part of the foundation of a safe working environment. In this study we investigate these foundations, how they are perceived and how they can be enhanced.

Essential concepts and relevant background research

In the field of education and training, the perspective of social safety theory (Slavich, 2020) offers a potentially fruitful approach to the concept of safety. This theory emphasizes the development and maintenance of friendly social relations as a fundamental principle. Threats to this area are a serious cause of stress and even illness. The larger background premise is that the human brain and immune system are constantly monitoring social, physical

and microbial threats from the environment. Thus, this general capacity is also behind the ability to respond to threatening social situations. This is essential for survival in a variety of situations (Slavich, 2020). Psychological safety is an important organizational asset that helps meet work demands and promotes work engagement also in highly demanding work situations and contexts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Dollar & Bakker, 2010).

Leadership and organizational principles and practices that promote well-being are a key area of research in positive organizational research (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Positive organizational research defines well-being at work as a broad, holistic and positive work orientation, a work engagement that has positive effects at the employee level and on performance and quality (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Schaufeli, 2018). Work engagement in education is also well researched (e.g., Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2007), and there is an ongoing discussion on which factors can contribute to staff work engagement and thus improve the quality and performance in education (Wenström et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2020).

Leadership is essential for the quality of education and for student learning outcomes (Bloom, Lemos, Sadun, & van Reenen, 2015; Bush & Glover, 2014; Coelli & Green, 2012). There is research evidence on the impact of leadership on learning outcomes through staff enthusiasm, commitment and work engagement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Wenström, 2020; Wenström & Kuortti, 2022). Research on vocational education and training (VET) has found that human resource management is the area most in need of improvement (Bloom et al., 2015) and that the quality of management varies even between different operational units of the same training provider (Jokinen, Sieppi & Maliranta, 2018). According to The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ, 2021), teachers who perceive the leadership as good also perceive their occupational health as better than others.

Despite the importance of leadership in educational institutions and the recognized challenges associated with it, leadership has been less studied in VET organizations than in other school levels. VET is particularly challenging and interesting in terms of studying the quality and success of leadership because the contexts can vary within the same educational organization.

The theory of positive leadership, which has been extensively researched and developed in Finland, both in VET and in other sectors (Wenström, 2020), offers a new angle to study leadership that promotes well-being and work engagement. As a leadership theory, positive leadership is defined as an umbrella concept for people-centred forms of leadership, such as transformational, ethical, authentic, spiritual and servant leadership (Blanch et al., 2016) or as an application of positive psychology to leadership (Cameron, 2012). Recent research shows that positive leadership can contribute to work engagement by, among other things, affecting job resources, basic psychological needs and by ensuring psychological and social safety (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; 2021).

Positive leadership relates to PRIDE theory which in vocational education and training organizations has been used to examine the construction of leadership and the enhancement of teachers' work engagement (Wenström et al., 2018a; Wenström, 2020), as well as students' perception of positive study environment (Hurskainen, Wenström, & Uusiautti, 2023). PRIDE theory articulates the factors that are linked to well-being and performance in an organization (Cheung, 2014; 2015). Wenström's and colleagues' research uses PRIDE theory as a leadership 'lens' through which 'positive leadership', i.e., building on positive practices, positive interactions, individual strengths and positive emotions and atmosphere, is implemented (Wenström et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Wenström, 2020). Mechanisms between positive leadership and work engagement have been explored through both literature review and meta-analysis (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; 2021; See chapter: Theoretical background)

The PRIDE theory has been further studied and developed in the PoJo - Positive Leadership for Productivity and Wellbeing project at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences, involving around 40 organizations of different sizes from the private and public sectors. In the opening phase of the PoJo project, an initial survey was carried out in the participating organizations, in which the work engagement experienced by the staff was mapped using the UWES-9 measurement (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Following our theoretical framework, i.e., positive organization theory, the realization of work engagement and performance was mapped using a questionnaire consisting of aspects of the PRIDE theory. In total, 4 organizations and 613 respondents participated in the initial survey. Of these, 2 were municipal organizations, 1 was a private SME and 1 was a vocational training organization (municipal training consortium) with 9 operational units participating in the initial survey. The validation of the PRIDE measure and its link with work engagement is the subject of another study in progress. This study will focus on one of the organizational units that participated in the initial survey, which scored the highest on both the positive organization questionnaire and the work engagement measurement. This unit was a vocational education unit in a municipal training consortium.

In line with positive organizational research, the aim of this study is to examine positive deviance using case study methods (Cameron et al. 2003; Lavine & Cameron, 2013; Sharma, 2022; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). According to Spreitzer & Sonenshein (2003) "*positive deviance, defined as intentional behaviors that deviate from the norm in positive ways, is an important mechanism to move beyond the ordinary toward excellence, focusing on the positive end of the bell curve*". The research question is to determine how positive leadership and organisation are manifested according to staffs' perception, i. e. what factors are perceived by staff to lead to a positively deviant result on a measure of positive organization and work engagement.

2. Theoretical background

The research is based on positive organizational research, which applies positive psychology to management, leadership, and organizational development. The approach is based on the idea that by focusing on people's potential, assets, and strengths, it is possible to promote positive outcomes at the organizational level (Cameron et al., 2003). According to Cameron and colleagues (2011), there are three main aspects of positive organizational psychology: (1) focusing on exceptionally positive outcomes or performance; (2) focusing on strengths and seeing opportunities rather than weaknesses and shortcomings; and (3) focusing on well-being, good organizational life and virtues (Cameron et al., 2011). The key aim is therefore to identify the psychological conditions that enable positively deviant behaviour and performance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003).

In order to analyse positive organizational factors, PRIDE theory has been developed to investigate positively deviant behaviour and performance. The theory was originally developed in Hong Kong in a study of organizational change in the social (health and welfare) sector. The components were identified through a literature review and empirically researched and tested (Cheung, 2014). PRIDE is an acronym for the components of a positive organization: P, positive practices; R, relationship enhancement; I, individual attributes; D, positively deviant or dynamic leadership; E, emotional well-being (Cheung, 2014, 2015).

There is strong research evidence on the relevance of the PRIDE theory components. Organizational units with strong positive organizational dimensions also have higher levels of staff well-being, performance, and quality (Cheung, 2014; 2015). Wenström applied, studied, and further developed the theory in the context of Finnish VET and found that the theory is suitable for structuring the factors that contribute to the work satisfaction and enthusiasm experienced by staff (Wenström et al., 2018a; Wenström, 2020). The results of Wenström's multimethod study have been further developed into an indicator instrument, which consists of a 25-item questionnaire composed of the 5 components of the theory. The questionnaire explores staff's experiences of the level at which the elements of a positive organization are implemented in their unit. The instrument has been piloted in the Oulu University of Applied Sciences' PoJo project on positive leadership and is being validated in a second study.

The idea of positive leadership underlying PRIDE-theory, drawing on positive organizational research, can be defined in two ways: (1) as the application of positive psychology to leadership (e.g. Cameron, 2012; Youssef & Luthans, 2012) or (2) as an umbrella concept for various humane, people-centred forms of leadership, such as transformational, ethical, servant, spiritual and authentic leadership (Blanch et al, 2016; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020, 2021; Wenström, 2020)

Positive leadership is characterized by a focus on strengths, assets and building a positive atmosphere. The application of positive psychology, on the other hand, can rely on different models or theories to define and implement positive leadership. For example, the PERMA theory of well-being developed by Seligman (2011) has also been applied to leadership in educational institutions (Oades et al., 2011), while research by Wenström and colleagues (2018a) shows that the PRIDE theory is suitable for describing and structuring the conditions for enthusiasm and work engagement in Finnish VET organizations (Wenström et al., 2018a, Wenström, 2020; see also Hurskainen et al., 2023). This means that by considering the different aspects of PRIDE theory and by developing concrete interventions based on it, the enthusiasm and work engagement experienced by staff can be strengthened and promoted (Cheung, 2014; 2015; Wenström et al., 2018a; Wenström, 2020; Wenström & Kuortti, 2022).

Positive organizational research also defines well-being at work as active and positive well-being, which is more than the absence of factors that impair work performance (Bakker & Derks, 2010; Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Youssef-Morgan & Bockorny, 2013). The concept of work engagement refers to a positive, active, and broad orientation towards work, and is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Work engagement has been found to be associated with both employee health and well-being and positive organizational outcomes (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Schaufeli, 2018).

Research shows that positive leadership influences work engagement through different mechanisms, which have been explained through several theoretical models (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; 2021):

- JD-R or job demands and resources theory (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001): positive leadership can strengthen job resources and meet job demands, f.e.g. social resources including supportive work community.
- SDT or self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000): Positive leadership can be used to support people's basic psychological needs, competence, relatedness, and autonomy.
- SLT or social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The positive leader acts as a social role model, i.e., leads by example.
- SET or social exchange theory (Shore et al., 2006). Positive leadership emphasizes the positive interaction between the leader and the person being led.
- Emotional contagion (Hattfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Positive leadership conveys and reinforces positive emotions (see also Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009)

- Psychological safety, which Kahn (1990) associates with trust, meaningfulness, and the ability to be one's authentic self at work as key manifestations.

In the present study, we are particularly interested in the experience of psychological and social safety as cross-cutting themes of aforementioned factors.

2.1 Basic psychological needs

Most motivation theories assume that people are motivated to act when they believe that an action will lead to a desired outcome (Deci & Ryan 2000). Self-determination theory (SDT) is a humanistic theory based on the assumption that people are intrinsically motivated, enthusiastic, and lifelong learners whose motivation is influenced by the social environment and how it meets the individual's basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT is interested in the factors related to the social environment that influence human motivation, social functioning, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When people are intrinsically motivated, they are also more productive and creative at work (Olafsen, Deci & Halvari, 2018). SDT theory has therefore been examined in research from a work-life perspective and linked to research on work engagement and job resources (e.g., Albrecht, 2013; Gagné & Vansteenkiste, 2013; Metin et al., 2016). It has even been suggested that work engagement and intrinsic motivation have largely convergent definitions, conditions and manifestations (Gagné & Vansteenkiste, 2013).

According to Gagné & Vansteenkiste (2013), a person's sense of competence is supported by an environment in which they experience a sense of control, are able to use and develop their skills and competences and meet sufficient challenges and receive feedback. A sense of autonomy is strengthened by an opportunity to influence one's own work and make decisions, and by experiences of meaningfulness and inclusion. A sense of relatedness (belonging) is supported by social relationships, opportunities for collaboration and support from colleagues and supervisors (Gagné & Vansteenkiste, 2013). Work environments that meet basic psychological needs can lead to well-being and lasting behavioural change, satisfaction, commitment and positive attitudes towards work, and work engagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Basic psychological needs also serve as job resources that help maintain and promote work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Metin et al., 2016).

2.2 Psychological safety

The study of psychological safety can be considered to have started in the 1990s, but thematically closely related research has been done even before that. For example, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1945) is essentially related to the basics of psychological safety. The concept of psychological climate has been used since the 1970s (e.g., James & al. 1978) and it also includes elements of psychological safety. Psychological climate means 'employees' perceptions of their work environment' and it has been a widely researched area (see e.g., Toprak, M., & Karakus, M. (2018).

Psychological safety has become more widely known with Google's Aristotle project which claimed it to be the most important success factor for teams (Rozovsky, 2015). Google's Aristotle project was not openly accessible and thus not scientifically valid, but the concept gained increasing attention. According to a meta-analysis by Frazier et al. (2017), psychological safety is associated with work engagement, job satisfaction, team learning ability, knowledge sharing, creativity and performance (Frazier, Fainschmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheca, 2017). As noted, psychological safety is also a mediating mechanism between positive leadership and work engagement (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021; see also Frazier et al., 2017).

The earliest definitions of psychological safety involve the ability to take risks, and to fail and make mistakes without a fear of blame (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Kahn (1990), whose research is also the earliest study of work engagement, links psychological safety to psychological commitment at work. Kahn's (1990) definition emphasizes the possibility of being oneself at work. More recent definitions tend to emphasize social safety, referring to an individual's experience of whether it is safe to take social risks in a group (Edmondson, 1999). The social aspect is particularly important when considering learning and creativity in the workplace (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Enthusiasm and work engagement are also social phenomena that are significantly influenced by the support of the work community (Wenström et al., 2018b; Wenström, 2020). In addition, it is also important to consider different levels of social contexts. According to Ling Bin (2010) psychological safety is a multi-hierarchy construct that takes into account individual, group and organizational levels.

One of the essential concepts closely related to psychological safety is trust (Frazier et al., 2017). We use the concept of trust following the definition proposed by Rousseau et al. (1998) as 'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another'. As with psychological safety, it is important to remember the importance of trust as a starting point for working together and its further development as a result of collaboration (Tufan et al., 2023). Communication evolves over time, but the sharing of information among network members demonstrates trust (e.g., Gillespie & Mann, 2004). All processes should involve discussion and joint decision-making, and participants should feel that information

is safe and not being misused. Otherwise, mistrust will result.

Researchers have also called for more research into the origins of psychological safety and the issues that influence it (Frazier et al., 2017). In a study by Frazier and colleagues (2017), the research hypothesis was that psychological safety is associated with positive leader relations, work design characteristics (e.g., autonomy, interdependence) and supportive work context, among other factors (Frazier et al., 2017).

According to Kahn (1990), psychological safety arises from positive interpersonal relationships, collaboration, leadership, and organizational norms. Several researchers also link psychological safety to various personality traits (Frazier et al., 2017). Although psychological safety is created in the community, in the social environment, it is an individual's experience, influenced by his or her personality, individual experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs, from the individual's 'emotional home' (often related to early childhood emotional relationships and prevailing emotional atmosphere) and early interactions up to experiences in working life.

The humanistic and socio-constructivist perspective on which positive leadership is based emphasizes the relevance of human experience (Crotty, 1998; Gergen 1999; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). A person's individual experience is true for them and influences their behaviour as a member of the work community and organization (Doldor, Silvester, Atewologun, 2017). From this perspective, it is important to examine the experiencing of psychological safety using qualitative methods and through the experience of the individual (Edmonson & Lei, 2014; see also Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015; Rich, 2016).

3. Materials and methods

This study uses a generic qualitative approach (Lichtman 2013), which aims to explore people's experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon under study. The qualitative approach allows to find new perspectives and to explain the phenomenon in a holistic way. Qualitative research increases our understanding of how people think, feel and behave at work, and has therefore been used in research on motivation, well-being at work, leadership, organizational change and development (Doldor et al., 2017). Qualitative research has the potential to focus attention on the individual experience (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013).

The study can also be characterized as a case study. Case study requires a particular choice of what is to be studied. In this case the study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest on this particular case (Stake 2003, 135–137). The object of study is one unit in an VET institution, a group of employees and their perceptions and experiences because based on an earlier quantitative measurement, the unit had achieved the best results in terms of work engagement and in the dimensions of positive organization (see also Karima, 2023). This qualitative research aims to explore people's perceptions and experiences behind the measurement results, i.e., how the staff perceived the positively deviant results to manifest in practice (Cameron et al., 2003). We may also call this study as instrumental case study since a particular case is examined to provide insights to redraw generalizations (Stake, 2003, 137)

3.1 Participants and data

The aim was, in line with positive organisational scholarship practices, to identify factors behind positively deviant results. The research data was collected through a qualitative survey in April 2021 as part of a staff meeting in the unit, at the beginning of which the results of the PoJo baseline survey were presented to the staff and the upcoming follow-up study was announced. Some staff started completing the survey immediately, overall, the survey was open for 2 weeks to allow those who were absent to complete the survey.

The survey data consists of the responses of 15 respondents of the selected unit, which has a total of 19 staff members. Respondents are referred to in the following data samples by codes R1–R15.

The questionnaire loosely followed the PRIDE theory components and the questions of the initial survey, as the aim was specifically to gain further insight into the factors behind the measurement results. The examples of the questions in the questionnaire are Describe the interaction in your work community (unit). What are the ways enabling positive interaction? or Describe how your manager's actions contribute to your well-being and enthusiasm at work?

Respondents were also given the opportunity to make free-form comments or suggestions for improvements to the unit's activities.

3.2 Ethics

Research permission was obtained from the management of the educational organization. Before answering the survey, the participants were informed that participation in the survey is voluntary. In addition, the survey was completely anonymous, and individual respondents cannot be identified. Possible references to the organization have been removed from the research material. In processing the research material, the guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, and the guidelines of the Oulu University of Applied Sciences have been followed.

3.3 Analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis, which Hsieh & Shannon (2005) describe as conventional. Conventional (data-driven) content analysis means that the classification is initially based on the categories that emerge from the data, and theoretical perspectives are only considered when interpreting the results (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002).

Data analysis began by importing the survey responses from Webropol into an Excel format, with all question responses in one file. Next, the responses were broken down into units of meaning, as one response could contain several different items. In total, 192 units of meaning were created from the responses of the 15 respondents. Each unit of meaning was then given a descriptive name, e.g. 'Everyone can be themselves, no one is forced into a particular mould' (V5) which was simplified to 'You can be yourself'. From the simplified expressions, the subcategories of the survey were formed, after which the subcategories were combined to form 12 super-categories. An example of the analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of the analysis

Original expression: 'Strengths are identified and exploited, for example, by allowing staff to do other work than their own when necessary. Sharing strengths and knowledge with each other in cases where you have undergone training that someone else hasn't, passing on knowledge.' (R4)		
Meaning unit	Sub-category	Main category
Strengths are identified and exploited, for example by allowing staff to do other work than their own when necessary.	Work rotation	Practices: developing strengths
Sharing strengths and knowledge with each other in cases where you have undergone training that someone else hasn't, passing on knowledge	Sharing know-how	Recognition and making use of strengths

4. Results

As the result of the data analysis 12 data-driven main categories and 25 sub-categories were formed.

Table 2. Main categories and sub-categories.

1. Qualities of a leader	1. Leader's qualities, including approachable, firm, positive, honest
2. Leader's actions	2. Leader's actions, e.g., supports and helps, is sensitive to emotions, cares for well-being, maintains hope, takes action
3. Independent responsibility	3. Possibility to take responsibility of one's own work 4. A free hand to do things
4. Trust	5. Trust in the work of others 6. Commitment
5. Authenticity	7. Possibility to be your true (authentic) self
6. Identifying and building on strengths	8. Expertise 9. Sharing knowledge 10. Opportunities and challenges of a small unit
7. Opportunities for developing work and developing oneself	11. Opportunities for self-development and training 12. Development of work 13. Appraisal meetings
8. Job characteristics	14. The content and results of work
9. Encounters	15. Valueing others 16. Knowing others 17. Showing an interest in colleagues
10. Cooperation	18. Offering and receiving help 19. Flexibility 20. Pulling together
11. Practices enhancing interactions	21. Meetings and discussions 22. Informal interaction
12. Positive atmosphere	23. An open atmosphere 24. Humor 25. Consideration of emotions

In the main categories 1 and 2, factors related to the leader were highlighted. Respondents described the personal strengths of the director of unit as, for example, being honest and listening, making them easy to approach. Respondents described the director's trust in the staff, reflected in the autonomy and freedom to do things their

own way and to try out new solutions. The director was described as caring and dialogic, but also as a person who leads: taking things forward and taking action and, if necessary, deciding and settling an issue based on their judgement as a leader.

Listening, pushing things forward, honesty and always being there for you, even when things are going badly. Giving freedom to shape work and activities. Positive attitude to all things but can still be decisive when needed. Openness is of course the key. Can treat each person as an individual in the "right way" when you know them well (R14)

In the main categories 3, 4 and 5, respondents describe the realization of responsibility and freedom: they are trusted as employees and are allowed to carry out their work freely and independently. In addition, there is trust in one's colleagues and that everyone does their best. Asking for help is allowed and helping others is encouraged. Respondents also describe confidence in being able to be themselves in the work community.

Each person (teacher) can participate in the planning of the school year and is allowed to modify it. Leadership has an ensuring function, there is trust in the employees. (R13)

I dare to be 'helpless' if something is new to me and I feel totally incapable for the task. I know that I will not be judged, I will always get help. Together we even try to figure out who could help or where we could get help. I can be honest about who I am. (R9)

Everyone gets to be themselves in bringing up their own and shared issues spontaneously and in confidence. You dare to ask everyone for advice, there are no stupid questions. You get help with different things when you need it. (R3).

Colleagues are experts in their field. I appreciate that. (R1).

In the main categories 6, 7 and 8, respondents describe factors relating to identifying, using, and developing different strengths and the content of work. In a small unit where people know each other, the strengths and competences of others are also known. Sharing competences is natural, but the culture of helping described above also encourages people to step outside their own area of strengths. The unit also capacitates skills development and has existing practices for this at organizational level. The practice of appraisal talks is also mentioned as a positive practice. In addition, respondents describe their work as interesting and challenging

There are so many areas of work/tasks that everyone can do a variety of things if they want to. It is possible to do a lot of different things. You also get to do things that are not always in your area of strength, and it has often happened that you get excited about this area as you gain experience, and it becomes your comfort zone. Each person shares his or her skills in the team without any constraints (Admittedly, time is sometimes a constraint). (R7).

In a work community, it is possible to try new ways of doing things. It is allowed to have fun at work. The supervisor and the work community encourage the development of skills and the whole work community is happy when someone develops their own skills. The work community works together to develop their own skills and professional growth. (R5)

We have appraisal talks every year and you can bring up your own strengths and areas for development, the need for training, etc. When you attend a training course, you can present your competence to the team and share it with others. We are very happy to use everyone's strengths in a positive way. The head of the unit has noticed my organizational skills and asks me to do different things because he trusts them to be done quickly and smoothly. (R3)

Vocational training is constantly evolving, so the work is not boring. The variety of the job and the excitement of learning new things. (R7)

The main categories 9, 10, 11 and 12 highlight factors related to interaction, community, and atmosphere. The small size of the unit and the compactness of the premises are cited as enabling everyday encounters and informal interaction, which has the effect of fostering a sense of community, trust, sharing knowledge and helping others. It also allows for flexibility and uncomplicatedness in agreeing on things. The atmosphere in the unit is perceived as safe and respectful of others, and the work community also allows people to express their feelings freely. The community was described as welded together partly because of external pressures and threats - there is a habit of pulling together because there have been many threats to its existence. Humour is also mentioned in several responses, but it is possible to share one's own concerns and challenging feelings. Interaction is also fostered by meeting and discussion practices and informality: the threshold for discussion is low, both with superiors and with colleagues.

In a small unit, people often meet face to face. Work related information can be passed on simply in passing. We've known each other for a long time, so everyone fits in naturally. There is a lot of laughter in the coffee room in the mornings and afternoons. I respect my colleagues. Sometimes I must ask for help, and I get it every time. Reciprocity also works well. We work together as teachers of different subjects. And we all are willing to go the extra mile! If you need to change rooms for your teaching or whatever, or you're late for lunch or your car needs to be connected to the engine heating system in the parking lot, a chat with colleagues is all it takes. (R1)

In a small unit it is quite natural to interact, and everyone knows each other well. (R11)
In addition to formal workplace meetings and team meetings, there are informal multi-professional discussions on a daily basis. These informal meetings often contribute more than the formal ones. The unit's management team meets quite often and tackles acute issues. In addition, all staff can approach the head of unit and other managers in a natural and uncomplicated manner. (R15)
Our mornings often start with morning coffee where, because of the rush, we only have time to exchange a few words (often I don't even sit down). Humour and listening to others are important. I know I won't be judged no matter what I say. (R9)

5. Discussion

Since numerous factors mediating positive leadership practices to work engagement are suggested in previous research (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021), it's also valuable to investigate staffs' perceptions directly. The results' categories of this qualitative case study can be examined through the theoretical perspectives presented in previous research (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021). In this study, the main categories can be structured and summarized specifically around the experience of basic psychological needs and psychological safety as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Experiencing basic psychological needs and psychological safety

One of the key factors for a well-functioning organization and leadership is trust (Cameron, 2012), which a leader can promote through his or her actions (Mishra & Mishra, 2012; Tufan et al., 2023). In the current study, trust emerged as both a leader-generated and a work-community-built quality. A leader demonstrates his or her own trustworthiness, for example, by driving the work community forward, making decisions when necessary and taking responsibility in a tight spot, as well as by standing up for his or her work community and maintaining optimism when faced with external pressures. As Mishra & Mishra (2012) describe, demonstrating their own integrity by keeping their promises even in small things and being true to their word, a leader can create positive action and a virtuous cycle that can lead to lasting change and build a climate and culture of trust in the organization. This virtuous cycle showed in the findings of the study as a culture of mutual helping and collaborating, having the courage to ask for help and trusting in the skills of others. When there is a high level of trust in the work community, it is also possible to express one's own challenging feelings, incompetence and insecurity and to trust others to help.

The key skills which are expected of a leader, encountering, listening and being present, were also highlighted in the results of this study (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2022; Olafsen et al., 2018). Trust does not emerge without interaction. The small size of the organizational unit as an enabler of interaction emerged in many places in the study. When the unit is small, natural encounters occur, people get to know each other better and thus gain an

understanding of each other's strengths and ways of working. This all contributes to familiarity, security, and trust between people. This finding raises the question of the extent to which the size of the community influences the sense of psychological safety and the building of trust, and this is one of our areas for further research. Previous research has highlighted the temporary and project-based nature of employment relationships as a challenge because people do not have time to get to know each other (Salmivaara, Martela & Hekkilä, 2020). In this context, leadership that supports interaction and dialogue plays an important role (Frazier et al., 2017). As our findings show, in a psychologically safe workplace, difficult issues are discussed, and different emotions are encountered. Managing emotions and atmosphere is also a key aspect of positive leadership, where both the leader's own recognition and reflection of emotions and interaction practices are important (Wenström et al., 2018a, 2019; Wenström, 2020).

From the perspective of basic psychological needs, autonomy in particular is seen to play an important role in motivation. When an employee has the opportunity to act autonomously, he or she usually also has the opportunity to act in a way that enhances competence and a sense of relatedness (Olafsen et al., 2018). In the results of this study, competence emerged particularly through the identification and use of strengths, which is an aspect of positive leadership (Wenström et al., 2018a; Wenström, 2020). The small size of the unit was also seen to play a role here. With a small number of people and a variety of tasks, it is possible to do different kinds of work. On the other hand, a large background organization provided a framework for competence development, training and, for example, working in working groups.

Previous research shows that support of the superior has a significant impact on how staff perceive their basic psychological needs to be met (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021; Metin et al., 2016; Olafsen et al., 2018). This study also highlighted the importance of the manager, especially in terms of autonomy. The leader can inhibit or enable autonomy at work. Based on the research data, the leader's actions also played a role in meeting the need for competence, as the leader can enable the use of strengths, for example through experimentation with different work tasks (see also Olafsen et al., 2018). In terms of community, the leader plays an important role as he or she also acts as a role model and leads the work community to work in the same direction (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021). When a leader is committed to his or her organizational unit and holds its ground even in challenging times, it serves as an example to others and thus contributes to the commitment of others to common goals. It is important to recognize that, like the development of trust, the promotion of autonomy is an interactive and continuous process. The identification and reinforcement of factors that respond to individual basic psychological needs is an ongoing process that is built up through personal encounters.

The leader, by virtue of his or her position, has the power to influence organizational practices and structures, for example, how meeting practices support the fulfilment of basic psychological needs and psychological safety (Wenström, 2020). At their best, systematic, and planned practices create clarity, predictability and consistency which have a positive effect on the experienced safety.

5. Conclusion

A key finding of this study is the importance of the small size of the unit for the realization of psychological safety and basic psychological needs, especially the sense of relatedness, in the context of positive leadership and organization. As the unit in question is part of a larger educational organization, it may be considered whether a similar organizational structure would have advantages for achieving work engagement. Even a large organization may be appropriately composed of smaller units, which are better placed to address basic psychological needs. Large units typically seek cost savings, but it is good to ensure that these savings are not at the expense of staff well-being and job satisfaction, which also play a role in quality and performance. In educational institutions, it is particularly important to consider the interconnectedness of staff and student well-being, i.e., staff well-being is also a prerequisite and starting point for student well-being and learning (Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). Other studies have also provided indications of the importance of a community, traditions and a close cooperation between staff members for the success of VET students (Jäppinen, 2010). Organizing the activities of even large educational institutions into sufficiently small units could help in creating teams where both staff and students experience psychological safety and fulfilment of their basic needs, which in turn are further reflected in better work engagement, pedagogical well-being and thus performance, also measured by business indicators.

Another key issue is the type of teams that make up the organization and the relationship of the head of unit/supervisor to these teams. Even in a large organization, team structures and different mentoring models can be used to create practices which enhance psychological safety and respond to basic needs of the daily work. Ultimately, these issues also come back to management. By identifying the factors of positive deviance, the factors that generate them can be built into different models of leadership. The key findings of this study relate to the quality of interactions, which is in line with previous similar studies (e.g., Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021).

An important point to note is that to contextualize the advantages of smaller units, we should remember to also consider the advantages of larger units and the weaknesses of smaller units. New solutions should therefore, for example, maintain low-threshold cooperation in organizations and avoid retreating into silos (Forsten-

Astikainen, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, Lämsä, Heilmann, & Hyrkäs, 2017). The creation of new ways of working and structures can possibly temporarily weaken both psychological safety and the fulfilment of basic psychological needs, because there is ambiguity in the ways of working. The ability to react to changes is a good measure of psychological safety.

In studying psychological safety, it is important to remember that it is about the experience of the individual in relation to the community. From the perspective of positive organizational research and leadership, this means that the individual's experience is true for him or her. Each individual experiences and interprets the issues and phenomena of his or her work environment in the context of his or her own experiences, beliefs and individual strengths. Therefore, strengthening psychological safety involves listening to people's experiences and meeting them in an appreciative way.

This study has explored, through staff perceptions, what triggers the kind of positively deviant behaviour, which shows in measurable outcomes in our framework and, for example, in work engagement. The results highlight the importance of leadership, autonomy, competence and relatedness, which can be seen as being at the heart of psychologically safe leadership and organization that meets basic psychological needs.

6. Concluding remarks

The research provides valuable insights for leadership development and leadership coaching programs. Our frame of reference is positive leadership, but the research highlights the communal and reciprocal construction of trust, psychological safety, and basic psychological needs in the work community and in all leadership interactions when leading and managing people in everyday work situations. It is therefore important that leadership is developed both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' and at both individual and community levels. Psychological safety is not created by the leader alone, but not without the leader and his or her example. This observation supports, among other things, the implementation of leadership coaching programs as community processes. Furthermore, these positive leadership coaching and development programs offer an important object of study in themselves as the experiences gained in them and their effectiveness at workplace and work community level help to further understand the nuances of positive leadership in practice.

In addition to the community perspective, it is important for leadership coaching programs to take into account the personal reflection of the leader. In line with previous studies (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021; Wenström, 2020), this study highlights the importance of trust. Trust is the starting point of the humanistic conceptualization of an individual on which positive leadership is based. Building trust is also a communal process, which is supported by the findings of our study on the communal construction of basic needs and reciprocity. From a leadership development perspective, it is important to guide leaders to examine their thinking and conceptualizations of the human, for example in relation to a systematic communal construction of trust. Leaders' own experiences of developing as a positive leader and the factors that support this are therefore also important topics for future research.

The study also generates other topics for further research by developing a method for assessing people's experiences of psychological safety and fulfilment of basic psychological needs, which makes it possible to measure, evaluate and discuss people's different experiences in the workplace. Our next study will aim to validate the indicator instrument built on the results of this research. In addition, interventions at workplace level to discuss psychological safety and basic needs are useful areas for future research.

7. Limitations

Although the results of a qualitative study cannot be generalized as such to all organizations, it is possible to apply or transfer the results to other similar organizations (on applicability, see: Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The most obvious limitation of a case study is the small size of the data and the perspective of one small organizational unit. On the other hand, this has allowed a particular focus on one positively deviating unit (Cameron et al., 2003). The size of the unit studied corresponds to a typical team size in large organizations and the results can therefore be applied to the organization of team activities in general.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no competing interests to declare.

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