HE WHO HAS EARS, LET HIM HEAR

BUILDING THE CANDID ORGANIZATION FROM THE BOTTOM UP

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He Who Has Ears, Let Him Hear

Abstract:

The interest in employee voice is currently on the rise, specifically because of its potential to improve organizational performance in an increasingly competitive world. Nonetheless, it is a fact that employees more often than not decide to remain silent, and there are insufficient recommendations in the literature on how to enhance employee voice. The purpose of this thesis is to fill a research gap concerning how certain organizational conditions, namely psychological safety, humble leadership and person-organization fit, influence employee voice. In order to answer the research question, a qualitative single-case study was conducted at a social enterprise. The findings suggest that psychological safety positively influences employee voice. Similarly, humble leadership influences employee voice positively. A strong person-organization fit in terms of value congruence was found to help stir employee behavior in a streamlined direction, through the mechanism of serving as a compass for employees, consequently influencing employee voice in a positive direction. However, the existence of a high degree of person-organization fit beginning at recruitment was also found to inherently exclude certain types of employee voice, i.e. influencing specific types of employee voice negatively. Additionally, the concepts were found to reinforce each other, either leading to virtuous or vicious cycles in terms of influencing employee voice.

Keywords:

   employee voice, psychological safety, humble leadership, person-organization fit

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Table 1: Definition of Concepts

Concept	Definition
Employee Voice	The unrestricted giving of information, with the intention to improve the organization, from employees to leaders (Detert & Burris, 2007).
Psychological Safety	The tacit belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999).
Humble Leadership	A feature of the leader-follower relationship which denotes the leader's willingness to view himself realistically, showing appreciation for the follower's strengths and input and the ability to learn (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013).
Person-Organization Fit (P-O fit)	The extent to which an individual perceived a fit between his or her own values and that of the organization in which he or she works (Piasentin & Chapman, 2006).

Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Background

The interest in employee voice has increased in the last decades (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011), particularly due to its capacity to improve organizational performance and employee representation (Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington & Ackers, 2004). It is said to be critically important for modern organizations to flourish, given that they now exist in a world which is increasingly characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Schein & Schein, 2018). Considering this, it is no wonder that academics are enthusiastically diving into the topic and organizations are seeking strategies to enhance voice in their *modus operandi*. In spite of this race to gain competitive advantage by creating the right conditions for employee voice, it is a fact that employees more often than not choose to keep their suggestions for improvement and complaints to themselves, in the belief that the costs of speaking up outweigh the benefits (Detert & Burris, 2007).

The silence certainly becomes an organizational flaw of failing to capitalize on the unique insights which frontline employees oftentimes bear in terms of improving operations. If leaders were to learn how to implement effective strategies for promoting a safe environment instead, they would have a powerful tool for inviting employees to utilize their full talent (Edmondson, 2018) and to help them cope well with change (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Fostering such a climate can in other words help organizations "*take off the brakes that keep people from achieving what is possible*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 21).

There are a number of conditions which are said to affect employee voice (Detert & Burris, 2007). Nonetheless, the focal point of this thesis is three theories; psychological safety, humble leadership and person-organization fit (hereafter, P-O fit). Psychological safety is the tacit belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking, and if employees perceive that the organizational climate is open and trusting, they are more likely to share their knowledge (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2018). This is to a great degree intertwined with the theory of humble leadership. It is said to be mainly the leaders' role to foster a psychologically-safe environment, and other than setting the tone for the rest of the organization, they are also responsible for role modeling behavior which followers then adopt (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). If leaders lead with humility, i.e. view themselves realistically, show appreciation for others' input and abilities and exhibit teachability (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013), then they have set the stage for psychological safety and employee voice. Similarly, high levels of P-O fit, meaning that an individual's values are congruent with those of the organization (Piasentin & Chapman, 2006), are said to enhance their perceived level of psychological safety (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013) and consequently the likelihood of speaking up.

1.2.   Problematization and Contribution of Research

The theories of psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit have previously been investigated and tested as the antecedents to employee voice in the literature, albeit to different degrees, and have proven to influence it positively. One might argue whether it is redundant to conduct yet another study on these concepts' ability to explain choice of voice, but we argue that there is another dimension to be explored that could add value to the literature, namely how they interact, create synergies and build *on* and *to* each other in terms of influencing employee voice, as that has not been investigated. The interactions are especially interesting knowing that the theories do not operate in a vacuum in practice. This is hence a research gap which we intend to contribute to with this thesis. Although the thesis is based on a single-case study, with the consequence that the findings cannot automatically be transferred to other organizations, we aim to academically contribute to enhanced understanding of *how* psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit together influence employee voice with help of this specific context. This will hence provide a relatively holistic view on how to enhance employee voice, and can then serve as a starting point for further investigation into other settings. We also wish to contribute with practical strategies which potentially can enhance employee voice in organizations, since such are found at insufficient levels in the literature.

1.3.   Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is thus to develop the understanding of *how* the theories interact to create an environment that influences employee voice with the help of a single-case study. This is of great interest knowing that, as previously mentioned, employees more often than not choose to remain silent (Edmondson, 2018). The purpose will be achieved by first examining how the individual theories influence employee voice, in order to grasp the perception of the general level and influence in the specific context, and thereafter the interactions are analyzed. The research question that guides the study is the following:

"How do psychological safety, humble leadership and person-organization fit influence employee voice?"

1.4.   Delimitation

The essence of employee voice is that it takes a bottom-up perspective, so naturally the view of this thesis is limited to lower-level employees' perceptions. Moreover, the interviewed employees all work from the headquarters in Stockholm, so geographical dispersion is not taken into account. Additional factors which might influence employee

voice, but which fall outside the scope of psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit, are not examined in detail.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Employee Voice

2.1.1. Definition of Employee Voice

Employee voice is a wide term that has been explored in many fields of study (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011), and there are consequently many and varying definitions of the concept (Dundon et al., 2004). One definition of the term is *"behaviors that constructively challenge the status quo"* (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998, p. 109). Likewise, McCabe and Lewin (1992) argue that employee voice consists of two elements: the expression of discontent or complaints in a work situation by employees to management, and the participation of employees in the process of organizational decision making. Nevertheless, the definition of employee voice which we settled for in this thesis is the following: *"the discretionary provision of information intended to improve organizational functioning to someone inside an organization with the perceived authority to act, even though such information may challenge and upset the status quo of the organization and its power holders"* (Detert & Burris, 2007, p. 869). Employee voice is in other words the unrestricted giving of information, with the intention to improve the organization, from employees to leaders . This definition does not entail that the absence of employee voice necessarily corresponds to intentional silence, or that the presence of voice requires listening to everyone's input about everything. Instead, the central characteristic which distinguishes the two definitions lies in the intention to either voice or withhold information that can be of benefit to the organization (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003).

2.1.2. Factors Impacting Employee Voice

Thus far, the research examining why employees choose to give voice or remain silent has resulted in three broad explanatory categories (Detert & Burris, 2007). First, differences in personality and demographic features play a role (Crant, 2003; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; referred to in Detert & Burris, 2007). Put differently, some people are more likely than others to speak up because of factors relating to their individuality. A second category focuses on employee attitudes, and posits that employees who are dissatisfied with some of the organizational conditions face the three options to either exit, voice or remain loyal to the organization (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers & Mainous, 1988; Withey & Cooper, 1989; referred to in Detert & Burris, 2007). The last category sheds light on the organizational conditions which affect employees' willingness to speak up, i.e. whether employees feel that the organizational environment is safe or risky for voicing concerns (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes & Wierba, 1997; Edmondson, 2003; Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003; referred to in Detert & Burris, 2007).

2.1.3. Forms of Employee Voice

Employee voice can occur in different forms, and take place through different channels. Kim, McDuffie & Pil (2010) divides employee voice into two broad categories: direct and indirect. In direct employee voice, employees voice their suggestions or concerns directly to management, for example during a meeting, while they go through an intermediate representative in indirect employee voice, for instance a mediator in the organization. Similarly, Millward, Bryson & Forth (2000) categorize the channels of employee voice, but argue that they are three instead and can occur via direct employee involvement, via indirect or representative participation mechanisms or via a trade union.

2.2. Psychological Safety

2.2.1. The Concept

Psychological safety is a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999), meaning a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves *"without fear of negative consequences to self-image or status"* (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). A climate of psychological safety refers to *"formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment"* (Baer & Frese, 2003, p. 50). Such a climate can encourage employees to speak up and seek negative feedback in terms of inadequacies in work behavior and performance, thus enabling the workforce to become self-correcting and self-directing (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Chen, Lam & Zhong, 2007) by reducing the costs associated with these behaviors (Chughtai, 2016). Schein and Bennis (1965) also proposed that in order for an individual to feel secure and thus capable of changing, a work environment characterized by psychological safety is necessary. Generally, psychological safety is about enabling the free exchange of ideas and concerns, but also to manage conflict effectively. It does not entail "meaningless" chit chatting or groupthink (Janis, 1991) as psychological safety not necessarily focuses on cohesiveness, but is focused on facilitating constructive conversations.

2.2.2. Leaders Role in Fostering a Psychologically Safe Workplace

Psychological safety is "*not a personality factor but rather a feature of the workplace that leaders must and can help create*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 13), and the leaders' role in removing the restraints that often discourage the followers from voicing their ideas and concerns is thus critical (Bradley, Postlethwaite, Hamdani & Brown, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). If leaders want to unleash individual and collective talent, they must foster a psychologically safe climate where employees are assured that speaking up will not lead to negative consequences (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon & Ziv, 2010). The leader must also continually invite participation to discuss important

matters, and respond to what is raised in an appreciative and respectful manner, as psychological safety is not a one-time event but something that must be sustained. Furthermore, it is equally important that the leader cultivates high-quality interpersonal relationships with the employees, and encourages this among coworkers, as increased interactions and communication can help create psychological safety (Carmeli, Brueller & Dutton, 2009; Edmondson, 2018). Moreover, motivating, challenging, and calibrating the employees to work towards a worthy purpose must become the soil in which psychological safety takes its roots.

Leaders must also drive out fear from the organization and enable innovation, learning and growth, since fear is the opposite to psychological safety and has been shown to inhibit learning (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan & Vracheva, 2017). Leaders also play a key role in managing the organizational hierarchy as research has shown that "*lower-status members generally feel less psychologically safe than higher-status members*", and "*those lower in the status hierarchy often experience stress in the presence of those with higher status*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 14-15). When hierarchy is not handled well, it creates fear and reduces psychological safety to the point where suppression of individual voice can occur (Kahn, 1990). On the other hand, leaders who are approachable, accessible, and willing to admit they do not have all the answers play a powerful role in enhancing psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). Hirak, Peng, Schaubroeck and Carmeli (2012) also found in their research that units whose leaders were perceived as more inclusive had higher psychological safety, which led to increased learning from failure and better unit performance.

2.2.3. Outcomes of a Psychologically Safe Workplace

Psychological safety can help employees overcome learning anxiety and defensiveness, and help them cope better with uncertainty and organizational change (Schein & Bennis, 1965; Schein, 1985). It has also been found to help teams leverage diversity, put conflict to good use and preventing it from impairing team performance (Edmondson, 2018; Bradley et al., 2012; Edmondson & Smith, 2006) by allowing employees to focus on shared goals instead of self-protection (Schein, 1985), which is increasingly important in a world where "*employees, at all levels, spend 50 % more time collaborating than they did 20 years ago*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. xiv; Parker & Wall, 1996). Furthermore, making talented employees work well together by minimizing interpersonal fear among team members can help improve organizational performance (Faraj & Yan, 2009; Baer & Frese, 2003) through promoting voice behaviors (Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012) and by increased employee error reporting, avoiding preventable failures and increased return on investments (Edmondson, 2018). Psychological safety can also improve employee satisfaction through removing the regret or pain caused by failing to speak up (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kahn, 1990). Lastly, the construct of psychological safety seems to work benefits for the employees, and consequently the

organization, in a twofold way. First, by removing fear, employees are enabled to contribute and make themselves heard, and second, when employees are freed to contribute, it makes for greater meaningfulness which in turn can trigger other organizational-wide benefits.

2.3. Humble Leadership

2.3.1. Leadership and the Leader-Follower Relationship

One definition of leadership is wanting to do something new and better, and thereafter getting others to follow along (Schein & Schein, 2018). At the core of the definition of leadership is the leader-follower relationship (Meindl, 1995). Naturally, if there were no followers, there would be no leader. A relationship is a set of mutual expectations about each other's future behavior based on past interactions with another (Schein & Schein, 2018). It is hence an interactive concept which relies on symmetry and reciprocity. A particularly conspicuous theory is that of transactional versus transformational leadership, where Bass (1990) posits that adopting a more transformational style is more effective in today's world.

According to Bass (1990), transactional leadership is concerned with giving followers directions about what to do and then rewarding them accordingly. In other words, the leader-follower relationship is confined to a transactional exchange. However, in a world increasingly characterized by fierce competition and growing expectations from customers, it is necessary that followers not only view their work as a mere exchange, but instead become more organizationally committed, raise their ambitions and generally put forth their best selves at work (Chan & Chan, 2005). A transformational leadership style is thus more suitable, given its focus on upgrading the organization and followers (transformation), in contrast to transactional leadership, where followers connect with their leaders in nothing more but an exchange process (Chan & Chan, 2005).

Likewise, Schein and Schein (2018) argue that in order to achieve transformation and adapt to today's conditions, leaders must engage in *personization* with their followers. Personization is defined as *"the process of mutually building a working relationship.../... based on trying to see that person as a whole, not just the role he or she may occupy at the moment"* (Schein & Schein, 2018, p. 24-25). This idea is hence a further departure from the transactional style of leadership which views the leader-follower relationship as merely professional. Instead personization entails that the parts should invest in relationship building and become more closely acquainted, even on a personal level, in order to deepen the trust and openness that is necessary in today's competitive world.

2.3.2. The Concept of Humble Leadership

There are many differing definitions of what constitutes humble leadership, a leadership style that is transformational (Schein & Schein, 2018), and many researchers have attempted to capture the complex and multifaceted concept (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013). For that reason, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) attempt to explain the virtue of humility by listing 13 personality traits which humble leaders possess. According to their research, humble leaders are open to new paradigms, eager to learn from others, acknowledge their own limitations and mistakes and attempt to correct them. They accept failure with pragmatism, ask for advice, develop others, have a genuine desire to serve, respect others and share honors and recognition with collaborators. They also accept success with simplicity, are not narcissistic and repel adulation, avoid self-complacency and are frugal.

Schein and Schein (2018, p. xiv) instead attempt to explain the concept by stating a clear definition, *"an intrinsically relational process that is deeply embedded in effective group processes"*, and the emphasis here is on the word relational. Another definition of what constitutes humble leadership is recognizing, as a leader, that you do not have all the answers. It is *"an interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts that connotes (a) a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, (b) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and (c) teachability"* (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013, p. 1518), and this is also the definition used in this thesis. In other words, humble leadership is a feature of the leader-follower relationship which denotes the leader's willingness to view himself realistically, showing appreciation for the follower's strengths and input and the ability to learn. It is important to note that this definition of humility carries positive connotations, despite the fact that it in other instances can be connected to such things as insecurity, idleness and lack of motivation (Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

2.3.3. Outcomes of Humble Leadership

Humble leadership is above argued to be a more effective leadership style in today's competitive business world. Specifically, it can lead to improved organizational objectives such as "*employee engagement, empowerment, organizational agility, ambidexterity and innovation*" (Schein & Schein, 2018 p. 1). Furthermore, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) mention several organizational outcomes of the leadership style. These include improved innovation, productivity, leadership development, low employee turnover, customer loyalty and satisfaction, a congenial and flexible work environment, employee satisfaction, continuous adaptation and renewal and employee commitment.

2.4. P-O Fit

2.4.1. Value Congruence as P-O Fit

The definition of P-O fit has been considered to be quite elusive (Rynes & Gerhart, 1989), and has broadly entailed how the congruence of the beliefs, personality traits, and values of the employee with the norms, culture, strategies, and values of the organization (Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991; Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990), affects the employee's attitudes and behaviors (Chatman, 1991). Rynes and Gerhart (1990) have also discussed factors such as hobbies, eating habits, use of leisure time, and even personality traits as determinants of perceived fit. However, a more common yet wider assessment involves "*the compatibility between the people and the organization in which they work*" (Kristof, 1996, p. 1). Piasentin and Chapman (2006) display a similar definition in their literature review of P-O fit, where it denotes the extent to which an individual perceives a fit between his or her own values and that of the organization in which he or she works. They further argue that "*values were the most commonly assessed items of fit, followed by personality traits, goals, skills and abilities*" (Piasentin & Chapman, 2006, p. 208). Furthermore, individual values "*are enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct or end-state is personally preferable to its opposite*" (Chatman, 1989 p. 339; Rokeach, 1973), which can guide individuals' attitudes, judgments, and behaviors, and it is this definition that will be adopted in this study.

Organizational values often emerge as a group product (Schein, 1985), and even if not all group members share the same values, most are typically aware of the support for a specific value. When the key values concerning behaviors and the way things are done in an organization are "*intensely held and widely shared*" (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) across units and levels, strong organizational values are said to exist (Chatman, 1991). The value systems can help guide members towards appropriate behaviors, and justifies choice of activities and the functions of the organization (Enz, 1988). Values have also been considered among many researchers to be an important element of organizational culture (Barley, Meyer & Gash, 1988; Pettigrew, 1979), and culture in turn has been said to be an important factor in determining how well a person fits into an organizational context (Rousseau, 1990).

2.4.2. Outcomes of High P-O Fit

When employees perceive a high fit with the organizational values, outcomes such as organizational identification, higher organizational commitment (Cable & Judge, 1996), quicker adjusting to the organization, intentions to stay, job satisfaction, job performance (Bright, 2007), and reporting to work on time (Locke, 1976; Chatman, 1991; Adkins, Russell & Werbel, 1994; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001) have been found as outcomes. When the employees' values are perceived to be aligned with those

of the organization, *"it makes for greater meaningfulness and psychological safety, leading to higher levels of employee engagement"* (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013, p. 27). However, a potential drawback of a high degree of P-O fit is that it can come at the expense of diversity (Powell, 1998), consequently fostering groupthink which can become an impediment to coping well with change.

2.5. Limitation of Theory

Some limitations of the theories include that they are subjective and that there are no widely used methods of measuring the degrees of employee voice and humble leadership. This means that we have had to rely on subjective interpretations of employees' perceptions in order to conduct the analysis. Additionally, humble leadership is a relatively new concept which has only been investigated in a limited range of settings. This entails that it is hard to determine whether the concept will stand the trials of time, and whether it will be suitable in a wider variety of contexts. The focal point of the leadership style has thus far been its positive outcomes, whereas the negative outcomes appear to be understudied. Moreover, the theories sometimes contradict one another, for example in the case of employee voice and psychological safety. Here the former states that it can be impacted by personality factors, while the latter does not. Nevertheless, this divergence will be addressed in the discussion section.

3.   Methodology

3.1.   Research Design

A single-case study was conducted in order to answer the research question *"How do psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit influence employee voice?"* Other than being a popular method for building theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), single-case studies allow for deep investigation, but also limit the ability to make generalizations beyond that of the specific case. Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm guided the empirical data collection and its ensuing analysis, and an idiographic approach with the aim to *"elucidate the unique features of the case"* and *"to develop a deep understanding of its complexity"* (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 68) was taken. The interpretivist paradigm is concerned with grasping and giving a voice to *"the subjective meaning of social action"* (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 29), and presumes that reality cannot be separated from the perception of it (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

The paradigm is thus often associated with qualitative, rather than quantitative, studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015), and although there is much debate about what constitutes qualitative research, it is generally agreed that it allows for a dialogue between the researchers and the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The paradigm, with the qualitative approach, was hence deemed suitable for the study and research question, since it is the perception of psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit that determine its relative levels. Consequently, field notes and semi-structured interviews were performed, and internal documents were reviewed for contextual purposes (see Appendix 1). A more in-depth explanation of the data collection and the motivation behind it is outlined further below.

The process of research has been abductive, and *"involved back and forth engagement with the social world as an empirical source for theoretical ideas, and with the literature"* (Bryman & Bell, p. 27). In other words, the starting point of research had its roots in the deductive approach where psychological safety was tested for its relevance by comparing it to shared practice (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, an inductive approach was later applied since the empirical material forced a development of the theoretical framework to better represent the phenomena brought forward in the interviews (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). Consequently, the process was iterative as the collection of empirical material and theoretical reflection occurred simultaneously (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which then lead to a modification of the research question.

3.2.   Case Selection

The case company Diet Doctor was selected because it was deemed to represent a unique case (Yin, 2003), given that it is one of few social enterprises working with diet

and health. We hypothesized that this would lead to an especially high degree of P-O fit, although we called it enthusiasm about the cause at the time, unaware of the exact theoretical concept. Furthermore, when one of us worked at the organization, leadership expressed a will to foster a culture which promoted employee voice. Therefore it sounded interesting to investigate whether reality lived up to their intentions. After having contacted leadership, who was enthusiastic about becoming the subject of investigation, they gave us full access to the organization and time to interview selected employees, a prerequisite for carrying out a case study (Yin, 2014).

3.2.1. The Case Organization

Diet Doctor is the world's largest low-carb website which is financed through an optional membership. It operates with the purpose *to empower people everywhere to dramatically improve their health,* and is guided by the four values of goodness, trustworthiness, simplicity and inspiration. The company can be classified as a social enterprise because one purpose is to fill a gap in the way health and weight is managed in the world, rather than merely maximizing profit.

Diet Doctor has 26 employees belonging to the diverse and multicultural core team operating from the headquarters in Stockholm, and a number of freelancers and contributors, who work from elsewhere. Out of the 26 employees in the core team, five belong to a narrower one called leadership. This leadership team is concerned with more strategic issues, and the CEO ultimately has veto power in all decisions. Moreover, the other operational teams have a team leader, who they have a monthly one-on-one feedback session with. Additionally, the enterprise is to a great extent run as a flat organization with an open-door policy. All employees, including leadership, are considered frontline employees and engage in operational tasks to some degree. Together they form what the COO describes as *"one large small team"*. Most of the work is carried out individually, but certain projects are carried out in smaller and changeable teams. Depending on the monthly priorities set by leadership and voted on by the lower-level employees, employees become parts of teams which form and dissolve on a continual basis. Diet Doctor has also implemented a number of formal structures to help promote employee voice (see Appendix 2), ranging from weekly values meetings to one-on-one sessions with members of the leadership team to online surveys. Arguably, the many channels for feedback reflect the importance that leadership places on employee voice.

3.3. Empirical Data Collection

The qualitative data which laid the ground for the analysis was collected through semi-structured interviews with employees. This format was chosen because it granted greater flexibility in terms of asking open-ended questions to allow for unconsidered

factors to emerge, but also because of the opportunity to ask clarifying questions when needed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). When designing the interview questions, we integrated Edmondson's (2018) widely used survey items into our interview template (see Appendix 3). A seven-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) is normally used when obtaining responses to measure psychological safety, but since our research was purely qualitative, we chose to let the participants comment on the items and later coded the responses to detect the absence or presence of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). The "*psychological safety measure has proven to be robust despite variations in both the number and the wording of the items used*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 20), meaning that "*the collected data has demonstrated the necessary statistical properties, such as inter-item reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha, and predictive validity, as measured by correlations with other variables of interest*" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 20), indicating that the codification of the responses would not impact the validity of the findings. Given that the process was iterative and abductive, we later found that humble leadership and P-O fit would help explain our findings. However, the concepts were not actively investigated or measured during the collection of the empirical material.

3.3.1.   Selection of Interviewees

A purposive sampling approach was chosen where we strategically targeted 12 lower-level employees to reflect the bottom-up perspective of the research question, rather than aiming to sample them on a random basis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The participants are all based at the headquarters in Stockholm, and have differing demographics in terms of cultural origin, experience, time at the company, and age which could potentially reflect a variance in perceptions of the topics studied. The focus on only interviewing lower-level employees was to obtain *their* perception of the subjective levels of the topics studied.

3.3.2.   Interview Process

Prior to the interviews, we sent the participants an email with a short description of the purpose of the thesis (see Appendix 4). A pilot interview was also conducted to ensure that the questions asked were informative, and questions were modified or excluded as needed. Furthermore, as the '*subjective meaning of social action*' (Bryman & Bell, 2013 p. 29) was the target of the interviews, the process was relatively flexible in terms of spending more time on certain questions than others, and leading questions were avoided as far as possible to minimize the risk of reflexivity.

The interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes, and eleven out of twelve interviews were recorded, but all could be transcribed as extensive field notes were taken during the interview process. Both of us attended all interviews, where one of us asked the

interview questions, and the other took field notes and asked clarifying questions when necessary. The transcription process allowed us to identify patterns and themes as the interviews were processed multiple times.

3.4.   Secondary Data

To complement the interviews, secondary data in form of internal company documents were reviewed in order to understand the contextual background of the case (see Appendix 1). Obtaining information not solely disclosed by the interviewees helps contextualize the role psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit plays in employee voice.

3.5.   Data Analysis

A thematic approach was adopted when analyzing the collected empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The recordings were transcribed manually in a shared document, and then carefully reviewed for the purpose of codification. Each transcription was first codified individually by us, where the data was "*broken down into component parts*" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13) and were given labels in form of themes and theories in a separate document. The individual codings were then compared to identify recurring patterns and to select focal core themes. We compared our findings to try to establish links between the codings, and in this iterative process new themes such as P-O fit emerged, and others such as organizational commitment were removed. As mentioned, the thesis takes on an interpretative approach where the responses obtained from the interviewee subjects' are assumed to be subjective, which means that we have been forced to interpret the empirical material. This interpretation will unavoidably permeate the analysis, and will also be reflected in the presentation of the empirical data and the findings. One could argue that having had an employment at the case company will make the interpretation biased, but we claim it could be a potential beneficiary factor as it can help yield insight otherwise not reachable.

3.6.   Ethical Approach

The intent of the study has been carefully explained to all participants, and they have been provided the opportunity to refrain from participating and answering any questions. They were informed about their right to have their responses anonymized and the right to withdraw from their interview process without further explanation. The respondents have been given fictional names, the interviewing order has been randomized (see Appendix 5) and the exact wording of some direct quotes has been slightly modified as it has been claimed to be a way to detect a person. Fourteen lower-level employees were invited to the study, of which twelve chose to participate,

signalling that the option of refraining from participating was understood. Lastly, the participants were informed about the intent of recording the material, and recordings have only been performed when consented to.

3.7.   Reflexive Considerations

Buchanan and Bryman (2007) have concluded in their research that it is difficult to sustain a view of the researcher as a neutral observer, where values of the researchers, reflecting either the feelings or personal beliefs, can bias and intrude on several areas of the business research. It is therefore challenging for researchers to truly remain objective and value free (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A potential bias present in this research is the pre-understanding of the setting, due to previous employment, that one of us holds. This could compromise the internal validity, i.e. the degree of correspondence between the collected empirical material and the theoretical ideas which then develop from this (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), by influencing what is observed in the research. However, measures were taken to balance this by having the other one challenging existing assumptions and the meaning of the findings. The research has attempted to allow for multiple voices to appear, both through the direct quotations from the interview subjects, but also through our sometimes differing perceptions of the findings. However, one could argue whether or not the quotes are still direct when they in some instances have been translated from Swedish to English, or words have been swapped to anonymize. Nonetheless, we jointly reflected on the appropriateness of one word over the other for alleviation of bias. Moreover, consensus with regards to the interpretations of the findings has been sought between us, which most likely has resulted in some notion of truth (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Lastly, the external reliability, i.e. the degree to which the study is replicable (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), is fairly low because of the purposive sampling and the mere nature of qualitative research, meaning that it is hard to "freeze" social circumstances and to expand the subjective meaning of the sample to the wider population. However, our idiographic approach justifies this to some degree as we sought to develop a deep understanding of the specific context of the case.

4.   Empirical Material

4.1.   Psychological Safety and Its Influence on Employee Voice

4.1.1.   Informal Structures for Psychological Safety

Baer and Frese (2003) argued that psychological safety can be promoted through formal and informal organizational practices, which respondents argued exists in the company, e.g. "*everything is done for them to speak up*" (Eva). Besides the formal structures present to to help promote employee voice (see Appendix 2), an additional number of informal structures emerged during the interview process. First, many said that there is an implicit expectation that employees should voice concerns face-to-face as the leadership often encourages this. Didrik explained "*if you have specific feedback to someone, you should go directly to that person*". Secondly, the practice of giving feedback through a mediator in cases where an employee does not feel comfortable, is another informal structure. However, Andrew shared how using mediators might be eroding psychological safety: "*And it [the feedback] doesn't come from the person that actually said it .../... That's really horrible practice. So it should come directly, quickly, and directly. I mean, otherwise it's meaningless, it's just destroys the value and trust*".

Thirdly, Julie, Carin and Pontus explained how coffee breaks and lunches become a way to socialize and get to know colleagues on a more private level, and this consequently contributes to psychological safety. Julie clarified that "*It is easier to give feedback if you know each other on several levels .../... It is harder to give feedback to someone you don't know, I think. Because you don't know how it will be received.*" Furthermore, the frequent trips and conferences have provided opportunities for team building, and the nurturing of relationships to the extent that employees consider the company as "*a home away from home*" (Julie, Henrietta), and *"a family"* (Jan, Didrik), which hints that interpersonal relationships are considered important for the experienced psychological safety. Additionally, Jan and Julie described how the chat-function Slack can be used as a way to schedule meetings "*I just write to see if they have a minute and then I come over [to their desk]"* (Jan). Rut and Pontus shared how e-mail can also be used to give feedback or raise ideas.

4.1.2.   Experienced Level of Psychological Safety

Interestingly, Julie, Eva, Andrew, Henrietta, Pontus, Carin, Rut and Silva simultaneously expressed that they believe the experienced level of psychological safety, and consequently if you choose to speak up or not, is due to differences in personality as the structures for voicing your concerns are in place. For example, Julie said "*It is very personal, different in different individuals. I don't think there are any*

obstacles in the company culture to [speak up], but I rather think it's a personal thing", and Andrew explained *"some courageous people [speak up] and it really sets the tone"*. Andrew and Carin speculated that the choice of speaking up might be influenced by previous experience of doing so, and Charlie, Jan, Julie and Henrietta emphasized that it is easier to speak with some over others.

Andrew and Pontus revealed how the leadership is *"leading by example"* by being self-critical and how it opens up for the others do the same. Many applauded the leadership for being willing to change and for "*saying they want feedback*" (Adam), and it became clear that this behavior has indirectly helped promote a more psychologically safe environment over time. Charlie explained "*I see it more and more from people, that they raise their concerns. They do speak up when there is something.*"

Moreover, many feel that their unique skills and values are utilized, and as the company is at a start-up phase, "*you have to work with things that you might not be best at sometimes*" (Rut). Jan further pointed out how *"I felt like I was instantly trusted here.../... I get to discover new skills I didn't know that I had. I feel that I'm in a safe environment where there's more time to explore these things"*, which indicates that the leadership trusts and invites their employees to develop. There is also an understanding that new ideas are integral to the company's success, which is why input is encouraged. Jan shared how "*[the] leadership invests in employees*" and Adam described how they "*continually ask what they can do to make it better*". With the feedback they get, they then make adjustments, signalling that they actually hear what the employees say. This indicates a high degree of psychological safety.

Eva shared how the leadership "*always takes the time to check how everybody's doing*", which has helped encourage a flat hierarchy and the approachability of the leadership team to voice your concerns. Howbeit, others have voiced how the company has "*very strong leaders*" (Julie, Adam) and that "*you have to be a bit courageous to speak up [to them]*" (Andrew), which could indicate that there are pockets of both high and low psychological safety in the company, depending on the relationship with the leadership. Furthermore, some shared how you cannot talk about just about anything, e.g. Charlie said "*You can speak about and give feedback on some subjects but not all, there's a "don't go there" with certain things*". This could imply that the leaders still need to admit they do not have all the answers, and invite the employees to more discussions in order to challenge them and allow them to bring their full talent to work.

Most seemed to agree that the team is very tolerant and that "*Differences are valued, you can be who you are here*" (Adam), and Henrietta explained how it enables members to go out of their comfort zone *"Even if you think it's hard to bring up tough issues, you still do"*. However, others expressed that one might be rejected for being different in the sense that "*There's a feeling that extroverted people might get more favored*"

(Adam), and that "*It can happen, but then with a twinkle in one's eye, but one might ask themselves if it's necessary at all*" (Silva). Nevertheless, some shared how discussions, with different opinions involved, have been "*very mature and respectful*" (Charlie) and "*tough issues are handled in a respectful manner, and sometimes leads to policy changes*" (Jan), hinting that diversity and conflict is put to good use.

All rejected the items that it is difficult to ask other members for help and that others deliberately acted to undermine their efforts, and instead emphasized how "*everybody is friendly and helpful*" (Didrik), and that there is a "*supportive and open environment*" (Julie). Moreover, Pontus highlighted how "*Everyone is really busy here .../... so people may not have the time to help you, but at the same time people are always willing to help*". Eva further explained that "*We have this in the back of our minds, that we want to improve this company so we are quite open to new ideas, because we know that if we're not open, we'll not improve*", but Jan shared how the high levels of openness can lead to slower decision-making: "*There's so much openness to speak up your mind, that I feel like some of the decisions take longer to be made just because everybody is expecting everybody's opinion*" and Adam emphasized "*Everybody feels so free to speak so we get into these unnecessary discussions*". This can be interpreted as a sign that people fear holding back more than they fear sharing their insights, but that leaders need to help set the stage for effective discussions. It also signals that groupthink to preserve cohesiveness is not a problem, but that diverse ideas are welcomed.

All respondents seemed to agree that mistakes are not held against them, and Carin shared how "*Many are good at telling about their own mistakes .../... You can even joke about it.*" Jan and Didrik described how the leadership is open about their own failures, and Julie elaborates that it is an "*accepting, supporting, open environment that forgives [mistakes]*". Adam further shared how "*mistakes are part of the process and it's almost even encouraged [to take a risk]*" and Eva emphasized "*If you make a mistake, and you're able to explain it, I think it's going to be fine*". However, even if the majority considered it safe for risk-taking, there were some other responses that gave another perspective: "*There are topics where you are welcomed to take risks, and others where you are not*" (Henrietta), indicating that employee voice is discouraged in some instances.

Furthermore, when the participants were asked if they would recommend working at the company, everyone said yes, but with a few reservations. As the company grows rapidly, Rut shared how you have to be confident with change and regard it as something positive, as "*there is this uncertainty, what is going to happen tomorrow?*", and Jan explained how "*things are changing all the time .../... and everything is moving very fast*". As existing employees seem to cope well with change, embracing it without defensiveness, psychological safety seems to exist in the company.

4.2. Humble Leadership and Its Influence on Employee Voice

Many interviewees emphasized that the leadership does much to create an open and inquisitive environment. In fact, it became clear that this was a critical reason for why employees often bring up feedback. In spite of the fact that a subordinate might have to muster some courage in order to voice concerns to leaders, the interviewees claimed it has become easier because they *"applaud employees when they actually give critique"* (Pontus). Many employees also expressed that they feel that they are being listened to. Jan said:

"There's always room for everybody to say their things, and I've noticed that when we have the pre-priorities meeting, you can just go and say what you feel should be a priority. And I've seen most of the things always been put up in the 'later' category".

Even though what is acted upon is ultimately selected by leadership, many employees feel empowered when some of their suggestions have been implemented, or at least thoroughly considered. Adam explained: *"It's really cool, that you can have an idea, and then a couple of months later you see it"*, and Rut said *"It's quite surprising that I've been able to have such great influence on things."* To be near decision makers in a small and flat organization allows employees to have much to say. Adam thought that it was *"quite unique"* to have such direct contact with the CEO. Nevertheless, one impediment for employees is that the leadership can come across as *"quite workaholic"* (Eva), meaning that there is a trade-off between efficiency and listening, and that they might not always be available for feedback.

Many employees highlighted that leadership is open about mistakes, and corrects behavior correspondingly. Pontus said that *"they listen and change, that's impressive I think."* Adam claimed that *"That's pretty amazing really, that you can be this open to feedback and really take it on board and try to learn from it."* Simply put, the leadership is not boastful or proud, but rather urges their subordinates not to treat them as *"semi-gods"* (Didrik). Indeed, self-criticism and acknowledging limitations was thought to be a powerful promoter of employee voice, since it inspires followers to view both themselves and others realistically. Andrew explained: *"I mean, leading by example is often a very good way of changing things. And the COO is good at speaking up at these meetings too and I mean, self-criticism and stuff like that. So, he leads by example."*

Personality was frequently attributed as an explanatory factor for employee voice, and many interviewees speculated that it played a great role in others' choice to either voice or remain silent. Parts of leadership are *"thinkers"* (Adam, Rut) according to the MBTI personality test which all employees are encouraged to take, and Adam shared how they have *"strong opinions"*. Even though they often listen, they might have a rigid and predetermined agenda on how to proceed, and then persistence is required from the

counterpart to continue pushing for alteration. Nonetheless, Rut explained that the directness of thinkers might be a benefit for similar-natured subordinates:

"[Leadership] is very direct, and say what they think. And that makes it easier for me to be direct as well, compared to when I talk to someone who doesn't really say what's on their mind and such, you know, beating around the bush."

However, the direct manner can be a drawback when working with more perceptive employees, i.e. *"feelers"* (Charlie), because the conduct might be interpreted as insensitive and clumsy. One way to circumvent having to voice concerns directly to leadership, if one perceives that one has a hard time making oneself understood, is to go through a trusted mediator. Carin explained:

"Most people probably don't feel like they can speak to everyone about everything. So it's good to be able to go through that kind of a channel, if you have something on your mind, or if you feel like you have an unrealistic workload or something."

4.2.1. "Don't Go There" Zones

Some interviewees mentioned that implicit *"don't go there"* zones exist in terms of assessing processes and practices (Charlie, Julie, Henrietta, Carin). Employees are in these cases aware that feedback has previously been raised, but has then been neglected. Julie explained *"My perception is that there are a lot of people taking initiatives, which are then listened to, and then there are other initiatives which are not listened to at all."* This hence discourages employees from continuing voicing concerns and pushing for what they believe to be a beneficial modification.
The behavior of other employees often fortify the notion that feedback on some topics are unwelcomed by asserting that *"you have to deal with this, because it can't be changed"* (Henrietta).

After an attempt to voice these concerns, employees might move on with a sense that their perspectives have not been fully listened to, and hence feel that leadership is not acting in reality as they should *"on paper"* (Charlie). This consequently impairs the perception of the organization having a flat hierarchy and that everyone's opinion is equally valued. Although there appeared to be a general agreement among the interviewees that divergent opinions are accepted, some wished that they would be more listened to, particularly when it comes to their domains of expertise. Andrew clarified:

"It's very difficult to change something if you don't really understand where it's coming from.../... So that's where a leader really must listen to other people and even if they don't understand to a hundred percent what they mean, they should really trust them that they're right and implement the changes."

4.3. P-O Fit and Its Influence on Employee Voice

4.3.1. Organizational and Individual Values

It became clear that not only were all interviewees able to repeat the four guiding values which are goodness, trustworthiness, simplicity and inspiration, but they were also deeply ingrained into the organizational operations. When asked to repeat the values, Eva started by saying *"Of course I can name them"*, indicating that they are very central and *"everything revolves around this"*. Rut elaborated that *"When you work so consciously with [the values].../... it's not surprising that it becomes second nature."*

Furthermore, some explained that a PR firm which Diet Doctor is working with were surprised that the organizational values were so *"vivid"* (Julie) and stuck to like *"madmen"* (Pontus), and that they *"were the first company that they had ever worked with that had such a strong brand platform"* (Adam). Adam further explained that it must come from *"discussing our values on a weekly basis"*, which then lead them to *"infiltrate our chats during the coffee breaks, and people make jokes about them."* Working and strictly complying with the values in the *modus operandi* was said to, together with the organizational mission, *"help stir the employees in the same direction"* (Jan). Jan further expanded how the genuinity of the values permeated the daily work by stating that *"This is the type of company that really does goodness.../... Diet Doctor really takes this value into practice. And I really like this value because we're trying to do good for the world"* and Pontus agreed that *"It's hard for a tobacco company to have goodness for example. For Diet Doctor, we can have goodness, as we help people"*.

Many interviewees emphasized that they strongly identify with the values. Charlie said *"They are amazing values, for my personal life I believe in them as well, it's something that keeps me here",* and Eva elaborated:

"Simplicity and trustworthiness, they are key values for me as a person. Yeah, they're like guiding values and super important for me and coincide with those values, so it fits me. With simplicity, yeah, I try to live it as much as I can. I apply it outside work, in my life in general."

One could argue that the close congruence with the values explains why all interviewees recommended working at Diet Doctor, indicating job satisfaction. This could be the result of a high P-O fit, which then causes employees to feel that they are working with something *"meaningful"* (Rut) and *"good"* (Andrew). In fact, personal alignment with the company values is an important recruitment criterion. Eva said: *"There's tough selection and probably the most important criteria is the values of the person."* Nonetheless, Carin, Jan, Henrietta, Didrik and Adam detailed that even though they recommend working at Diet Doctor, they did not think that it would suit everyone. Carin explained:

"A hardcore vegan would have gone crazy. It would have become a crisis. Which is kind of sad. A common critique of low-carb diets is that it is so centered on animal products. So it would probably have been beneficial if the company could get a few vegans to change that. I don't think we will get any though, they would probably not feel welcome."

Henrietta and Charlie also shared how the values can seem *"idealistic"*, *"artificial"* and *"hard to live up to"*. Carin expressed *"I don't agree with the notion that every coworker has to agree with everything that the company does. You can be a good coworker anyway."* However, if simply viewed as a tool to judge one's work and behavior against, most interviewees take a positive stance. Jan explained:

"I think it's a very smart thing to keep in mind.../... I'm thinking like, is this goodness for the people who are not members, is this goodness for people who are members, is this trustworthy? So it's just a very nice way to measure what you do".

Aspiration towards the values was also said to help promote employee voice and embetterment as they help guide organizational behavior and promotes accountability in that it becomes evident when leaders or employees do not stick to them. Pontus explained *"That it's in the policy. That you should try to improve, it's not a gimmick, they [leadership] really try to uphold it, they might not always do it, but it's their mission to do it".*

5.   Analysis and Discussion

5.1.   The Influence of Psychological Safety

Interestingly, the empirical data revealed that there is a collective perception that psychological safety exists in the company, albeit to varying degrees. Many interviewees constituted personality traits as the explanatory factor as to why some choose to speak up and others not. Here is where a dichotomy arises. Namely, Edmondson (2018) argues that psychological safety, and thus whether or not you choose to speak up, is not a personality factor, but a climate the leader must help create, as climate has proven to affect individuals in roughly the same way, irrespective of personality traits. On the other hand, the theory of employee voice argues that the choice of voice *can* be impacted by differences in personality such as extraversion and introversion. It is difficult to determine which theory is ultimately right, but our research suggests that the importance of individual personality traits are underestimated in psychological safety, or that the level of psychological safety is not sufficient to enable everyone to feel safe and able to speak up.

Moreover, Hirak et al. (2012) argue that the extent to which a work unit considers its leader as inclusive, can help explain the experienced level of psychological safety, and not every employee has one-on-ones or closer working-relationships with the CEO and COO. The frequency in responses of psychological safety being a personality trait, could then arguably be explained by that the individuals' experience the leader as more or less inclusive depending on the quality of the interpersonal relationship, but also depending on the perception of the hierarchy. What is more, a few respondents shared how there is an innate feeling that extroverts get more favored, not only by the leadership team, but by the coworkers as well. Even if the favorization is not what directly impacts the choice of voicing one's concerns, it could be demotivating for others who do not share those traits if they perceive others as being listened to more, simply because they know how to phrase ideas better. Furthermore, a few members of the leadership team have been labeled as *"thinkers"*, and those employees who are thinkers themselves have an easier time to get their suggestions through. On the other hand, those considering themselves as *"feelers"* can experience frustration if their ideas are not received in an effective manner. Consequently, the individual perception of the group psychological safety appears to be linked to the relationship and compatibility they have with the leadership.

On another note, the team working at Diet Doctor is diverse in terms of nationality and cultural origin, and our findings suggest that the employees have come together around the values and the mission of the organization, enabling them to lever their diversity. Many also described the workplace as a family and a home away from home, indicating

that high-quality relationships exists, which seems to be facilitated by the high tolerance and respectful manners present in discussions. Furthermore, it is the purpose of the organization that seems to provide the employees with meaning in their job, and that continually motivates them to voice their concerns and work together with others towards the shared goal of improving the lives of the customers.

5.2. The Influence of Humble Leadership

The leaders appear to exhibit humble behavior to a large degree, and this consequently seems to affect employee voice positively. First, they set the tone for particularly direct employee voice by applauding employees when they give feedback and hence displaying an appreciation for employee voice. This in combination with the many feedback forums and the perceived proximity of leadership creates space for employees to give input. Other than showing an appreciation for others' feedback, leadership possesses two of the other central characteristics to the definition of humble leadership which we settled on, namely a willingness to view oneself accurately and being teachable (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013). The willingness to open up about mistakes, taking in feedback and thereafter changing as a response encourages employee voice and creates a virtuous cycle when employees sense that their input is taken seriously. There is also some *personization*, where leaders invest in relationship building through social activities and asking employees how they are doing, and this positively influences employee voice, since the interviewees emphasized that it is easier to give input to someone who one is well acquainted with.

Even though feedback is generally appreciated, there are certain areas where it is not. These areas can be regarded as leadership's priorities which they have strong opinions about, and these *"don't go there"* zones create ambiguity in regards to the perception of humble leadership. A sense of disempowerment seems to be created when employees perceive that leadership is not role modeling the behavior which is promoted on paper, and these *"don't go there"* zones become pockets of organizational silence. Moreover, if these zones happen to be important for an employee, and he senses that leadership does not take the time to fully listen to his perspective, then the sense of futility appears to contaminate his general regard of leadership. This negative image even transfers to the efforts leadership puts in to enable employee voice in other situations, suggesting that employee voice is influenced negatively.

Additionally, the variations in perceptions of leadership's level of humility suggests that humble leadership is in fact a trait of individual relationships between leaders and followers, similarly to how Schein and Bennis (1965) argue about psychological safety. In order to achieve group-level psychological safety, Frazier et al. (2017) argue that the variations must be minimized and convergent, and with this reasoning the same inference can be drawn regarding humble leadership on a team level.

5.3.   The Influence of P-O Fit

It seems that the Diet Doctor culture has strong organizational values and that a high degree of P-O fit with employees exist. The values are central to the extent that they become second nature and are shared between the vast majority of team members. This is also reflected in a potential outcome of P-O fit, which is that every employee responded that they would recommend working at Diet Doctor, indicating job satisfaction. However, many also elaborated that they would not recommend it to *just about anyone*, hinting that people who would not be congruent with the organizational values would not feel at home or be able to handle the fast pace and change of things. Paradoxically, values such as goodness and trustworthiness also means that the group is forced to foster a culture of tolerance of perspectives that are not in line with the organization. Otherwise the values would be experienced as hypocritical and deceptive. With these facts in mind, the high degree of P-O fit seems to influence employee voice positively.

Nevertheless, certain types of employee voice appears to be inherently excluded when a major criteria for recruitment is a high P-O fit, and interviewees accentuate that such things as stark deviance from the general eating habits would have caused certain people to go *"crazy"*. In other words, since people are employed based on their congruence with the values and how passionate they are about the cause, there is a natural selection as to which types of employee voice are welcomed. However, Powell (1998) argues that there are both advantages and disadvantages to this dilemma of P-O fit versus diversity. Additionally, in cases where employees do not have a high P-O fit from the beginning, they appear to stand before the two options to either conform over time or leave the organization, and this also affects the types of employee voice that are allowed to prevail. Certain perspectives are hence not heard and the lack of diverse employee voice fosters groupthink with regards to a few topics.

5.4.   The Interactions of the Different Concepts

It appears that the strong organizational values, and therefore strong P-O fit, are both the driver and backbone of psychological safety and humble leadership. That is because the values are so deeply ingrained into the culture, much emphasized and congruent with the majority of employees. First, there seems to be a relationship between the values and psychological safety, given that people oftentimes speak up, even when they have to muster courage to do so. The values and organizational mission hence seem to transcend the sometimes uncomfortable action of having to voice concerns to leaders. Especially goodness and trustworthiness play a central role in creating the foundation for psychological safety. That is, employees know that they are adhered to, and therefore feel encouraged to speak up and expect fair treatment thereafter. If the values for some reason are not adhered to, employees are empowered to voice this and can

expect corrected behavior. The values thus act as an internal thermostat and are what sparks the virtuous cycle of adherence to the principles and creates a sense of psychological safety for employee voice.

Similarly, a relationship between the values and humble leadership seems to exist, and this consequently fosters psychological safety. Put differently, leadership are the ones who continuously reinforce the values, which appears to set the tone for both humble leadership and psychological safety. Employees also know that the values guide the leadership's behavior, which provides them with a tool to address the need for a corrected behavior if they feel they are not being listened to. Additionally, leadership has in the past demonstrated an ability to transform as a response to employee voice, and this causes employees to feel that the values are genuine and not simply a fancy word in a document. This ability to change also seems to compensate to a degree for perceived flaws in regards to humility, and seems to promote a forgiving environment. The interactions between psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit therefore suggest that synergies and a self-reinforcing cycle that are beneficial for employee voice are created.

5.5.   A Note on the Impact of Ambiguity and Peripheral Values

There seems to be pockets of low psychological safety, oftentimes related to specific *"don't go there"* zones, where humble leadership is not practiced to its full extent. This consequently appears to affect P-O fit and value congruence negatively for individuals who experience that what is preached is not practiced. Specifically, employees who are involved with such zones are impacted negatively, and the feeling that they are not allowed to fully articulate their point and have a proper discussion often ends up infecting unrelated areas and negatively influencing their inclination towards employee voice. Put differently, the virtuous cycle shifts to a vicious cycle. Sometimes these *"don't go there"* zones appear to be related to peripheral values which are held by leadership but not shared with every employee, e.g. being a *"workaholic"*. Furthermore, whether an employee is congruent or not with these peripheral values appears to be the determining factor which either affects the feedback loop positively or negatively with regards to employee voice.

5.6.   Final Points

Even though the research cannot establish causal relationships between the theories, but rather relies on the interpretivist paradigm and the interviewees' subjective perceptions, some inferences can still be drawn of how psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit influence employee voice. Likewise, a chicken-and-egg situation arises from the empirical material since it is impossible to determine whether observed outcomes like

employee engagement through voice and a high leverage of diversity are the result of the fact that psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit exist in the organization, or if they are a precursor, or the result of something else.

6.   Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to contribute to the understanding of *how* the selected theories interact to influence employee voice by answering the following research question:

"How do psychological safety, humble leadership and person-organization fit influence employee voice?"

The research conducted revealed that employees perceive that psychological safety exists in the company and it helps influence employee voice positively, although there are a few pockets where neither is high. The findings also suggest that the leadership exhibit humble characteristics to a large degree in their relationship with followers and this then influences employee voice positively, although similarly to psychological safety there is some ambiguity demonstrated by the *"don't go there"* zones. This consequently influences employee voice negatively.

Furthermore, the P-O fit, or more specifically the values guiding the organization and the employees' congruence with these, seems to be an underlying mechanism influencing employee voice positively. Put differently, the values serve as a guiding principle for the other concepts and congruence in action and word creates a virtuous cycle of enhanced psychological safety and humble leadership, which then influences employee voice positively. Conversely, a potentially vicious cycle arises when there is incongruence in action or word. In other words, the *"don't go there"* zones could be considered an infringement on the values of goodness and trustworthiness, which then undermines the perceived level of psychological safety and humble leadership, and adversely influences employee voice.

The congruence with the values calibrate not only the organizational priorities and behaviors, but also what perspectives will be heard in the organization. In other words, we argue that employees can either have a high P-O fit from the beginning, conform over time or choose to leave the company, and this process also affects what types of employee voice that prevail in the organization. The values thus create a natural selection process of what employees you recruit, and therefore a natural selection of types of employee voice. Moreover, the values also serve to alleviate any flaws in the perceived level of humble leadership, since they reinforce the notion that leadership continuously attempts to improve and that the values can always be pointed to if they do not act in reality as they should on paper.

Lastly, the virtuous cycle also signals a reciprocal relationship between the selected theories and employee voice. In other words, not only do psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit influence employee voice positively, but employee voice seems

to reinforce the adoption of the behaviors described in the theories as well. A climate characterized by safety, a meaningful purpose, guiding values and humble leaders help set the stage for employee voice, and when people feel free to speak up, they can report errors needed to improve the psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit in turn, which then again influences employee voice.

6.1. Contributions

Theoretically, the thesis contributes by demonstrating how psychological safety, humble leadership and P-O fit interact to influence employee voice. Our research suggests that personality factors might play a greater role in employee voice than the theory of psychological safety suggests, or some other variable, such as inclusivity or the interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers, needs to be explored. Moreover, the research demonstrated that humble leadership plays a central role in encouraging employee voice, particularly the trait of teachability, since it promotes a forgiving view on the leader. Furthermore, if a scale for measuring humble leadership is ever to be developed, it should look especially close into the individual relationships that leaders have with followers. In cases where there is convergence of perceptions of these individual relationships, one can claim that humble leadership has been achieved on a group level.

The practical implications from this thesis involve addressing the critique of the humble leadership concept that is targeted against personization, where the theory previously has provided few practical examples of how to achieve that. Our research gives practical tools for the leaders, and shows that particularly spending time in non-work settings and genuinely caring for employees can help attain personization. The research suggests that working intensively with organizational values, and by that creating a strong brand platform, is effective for promoting employee voice and helping employees unite around a common purpose. The values act as a thermostat for all organizational practices and processes and shows what needs to be recalibrated. Put differently, they reinforce the virtuous cycle of psychological safety, humble leadership and employee voice.

6.2. Transferability

The organization which forms the basis of this single-case study is unique in many respects. The external validity, i.e. the ability to generalize the results and apply them to other organizational contexts (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), is hence limited. Furthermore, the small sample of interviewees could also impact the transferability, but in this context 12 interviews out of potentially 14 represents a large portion, and the congruence in the interviewee subjects' responses indicate that some potential truth has been derived. Moreover, the thick description (Geertz, 1973), i.e. the thorough and

detailed account of the context, enables other researchers to make judgments about "*the possible transferability of findings to other milieux*" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 referred to in Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 402).

6.3.   Future Research

Our study indicates that future research should focus on testing how the selected theories interact in an organization with low P-O fit and weak organizational values. This would be interesting in order to either refute or validify the importance of working actively with organizational values. It would also be interesting to research the relative importance of the individual proximity to a leader and how it affects perceptions of psychological safety, through better relationships and an increased sense of inclusivity.

7.   References

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8. Appendix

8.1. Appendix 1: List of Company Documents

- Internal values document
- Template for one-on-one meetings
- Public website

8.2. Appendix 2: Formal Structures for Employee Voice

1   The fact that Diet Doctor is a small and flat organization, which ensures close proximity to leaders.

2   Monthly one-on-one sessions with a member of the leadership team. Questions such as *"How are things going?"* and *"What may be interesting [for the leader] to know?"* are asked.

3   Weekly meeting where the core team gathers to discuss feedback in relation to the company values.

4   Weekly anonymous surveys via the online tool OfficeVibe.

5   Monthly pre-priorities meeting where employees can voice which projects they think should be prioritized for the upcoming month.

6   Priorities meeting where the upcoming month's priorities are revealed and discussed.

7   Twice-yearly performance scores, also for the leadership team, based on surveys sent out to coworkers. These then form the basis for the annual salary meetings and the twice-yearly shares meeting.

8   Mandatory MBTI personality test for new employees. The results are then posted in the online-communications tools in order to help employees understand they coworkers better and adapt their feedback accordingly.

9   Red and green signs at every desk to help signal whether employees are open for feedback at a particular time.

8.3.   Appendix 3: Interview Template

General information given to the interviewee

The interview is anonymous.

The interviews are conducted with a scientific purpose.

Ask whether we can record the interview.

The interviewee is allowed to take a break at any time.

The interviewee is allowed to refrain from answering questions.

Disclose what we are investigating and explain the concepts of psychological safety, employee voice and feedback.

Topics

Background

Could you please introduce yourself?

For how long have you worked at Diet Doctor?

Feedback practices

Can you tell us of a time when you gave feedback?

Would you say that most people here are comfortable giving feedback, even regarding sensitive topics?

What do you think about the weekly feedback sessions – both individual and in group?

Have the weekly feedback sessions changed how you give or receive feedback?

How is feedback generally received around here?

How confident are you that you won't receive retaliation or criticism if you give feedback?

In what ways to do you feel most comfortable giving feedback, face-to-face, over phone, e-mail or by any other medium?

Edmondson's (2018) survey items to measure psychological safety

If you make a mistake on this team, is it often held against you?

Are members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues?

Do people on this team sometimes reject others for being different?

Is it safe to take a risk on this team?

Is it difficult to ask other members of this team for help?

Would anyone on this team deliberately act in a way that undermines your efforts?

Do you feel that by working with team members of this team, that your unique skills and talents are valued and utilized?

Culture

Can you name the four pillars that Diet Doctor rests on? What is your personal opinion about them?

Can you describe the culture at Diet Doctor?

Has the Diet Doctor culture changed during your time at the company?

Do you see any problems with the existing culture?

If you could do one change to the Diet Doctor culture, what would that be?

How has the colleagues and top managers contributed to your sense of psychological safety and giving of feedback?

How do you feel that your suggestions of improvements are being handled by management and by other colleagues?

Would you recommend working at Diet Doctor?

Values and dos and don'ts

What are your thoughts when I read the following statements from the values and dos and don'ts document?

- "Say what you think and feel. Listen more than you talk" and "Tell people what you think and feel directly in a frank and kind manner."

- "Focus on the most important thing."

8.4.   Appendix 4: Invitation to Interview

E-mail sent by the researchers:

Hello everybody!

As you've been told today, my thesis partner Ida and I will write our thesis at Diet Doctor on the topic of psychological safety, which means the feeling that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Or to put it in another way, if a team is psychologically safe, then team members will dare to give honest feedback and ask questions since they don't feel like they risk their status by appearing incompetent.

How will this happen? This will be an iterative process, so the research question is not written in stone, and depending on our findings we might choose a particular angle to investigate in depth. We will contact the people individually and ask to schedule a voluntary interview that will take place during work hours at the office, beginning next week. Our plan is to have conducted all interviews before the end of February.

After we have gathered all interview data, we will analyze the results, and hand in the full thesis in the beginning of May. We will present our findings to you in a brief lunch presentation that will be voluntary.

We truly appreciate your collaboration and look forward to hearing your insights :-)

Best,
Amanda & Ida

8.5. Appendix 5: Interviews and Fictional Names

Name in thesis*	Format
Adam	Meeting room at Headquarter
Rut	Meeting room at Headquarter
Silva	Meeting room at Headquarter
Carin	Meeting room at Headquarter
Pontus	Meeting room at Headquarter
Didrik	Meeting room at Headquarter
Henrietta	Meeting room at Headquarter
Charlie	Meeting room at Headquarter
Andrew	Meeting room at Headquarter
Jan	Meeting room at Headquarter
Eva	Meeting room at Headquarter
Julie	Meeting room at Headquarter

*Names are fictional and the order is randomized.