

Exploring Leadership Strategies That Promote Psychological Safety and Employee Voice During Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the leadership strategies that promote psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change among managers and employees working in organizations in Qatar.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative exploratory study was conducted with 24 participants from public- and private-sector organizations in Qatar, comprising 10 managers and organizational leaders and 14 employees who had directly experienced at least one significant organizational change during the preceding two years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on relevant organizational and change-related experience. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews focused on leadership communication, accessibility, responses to disagreement, participation in decision-making, treatment of mistakes, trust, inclusion, and employee willingness to express concerns and suggestions. Interviews lasted approximately 45–70 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to code the transcripts, organize related codes, develop candidate themes, and refine the final thematic structure through repeated comparison with the complete dataset.

Findings: The analysis identified eight interrelated themes: transparent and sense-giving communication, accessible and responsive leadership, respectful treatment of voice and dissent, participative change processes, learning-oriented responses to errors, interpersonal trust and leader consistency, inclusive leadership across status boundaries, and voice-to-action follow-through. Psychological safety emerged as a key mechanism through which leadership reduced perceived interpersonal risk, while perceived voice efficacy determined whether employees believed speaking up would produce meaningful consideration or action. Hierarchical distance, peer climate, confidentiality, timing of consultation, change fatigue, organizational response capacity, and leadership continuity influenced the translation of psychological safety into sustained employee voice.

Conclusion: Effective leadership during organizational change requires both creating an interpersonally safe climate and demonstrating that employee contributions are consequential, thereby reducing the risks of speaking up while strengthening employees' willingness to participate actively in change processes.

Keywords: leadership strategies, psychological safety, employee voice, organizational change, inclusive leadership, employee participation, Qatar

1 Introduction

Organizational change has become a persistent feature of contemporary workplaces as organizations respond to technological disruption, economic uncertainty, changing workforce expectations, regulatory pressures, digital transformation, and increasingly complex stakeholder demands. Change initiatives may involve restructuring, adoption of new technologies, revised governance arrangements, altered work processes, leadership transitions, or broader cultural transformation. Although such initiatives are frequently designed to improve organizational effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term sustainability, they also introduce uncertainty and interpersonal risk for employees. During periods of change, established routines may be disrupted, responsibilities may become ambiguous, reporting relationships may shift, and employees may become uncertain about how their opinions, mistakes, concerns, or resistance will be interpreted. Consequently, the effectiveness of organizational change depends not only on formal plans, structural arrangements, and technical implementation but also on whether employees feel sufficiently secure to communicate openly and participate actively in the change process. Leadership therefore occupies a central position in determining whether organizational change becomes a participatory process characterized by learning and constructive dialogue or a top-down process associated with silence, defensiveness, and disengagement (Madufo et al., 2026; Mazhabi, 2025; Umar et al., 2025).

Leadership during organizational change requires more than communicating new strategic priorities or ensuring compliance with implementation plans. Leaders must interpret uncertainty, establish direction, maintain credibility, facilitate adaptation, and create conditions in which employees can contribute knowledge that may not be readily available to senior decision-makers. Contemporary research on leadership and change increasingly emphasizes that successful transformation depends on relational as well as structural competencies. For example, research on leadership in higher education has highlighted the importance of leadership approaches that support institutional adaptation and system-level transformation, particularly where governance, technology, and organizational practices are changing simultaneously (Aedi et al., 2026; Madufo et al., 2026). Similarly, work examining leadership under conditions of crisis and educational change indicates that leaders are required to

combine strategic direction with responsiveness, communication, resilience, and context-sensitive engagement with organizational members (Mazhabi, 2025). At more senior governance levels, effective leadership has also been associated with the ability to integrate diverse perspectives, maintain accountability, and navigate complex institutional environments rather than relying solely on positional authority (Taylor, 2026). These developments suggest that leadership effectiveness during change increasingly depends on the capacity to establish conditions under which employees can participate meaningfully rather than merely receive instructions.

One of the most important interpersonal conditions for such participation is psychological safety. Psychological safety refers broadly to the perception that individuals can engage in interpersonal risk-taking without anticipating humiliation, punishment, rejection, or other adverse consequences. Within organizational change, this condition is particularly important because employees often need to raise concerns about implementation problems, question assumptions underlying new procedures, identify risks, acknowledge errors, and suggest modifications. Such behavior can be valuable to organizational learning but may also be perceived as risky when employees are uncertain about how leaders will respond. Recent research has reinforced the central role of psychological safety across several leadership contexts. For example, socially responsible leadership has been linked with psychological safety in explaining employee experiences in public university settings, indicating that employees' perceptions of leadership responsibility and fairness can shape whether the workplace feels interpersonally secure (Kyambade et al., 2025). In remote and hybrid work settings, inclusive leadership has similarly been examined in relation to psychological safety and employee voice, underscoring the importance of leadership accessibility and inclusion when conventional face-to-face interaction is reduced (Mohase et al., 2025). Research on digital leadership has also shown that psychological safety can function as an important psychological mechanism through which leadership supports employee engagement and innovative outcomes in digitally transforming environments (Luo et al., 2025).

The relevance of psychological safety becomes even more pronounced when organizational change requires experimentation and learning. New technologies, revised work systems, and transformed organizational structures inevitably create situations in which employees must operate without complete certainty. Under these conditions,

problems cannot always be anticipated in advance, and employees often possess frontline knowledge regarding implementation barriers that leaders do not have. If employees believe that admitting uncertainty, reporting mistakes, or challenging ineffective practices will expose them to criticism or reputational damage, important information may remain concealed. By contrast, when leaders respond constructively to questions and errors, employees are more likely to communicate emerging problems before they become more difficult to resolve. This logic is consistent with research on safety leadership, which demonstrates that leadership behavior can shape employee participation and compliance by influencing knowledge, expectations, and the perceived acceptability of safety-related involvement (Piao, 2025). Research on psychosocial safety climate implementation similarly indicates that leadership competence is important in translating organizational commitments into everyday practices that employees experience as supportive and psychologically safe (Cataloni et al., 2026). Accordingly, psychological safety can be understood as an operational condition that enables employees to provide potentially uncomfortable but organizationally valuable information during periods of change.

Closely connected to psychological safety is employee voice. Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of suggestions, concerns, ideas, or opinions intended to improve organizational functioning or draw attention to problems. Voice differs from routine communication because it often involves challenging existing practices, questioning decisions, or drawing attention to conditions that decision-makers may prefer not to confront. During organizational change, voice can provide leaders with access to distributed knowledge about how new systems are functioning in practice, what unintended consequences are emerging, and where employees perceive risks or opportunities. Transformational leadership has been associated with voice behavior through relational processes such as leader-member exchange and knowledge sharing, suggesting that employees are more likely to contribute ideas when leadership relationships are characterized by trust and high-quality interaction (Sharif et al., 2024). Likewise, research on spiritual leadership and leader-member exchange has demonstrated that leadership relationships can influence employee voice, while individual and cultural orientations may shape how strongly these relationships are expressed (Yu & Pitafi, 2024). These findings highlight that voice is not merely an individual disposition but is strongly

conditioned by the interpersonal and organizational context created by leadership.

Inclusive leadership is especially relevant because it signals openness, accessibility, and appreciation of employee contributions. In periods of organizational change, inclusion can reduce the perceived distance between leaders and employees and make it more acceptable for individuals at lower hierarchical levels to offer alternative views. Evidence suggests that inclusive leadership can encourage change-oriented extra-role behavior through leader-member exchange and trust in leadership, reinforcing the idea that relational quality and confidence in leaders are central mechanisms through which employees become willing to contribute beyond formal role requirements (Masih et al., 2025). The connection between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee voice is also supported by evidence from remote and hybrid work contexts, where employees may have fewer informal opportunities to interpret leaders' intentions and therefore depend more heavily on explicit signals of accessibility and inclusion (Mohase et al., 2025). These findings are highly relevant to organizational change because change often disrupts established channels of communication and increases the importance of deliberate leadership practices that invite employee participation.

Conversely, leadership can suppress voice when employees anticipate negative consequences from speaking. Toxic leadership has been associated with patterns of exit, silence, voice, and neglect, demonstrating that employees' responses to leadership quality extend beyond satisfaction and may directly affect whether they choose to communicate or withdraw (Sabino et al., 2024). Organizational silence can also be reinforced by perceptions of corporate hypocrisy, inertia, or inconsistency, whereas paradoxical leadership may create conditions that help re-establish voice behavior by managing competing organizational demands more effectively (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). These findings are significant because organizational change often creates precisely the kinds of contradictions that can generate silence: leaders may ask for openness while signaling that certain questions are unwelcome, request innovation while penalizing failure, or solicit feedback after key decisions have already been made. Under such conditions, employees may conclude that speaking is formally encouraged but practically unsafe or ineffective. Thus, the credibility of leadership during change depends on alignment between verbal invitations to participate and actual behavioral responses to employee input.

Trust also appears to be a central mechanism connecting leadership with employee voice. Employees assess not only whether leaders claim to support participation but whether they behave consistently, protect confidentiality, respond fairly, and follow through on commitments. When trust is present, employees are more likely to interpret ambiguity in a less threatening manner and may be more willing to incur the interpersonal risk associated with speaking up. Inclusive and relationship-oriented leadership can strengthen this trust by demonstrating respect and reciprocity (Masih et al., 2025; Yu & Pitafi, 2024). Similarly, synergistic leadership behaviors have been examined in relation to organizational voice and knowledge-related behaviors, emphasizing that collaborative leadership processes can influence whether employees share or conceal information (Mirghafouri et al., 2024). This is especially important during organizational change because employees often hold locally specific knowledge regarding workflow, stakeholder needs, technical constraints, and implementation difficulties. If this information remains hidden, leaders may make decisions based on incomplete organizational knowledge.

The importance of knowledge availability becomes even more apparent when change involves complex technological or system-level transformation. Organizations increasingly depend on large volumes of information, distributed expertise, and evidence to support strategic decision-making. Research concerning scientific data systems has emphasized the strategic role of high-quality data and knowledge infrastructures in supporting major institutional and national requirements (Guo et al., 2024). Although such work emerges from a different substantive context, it reinforces a broader organizational principle: effective decision-making depends on the availability, integration, and timely use of relevant information. Similarly, research examining the construction of comprehensive knowledge frameworks, such as panoramic spatiotemporal analytical systems, reflects the growing importance of integrating diverse forms of information when interpreting complex phenomena (Cui et al., 2024). Within organizations, employee voice performs an analogous informational function by transmitting situated knowledge upward and across organizational boundaries. Leadership that suppresses voice may therefore impair not only employee morale but also the quality of organizational intelligence available during change.

The relationship between leadership, voice, and change should also be understood within wider institutional and sustainability-oriented perspectives. Organizational

transformation increasingly takes place in systems where environmental, social, technological, and governance considerations intersect. Research on activating ecological resource value, for instance, highlights how institutional mechanisms, coordination, and strategic pathways are required to translate latent resources into sustainable development outcomes (Lang & Wang, 2024). In a comparable organizational sense, employee knowledge and experience represent latent resources that can contribute to successful change only when leadership creates pathways through which they can be expressed and used. Likewise, scholarship focused on long-term policy development and institutional learning emphasizes the importance of reviewing past practices while adapting governance arrangements to future challenges (Neto & Camkin, 2024). These broader perspectives reinforce the proposition that sustainable change is not achieved solely by issuing new directives; it requires mechanisms through which organizations can learn from internal feedback and continuously adjust.

Leadership also has an ethical and values-based dimension that may influence psychological safety. Spiritual leadership research emphasizes purpose, values, meaning, interconnectedness, and the creation of supportive organizational environments (De Silva et al., 2026). Such principles can be relevant during periods of uncertainty because employees may judge change not only according to its technical efficiency but also according to whether leaders demonstrate integrity, respect, compassion, and consistency. When leadership behavior reflects these qualities, employees may be more willing to trust organizational intentions and communicate candidly. In contrast, inconsistencies between stated values and enacted behavior can undermine credibility and increase silence. This is particularly consequential where change affects employment conditions, professional identity, authority, or established routines. Employees are likely to observe leadership conduct closely and interpret it as evidence of whether openness is genuinely valued.

Leadership competence at the organizational level therefore involves creating both structural and relational conditions for participation. Studies of psychosocial safety climate suggest that successful implementation depends on leaders who are able to translate organizational commitments into visible practices (Cataloni et al., 2026). Research on institutional transformation likewise demonstrates that change management, transformational leadership, and knowledge management can operate jointly

in shaping sustainable performance (Umar et al., 2025). Digital leadership research further indicates that leadership can enhance innovation through psychological and motivational mechanisms rather than through technology alone (Luo et al., 2025). These findings collectively suggest that leaders influence change outcomes not merely by determining what will change but by shaping how employees experience the process and whether they contribute actively to it.

Despite growing attention to leadership, psychological safety, and employee voice, important gaps remain. Existing studies frequently investigate these constructs in relatively specific settings, such as higher education, remote or hybrid work, hospitality, safety management, or particular national contexts (Kyambade et al., 2025; Mohase et al., 2025; Piao, 2025; Sharif et al., 2024). Other studies focus on particular leadership approaches, including inclusive, transformational, spiritual, socially responsible, digital, paradoxical, or synergistic leadership (Luo et al., 2025; Masih et al., 2025; Mirghafouri et al., 2024; Sulphrey & Jasim, 2025; Yu & Pitafi, 2024). While these studies provide important evidence, less is known about how employees and managers themselves interpret the concrete leadership strategies that make speaking up feel both safe and worthwhile during organizational change. A focus on named leadership styles may also obscure the everyday behaviors through which psychological safety is actually constructed, such as acknowledging uncertainty, listening non-defensively, protecting confidentiality, inviting dissent, responding to mistakes, explaining rejected suggestions, and following through on employee input.

This gap is particularly relevant in Qatar, where organizations across public and private sectors have undergone substantial modernization, digitalization, institutional development, and workforce transformation. Such environments create a strong need for leadership practices capable of coordinating formal change while maintaining employee engagement and access to frontline knowledge. As organizational systems become more complex, leaders must rely increasingly on employees to identify implementation difficulties, propose improvements, and communicate emerging risks. Yet employees may remain silent if hierarchy, uncertainty, reputational concerns, or previous experiences suggest that voice is unsafe or ineffective. Understanding the leadership strategies that reduce these barriers is therefore important both theoretically and practically. It can help clarify how psychological safety operates during organizational change

and how leadership behavior can transform employee voice from a formally encouraged principle into an actual organizational practice.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore the leadership strategies that promote psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change among managers and employees working in organizations in Qatar.

2 Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to examine leadership strategies that promote psychological safety and employee voice during periods of organizational change. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of employees' and organizational leaders' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of leadership behaviors during change processes, particularly those behaviors that encouraged employees to communicate concerns, express alternative viewpoints, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and contribute suggestions without fear of interpersonal or professional consequences. The study was conducted in Qatar and included participants drawn from organizations that had experienced substantial organizational change during the preceding two years, including restructuring, digital transformation, implementation of new work systems, changes in organizational policies, departmental reorganization, leadership transitions, and modifications to work processes. Participants were recruited from public-sector and private-sector organizations operating in Qatar in order to capture experiences across different organizational environments. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who possessed direct experience of organizational change and were therefore able to provide information relevant to the research objectives. The final sample consisted of 24 participants, including 10 managers and organizational leaders and 14 employees who had directly experienced at least one significant organizational change initiative. Including both managerial and employee perspectives enabled the study to examine leadership strategies from the perspective of those responsible for implementing and communicating change as well as those directly affected by it.

Eligibility for participation required individuals to be at least 21 years of age, currently employed in an organization located in Qatar, have at least two years of organizational work experience, and have directly experienced a significant

organizational change within their current organization during the previous two years. Managers were additionally required to have supervisory or leadership responsibilities during at least one organizational change initiative. Employees were required to have worked under a manager or supervisor during the implementation of the organizational change. Individuals who had recently joined their organization and had not directly experienced the relevant change process were excluded. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that subsequent interviews no longer generated substantially new concepts regarding leadership practices, psychological safety, or employee voice. The participants represented different organizational levels, professional backgrounds, and functional areas, thereby increasing the diversity of perspectives represented in the data. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals received information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study before providing informed consent. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the research without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process by assigning identification codes to participants and removing personally identifiable information, organizational names, and other potentially identifying details from interview transcripts and research reports.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews based on an interview guide developed in accordance with the objectives of the study and the conceptual domains of leadership behavior, psychological safety, employee voice, and organizational change. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided sufficient consistency across participants while allowing the researcher to explore individual experiences in greater depth and pursue unexpected but relevant issues emerging during the conversations. The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions addressing participants' experiences of organizational change, managerial communication during change, opportunities to express concerns and alternative opinions, responses of leaders to disagreement or critical feedback, approaches used by managers to encourage employee participation, experiences of speaking up or remaining silent, interpersonal trust between leaders and employees, treatment of mistakes and failures, leader accessibility, transparency in decision-making, inclusion in change-related discussions, and leadership behaviors that either strengthened or weakened employees' sense of psychological safety. Managers were

additionally asked to describe the strategies they used to involve employees in change processes, manage resistance and uncertainty, obtain employee feedback, respond to criticism, and establish an environment in which employees could raise difficult issues. Employees were asked to provide concrete examples of situations in which leadership behaviors influenced their willingness to express ideas, report problems, challenge decisions, or propose improvements.

The initial interview guide was reviewed for clarity and relevance before formal data collection. Minor modifications were made to improve the sequencing and wording of questions and to ensure their applicability to the organizational context of Qatar. Interviews were conducted individually in a private setting or through a secure online meeting platform when face-to-face participation was not practical. Participants were able to communicate in English or Arabic according to their preference, enabling them to describe their experiences in the language in which they felt most comfortable. Interviews generally lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were digitally audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of the discussions. Field notes were also prepared during and immediately following each interview to record contextual observations, important nonverbal information where applicable, emerging interpretations, and potential issues requiring exploration in subsequent interviews. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to use probing questions such as requests for examples, explanations, and clarification when participants raised issues associated with trust, interpersonal risk, leader reactions, organizational hierarchy, communication, or employee participation. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently, allowing emerging concepts to inform subsequent interviews and enabling the researcher to examine developing patterns in greater depth. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Where interviews were conducted in Arabic, the material relevant to the final English-language analysis and reporting was translated carefully while preserving the original meaning of participants' statements. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings to enhance accuracy before formal coding began.

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning concerning leadership strategies that facilitated or constrained psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change. Analysis began with repeated reading

of the interview transcripts and field notes to achieve familiarity with the data and develop an overall understanding of participants' experiences. During this stage, preliminary observations and analytical notes were documented, with particular attention to descriptions of leadership communication, employee involvement, interpersonal trust, responses to disagreement, leader accessibility, reactions to mistakes, perceived risks associated with speaking up, and organizational conditions affecting employee participation. The transcripts were subsequently subjected to systematic coding. Meaningful segments of text were assigned initial codes that reflected both explicitly stated experiences and underlying patterns relevant to the research questions. Coding remained sufficiently open during the early stages of analysis to allow concepts to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined classification system on the data. Examples of issues examined during coding included transparent communication, active listening, leader openness, respectful responses to dissent, participative decision-making, acknowledgment of uncertainty, encouragement of questioning, constructive treatment of errors, leader consistency, interpersonal respect, feedback responsiveness, protection from retaliation, inclusion in change planning, and perceived credibility of leadership.

Following initial coding, conceptually related codes were compared, organized, and progressively grouped into candidate themes representing broader patterns in the participants' accounts. The themes were continuously reviewed against both the coded extracts and the complete dataset to determine whether they captured internally coherent and analytically distinctive aspects of the phenomenon. Particular attention was given to relationships among specific leadership behaviors, employees' perceptions of interpersonal risk, their willingness to communicate concerns or ideas, and their participation in organizational change. Contrasting cases were also examined to identify circumstances in which similar leadership actions were interpreted differently or in which employees chose silence despite explicit managerial encouragement to speak. The analytical process therefore considered not only strategies perceived as effective but also contextual conditions that influenced their effectiveness. Themes were refined, clearly defined, and named after repeated comparison with the original interview material. Analysis continued until a coherent thematic structure was developed explaining how leadership practices contributed

to the creation of psychologically safe conditions and supported employee voice during organizational change.

Several procedures were incorporated to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency of the qualitative analysis. An audit trail was maintained documenting decisions concerning coding, theme development, revision of categories, and interpretation of the findings. Reflexive notes were used throughout data collection and analysis to identify potential researcher assumptions and reduce the likelihood that interpretations would be driven primarily by pre-existing expectations. Themes and interpretations were repeatedly compared with the original transcripts to ensure that conclusions remained grounded in participants' accounts. Attention was also given to negative and divergent cases rather than limiting the analysis to experiences that supported dominant patterns. Data from managers and employees were compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence between leadership intentions and employee experiences. The final themes were supported by representative participant narratives and quotations, allowing a clear connection to be maintained between the empirical data and the interpretation of leadership strategies that promote psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change.

3 Findings and Results

A total of 24 participants took part in the study, comprising 10 managers and organizational leaders and 14 employees from public- and private-sector organizations in Qatar. Participants represented a range of organizational functions, including administration, human resources, finance, information technology, operations, education, healthcare, professional services, and project management. Thirteen participants were male and 11 were female. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 54 years, with a mean age of approximately 38 years. Their total professional experience ranged from 4 to 27 years, while organizational tenure in their current workplaces ranged from 2 to 16 years. Among the 10 participants in managerial or leadership positions, managerial experience ranged from 3 to 18 years. All participants had directly experienced at least one substantial organizational change during the preceding two years. The most frequently reported forms of change were digital transformation and implementation of new technologies, departmental restructuring, changes in organizational procedures, leadership transitions, revised performance-management systems, and changes in

employee roles or reporting relationships. Approximately half of the participants had experienced more than one type of organizational change during the relevant period. Analysis of the interviews indicated that participants did not perceive psychological safety and employee voice as

isolated individual characteristics. Rather, both were consistently described as outcomes of recurring interactions between leadership behaviors, communication practices, interpersonal relationships, and the broader conditions under which organizational change was implemented.

Table 1

Main Themes and Subthemes of Leadership Strategies Promoting Psychological Safety and Employee Voice During Organizational Change

Main Theme	Subthemes	Analytical Meaning
Transparent and Sense-Giving Communication	Explaining the rationale for change; communicating uncertainty honestly; providing timely information; clarifying expectations and consequences	Leaders reduced ambiguity and perceived threat by helping employees understand why change was occurring, what was known and unknown, and how employees would be affected.
Accessible and Responsive Leadership	Leader availability; active listening; informal communication channels; timely responses to concerns	Employees were more willing to speak when leaders were visible, approachable, and responsive rather than distant or exclusively hierarchical.
Respectful Treatment of Voice and Dissent	Non-defensive responses; acknowledgment of criticism; protection from retaliation; respectful disagreement	Psychological safety was strengthened when employees could challenge decisions or raise concerns without being labeled as resistant, disloyal, or problematic.
Participative Change Processes	Employee consultation; involvement in implementation decisions; co-development of solutions; feedback loops	Voice increased when employees believed their input could influence the change process rather than merely being collected symbolically.
Learning-Oriented Responses to Errors	Normalizing experimentation; separating mistakes from blame; discussing lessons learned; encouraging early reporting of problems	Leaders fostered psychological safety when errors during change were treated primarily as sources of information and learning rather than occasions for punishment.
Interpersonal Trust and Leader Consistency	Behavioral consistency; fairness; confidentiality; keeping commitments; alignment between words and actions	Employees assessed whether speaking up was safe largely by observing whether leaders behaved predictably and honored commitments over time.
Inclusive Leadership Across Status Boundaries	Inviting quieter employees; reducing status barriers; equal opportunity to contribute; recognition of diverse expertise	Voice was broadened when leaders actively counteracted hierarchy and ensured that employees at different levels could contribute.
Voice-to-Action Follow-Through	Reporting what happened to suggestions; explaining rejected ideas; visible implementation of useful input; closing feedback loops	Employees sustained voice behavior when they could see that speaking up produced consideration, explanation, or action.

Table 1 presents the eight main themes derived from the thematic analysis. Together, these themes demonstrate that leadership strategies promoting psychological safety and employee voice operated through several interconnected mechanisms rather than through a single behavior. Participants emphasized that transparent communication was particularly important at the beginning of change initiatives, when uncertainty regarding roles, expectations, job security, performance criteria, and future organizational arrangements was highest. However, communication alone was not sufficient to produce psychological safety. Employees repeatedly distinguished between leaders who simply transmitted information and leaders who created opportunities for reciprocal dialogue. Accessible leadership therefore emerged as a second major mechanism through which employees assessed whether questions, concerns, and disagreement were genuinely welcomed. This perception was reinforced when leaders listened without interruption, asked follow-up questions, provided explanations, and remained available after formal meetings. Respectful treatment of dissent was particularly important because participants described organizational change as a period in

which employees often had concerns that could be interpreted as resistance. When managers reacted defensively or associated criticism with negativity, employees became increasingly cautious and shifted toward silence. In contrast, when disagreement was treated as legitimate information, employees were more willing to identify operational risks and unintended consequences.

Participative change processes further strengthened employee voice by increasing the perceived usefulness of speaking up. Participants frequently indicated that consultation was meaningful only when it had a visible connection to decisions or implementation practices. Where employees were invited to meetings but believed that decisions had already been finalized, participation was often perceived as symbolic, which gradually weakened motivation to contribute. Learning-oriented responses to errors represented another critical element, particularly during digital transformation and procedural change, where experimentation and adaptation were common. Employees reported greater willingness to report mistakes early when leaders focused on identifying causes and preventing recurrence rather than identifying individuals to blame.

Interpersonal trust and leadership consistency cut across all other themes. Employees evaluated the safety of speaking up by observing whether leaders maintained confidentiality, applied standards consistently, kept commitments, and behaved similarly under pressure. Inclusive leadership was also essential in organizations characterized by pronounced hierarchy. Participants described the importance of actively inviting input from junior employees and individuals who were less likely to volunteer opinions in formal meetings. Finally, voice-to-action follow-through emerged as a central

factor in sustaining employee participation over time. Even when suggestions were not accepted, participants considered clear explanations important because they demonstrated that employee input had been heard and evaluated. Collectively, the findings show that psychological safety was constructed through repeated leadership behaviors that reduced interpersonal risk, while employee voice was sustained when employees simultaneously perceived both safety and potential usefulness in contributing.

Table 2

Leadership Behaviors Associated with Psychological Safety During Organizational Change

Leadership Behavior	Indicators Identified in Participant Accounts	Perceived Effect on Psychological Safety
Honest explanation of change	Clear rationale, acknowledgment of uncertainty, realistic discussion of difficulties	Reduced rumors, anxiety, and perceived hidden agendas
Visible leader availability	Open-door interactions, direct access, regular check-ins, presence during implementation	Increased comfort in raising concerns and seeking clarification
Active and non-judgmental listening	Allowing employees to finish speaking, asking clarifying questions, avoiding immediate rebuttal	Reduced fear of embarrassment and interpersonal rejection
Respectful response to disagreement	Separating criticism of decisions from judgments of the employee	Increased willingness to express divergent opinions
Confidential handling of sensitive concerns	Private discussion, protection of employee identity where appropriate	Increased trust and willingness to discuss sensitive risks
Constructive response to mistakes	Investigation of causes, emphasis on learning, avoidance of public blame	Increased early disclosure of problems and experimentation
Consistent treatment of employees	Similar standards across positions and groups, predictable managerial responses	Strengthened perceptions of fairness and reliability
Leader acknowledgment of limitations	Admitting uncertainty, requesting expertise, acknowledging mistakes	Reduced status barriers and normalized openness
Proactive invitation of input	Direct requests for opinions, inclusion of junior staff, structured opportunities for questions	Increased participation among employees who would otherwise remain silent
Emotional composure under pressure	Calm responses to bad news, criticism, and implementation difficulties	Reduced anticipatory fear regarding negative leader reactions

Table 2 illustrates the specific leadership behaviors that participants associated most strongly with psychological safety during organizational change. The findings suggest that psychological safety developed primarily from employees' expectations regarding how leaders would respond when potentially uncomfortable information was communicated. Employees did not define a safe environment as one in which disagreement, mistakes, or uncertainty were absent. Instead, psychological safety was described as confidence that such issues could be raised without disproportionate interpersonal or professional consequences. Honest explanation of change was consistently associated with lower anxiety because incomplete or highly controlled communication tended to generate speculation. Participants reported that uncertainty itself was not necessarily damaging when leaders acknowledged it openly. In several accounts, employees considered statements such as not yet having a final answer more trustworthy than overly confident messages that were

subsequently contradicted by events. This indicated that credibility depended not only on the amount of information provided but also on perceived authenticity.

Leader availability and active listening were similarly important because they transformed formal communication into interpersonal accessibility. Participants described regular check-ins, open-door communication, brief informal conversations, and direct invitations to discuss concerns as signals that employee perspectives were legitimate. Active listening was especially important when employees expressed views that contradicted management assumptions. Participants differentiated between managers who listened merely to respond and those who listened to understand. The latter behavior reduced the perceived social cost of raising difficult issues. Respectful responses to disagreement further strengthened psychological safety by communicating that opposing views would not automatically be interpreted as disloyalty or resistance. Employees described substantial caution when leaders displayed irritation, sarcasm, public

criticism, or immediate rejection of opposing views. Even when these reactions were directed at another employee, observers reported that they learned from the incident and adjusted their own future behavior accordingly. Thus, psychological safety was affected not only by employees' direct interactions with leaders but also by their observation of how leaders treated others.

Constructive responses to mistakes were especially salient during early stages of change implementation. Participants described organizational change as a context characterized by learning demands, unclear procedures, unfamiliar technology, and changing performance expectations. In such conditions, punitive reactions to mistakes discouraged employees from reporting difficulties and sometimes resulted in problems being concealed until they became more serious. By contrast, leaders who asked what happened, why it happened, and what could be changed

were perceived as creating conditions in which problems could be surfaced earlier. Leader acknowledgment of personal limitations or uncertainty also reduced hierarchical distance. When managers admitted mistakes, requested employee expertise, or acknowledged that implementation plans might require revision, employees interpreted this as permission to contribute rather than as a weakness in leadership. Emotional composure under pressure was another frequently described indicator. Employees were more willing to bring bad news to leaders whose reactions remained measured and problem-focused. Overall, the pattern of findings indicates that psychological safety was less dependent on explicit statements that employees were free to speak and more dependent on repeated behavioral evidence showing that speaking up would be treated fairly and constructively.

Table 3

Conditions Influencing the Translation of Psychological Safety into Employee Voice

Condition	Facilitating Pattern	Inhibiting Pattern	Effect on Employee Voice
Perceived usefulness of input	Employees saw suggestions influence decisions or implementation	Suggestions were collected without visible consideration	Determined whether employees believed speaking up was worthwhile
Feedback after speaking up	Leaders explained actions, decisions, or reasons for rejection	No response after concerns or ideas were raised	Influenced whether voice behavior was sustained
Hierarchical distance	Leaders reduced status barriers and actively invited contribution	Employees were expected to communicate strictly through hierarchy	Affected willingness of junior employees to speak
Risk of negative labeling	Critical input was treated as legitimate	Employees raising concerns were considered resistant or difficult	Shaped willingness to express dissent
Timing of consultation	Employees were involved before decisions became fixed	Consultation occurred after key decisions were finalized	Influenced authenticity of participation
Peer climate	Colleagues supported open discussion and constructive disagreement	Employees discouraged one another from raising sensitive issues	Reinforced or weakened formal leadership efforts
Change fatigue	Leaders prioritized issues and acknowledged employee burden	Repeated changes occurred without adequate explanation or support	Reduced motivation to contribute even when safety existed
Confidentiality and trust	Sensitive concerns were handled discreetly	Information was attributed to individuals or circulated informally	Strongly influenced upward communication
Organizational response capacity	Suggestions could be evaluated and acted upon	Structural constraints prevented any visible response	Affected expectations that voice would produce meaningful outcomes
Leadership continuity	Leaders demonstrated stable responses over time	Leadership reactions varied across situations or individuals	Determined whether employees trusted the safety of future voice behavior

Table 3 demonstrates that psychological safety was necessary but not sufficient for sustained employee voice. Participants repeatedly distinguished between feeling able to speak and believing that speaking would be useful. This distinction became particularly clear in accounts of organizations where leaders were personally approachable but organizational processes did not provide meaningful mechanisms for responding to employee suggestions. In such settings, employees were often willing to express concerns initially but reduced their participation after repeated experiences of receiving no response. The

perceived usefulness of voice therefore emerged as a major condition influencing whether psychological safety translated into actual behavior. Participants indicated that employees paid close attention to what happened after suggestions were made. Visible implementation of a recommendation represented the strongest evidence that voice mattered, but acceptance of the suggestion was not considered necessary in every case. A clear explanation of why an idea could not be implemented was often sufficient to preserve trust because it demonstrated that the input had been considered seriously.

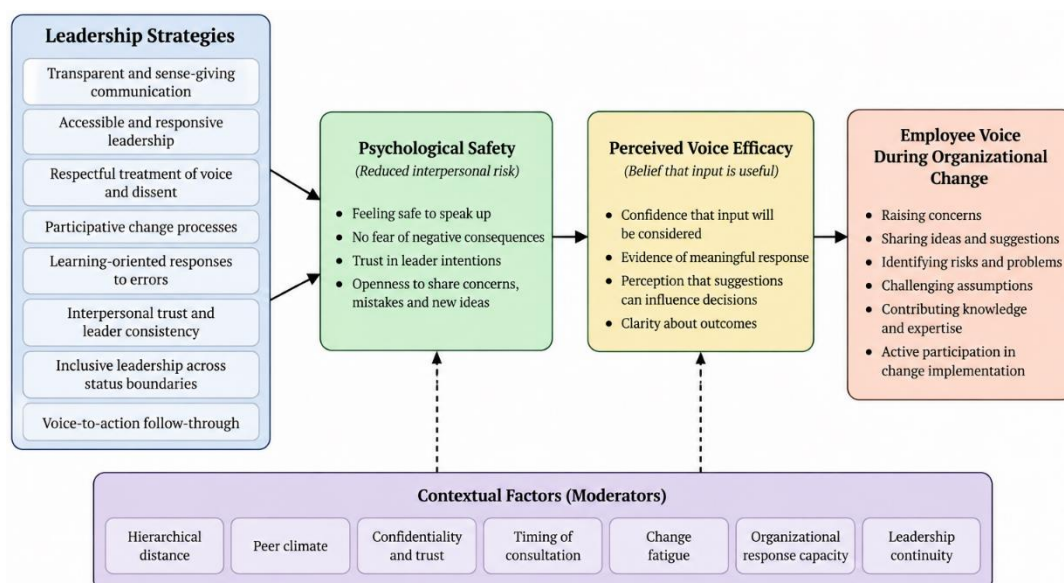
Hierarchical distance was particularly relevant in the Qatari organizational context represented in the study because participants worked in organizations that varied substantially in formal authority structures and managerial accessibility. Junior employees often reported greater reluctance to initiate disagreement unless leaders explicitly invited them to contribute. This pattern was reinforced by concerns about negative labeling. Participants described situations in which employees who repeatedly raised problems could acquire informal reputations as being negative, resistant, or difficult, even when the issues they identified were legitimate. Such reputational risk discouraged voice and contributed to selective communication in which employees shared only information they believed leaders wanted to hear. Timing of consultation also influenced perceptions of authenticity. Employees responded more positively when they were invited to contribute before implementation choices were finalized. By contrast, consultation that occurred after major decisions had already been made was frequently interpreted as an exercise in obtaining compliance rather than genuine participation.

Peer climate represented another important contextual factor. Participants explained that employees often discussed privately whether it was advisable to raise a particular concern and that these informal conversations shaped collective expectations about voice. Where colleagues encouraged constructive discussion and shared examples of

leaders responding positively, formal leadership efforts were reinforced. Where employees warned one another that speaking up would make no difference or create unnecessary problems, silence became normalized. Change fatigue could also reduce voice independently of psychological safety. Some participants described environments in which employees were no longer afraid to speak but had become disengaged because they had experienced repeated organizational changes without sufficient stabilization or follow-up. Consequently, leadership strategies needed to address not only fear but also exhaustion, cynicism, and perceptions of futility. Confidentiality was especially important for sensitive concerns related to managerial behavior, team conflict, resource allocation, or implementation failures. Employees were significantly less willing to disclose such information when they believed comments would be traced back to them. Finally, organizational response capacity shaped the long-term credibility of employee voice systems. Leaders could encourage participation, but if the organization lacked mechanisms for evaluating and acting upon suggestions, employees eventually perceived voice as ceremonial. These findings indicate that sustainable employee voice requires the interaction of psychological safety, perceived efficacy, credible feedback processes, and organizational capacity to respond.

Figure 1

Conceptual Pathway Linking Leadership Strategies, Psychological Safety, and Employee Voice During Organizational Change



Note. The figure illustrates how leadership strategies influence employee voice during organizational change through reduced interpersonal risk (psychological safety) and increased perceived voice efficacy, within the context of organizational and social conditions that can strengthen or weaken these relationships.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual pattern derived from the interviews and illustrates the central relationship identified across the themes. Leadership strategies were found to influence employee voice primarily through two interconnected pathways: reduction of interpersonal risk and enhancement of perceived voice efficacy. Transparent communication, leader accessibility, respectful treatment, constructive responses to errors, behavioral consistency, and inclusive interaction reduced the anticipated interpersonal costs of raising concerns, questioning assumptions, or admitting problems. These behaviors contributed to psychological safety by signaling that employees could engage in interpersonal risk-taking without expecting humiliation, retaliation, damaged relationships, or negative professional labeling. Psychological safety, however, did not automatically result in employee voice. For voice to occur consistently, employees also needed to believe that their input would receive genuine consideration and could potentially affect decisions, implementation practices, or problem resolution. Participative decision-making, timely feedback, visible follow-through, and explanations regarding the acceptance or rejection of suggestions therefore strengthened perceived voice efficacy.

The conceptual pattern further indicates that leadership strategies and psychological safety operated within a wider organizational context. Hierarchical distance, peer norms, confidentiality, change fatigue, timing of consultation, and organizational response capacity could either strengthen or weaken the relationship between psychological safety and employee voice. When these contextual conditions were supportive, employees were more willing to raise operational concerns, identify risks, suggest modifications, challenge assumptions, and contribute knowledge during change implementation. When contextual conditions were unfavorable, employees could remain silent even when their immediate supervisor was personally supportive. The findings therefore suggest that employee voice during organizational change should be understood as the outcome of both relational safety and perceived practical usefulness. Leadership was most effective when it addressed both dimensions simultaneously: creating an interpersonal climate in which employees felt safe enough to speak and building decision processes in which speaking appeared consequential.

Across the dataset, a recurring sequence was evident in participants' descriptions of effective leadership during organizational change. Leaders first established credibility by communicating openly about the reasons for change and

acknowledging uncertainties. They then created opportunities for interaction by remaining accessible and inviting questions. The next critical stage involved the leader's response to the first instances of disagreement, bad news, or reported mistakes. Participants described these early interactions as particularly influential because employees used them as evidence when deciding whether future voice would be safe. When leaders responded calmly, respectfully, and constructively, psychological safety strengthened. Employees subsequently became more willing to share operational knowledge, challenge unrealistic assumptions, identify implementation problems, and propose alternative approaches. When leaders then provided feedback and demonstrated that employee input had informed action or had at least been seriously considered, voice behavior became more sustained. Conversely, when leaders reacted defensively, failed to follow up, or invited participation only after decisions had been finalized, employees learned that silence was safer or more efficient.

A further pattern concerned the distinction between formal and informal voice mechanisms. Formal mechanisms included scheduled meetings, staff consultations, change workshops, surveys, suggestion systems, and structured feedback sessions. Participants acknowledged their usefulness but emphasized that informal leadership behavior often had greater influence on psychological safety. Employees frequently decided whether to speak based on small interpersonal signals, such as whether a manager interrupted them, whether concerns were dismissed, whether dissenting employees were subsequently excluded, whether mistakes were discussed publicly, and whether managers returned to issues raised in previous conversations. This finding indicates that formal employee voice systems cannot compensate fully for unsafe day-to-day leadership behavior. An organization may provide multiple channels for feedback, but employees may still withhold information when they expect adverse interpersonal consequences.

The findings also revealed a temporal dimension. Psychological safety was not regarded as a fixed condition established at the beginning of organizational change. Instead, participants described it as continually updated through experience. A leader who initially encouraged questions could lose credibility if later responses to criticism became defensive or punitive. Conversely, leaders could gradually rebuild voice after previous negative experiences by responding consistently and transparently over time. This temporal pattern was particularly important during prolonged change initiatives, where uncertainty and

workload pressures changed across implementation stages. Early phases required explanation and reassurance, implementation phases required rapid reporting of operational difficulties, and later phases required opportunities to reflect on lessons and revise processes. Effective leadership therefore involved adapting voice-supportive practices to the changing demands of the change process while maintaining consistent standards of respect, fairness, and responsiveness.

Differences between managerial and employee perspectives also contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Managers frequently described their intention to maintain openness and encourage participation, whereas employees placed greater emphasis on the consequences that followed actual speaking-up behavior. This difference suggested that leadership intent did not necessarily produce perceived psychological safety. Some managers believed that an open-door policy or periodic invitations for feedback were sufficient indicators of accessibility, while employees evaluated accessibility more concretely through the manager's reactions, availability under pressure, and willingness to engage with uncomfortable issues. Similarly, managers sometimes interpreted limited employee participation as a lack of interest, whereas employees described strategic silence caused by previous experiences of being ignored, concern about reputational consequences, or the belief that decisions had already been finalized. This discrepancy demonstrates that psychological safety should be assessed through employees' perceptions of interactional risk rather than inferred from managerial intentions alone.

Overall, the findings identified leadership as a central but context-dependent determinant of psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change. Leadership strategies were most effective when they combined transparent communication, interpersonal accessibility, respectful handling of dissent, participative decision-making, learning-oriented responses to mistakes, consistent behavior, inclusive engagement, and visible follow-through. These strategies reduced the personal risk associated with speaking up while simultaneously increasing employees' expectations that their contributions would be useful. The findings therefore support a relational and process-oriented understanding of psychological safety, in which safety is continuously constructed through leadership interactions and becomes behaviorally meaningful when it enables employees to participate actively in organizational change.

4 Discussion

The present study explored leadership strategies that promote psychological safety and employee voice during organizational change among managers and employees working in organizations in Qatar. The findings showed that psychological safety and employee voice were not produced by a single leadership behavior but emerged through a combination of transparent communication, leader accessibility, respectful treatment of dissent, participative change processes, learning-oriented responses to errors, interpersonal trust, inclusive leadership across status boundaries, and visible follow-through on employee input. The analysis further demonstrated that psychological safety was necessary but not sufficient for sustained employee voice. Employees also needed to believe that speaking up was worthwhile and that their concerns, ideas, and suggestions would be genuinely considered. Contextual factors such as hierarchical distance, peer climate, confidentiality, timing of consultation, change fatigue, organizational response capacity, and leadership continuity influenced whether psychologically safe conditions were translated into actual voice behavior. Taken together, these results suggest that effective leadership during organizational change operates through both an interpersonal pathway, by reducing the perceived risk associated with speaking, and an instrumental pathway, by increasing employees' confidence that speaking can influence organizational decisions and implementation.

One of the central findings was the importance of transparent and sense-giving communication during organizational change. Participants repeatedly described uncertainty as a major source of anxiety, particularly when organizational changes affected responsibilities, reporting structures, technologies, procedures, or expectations. Leaders were perceived as more effective when they explained why change was occurring, clarified what was known and unknown, and communicated developments in a timely manner. This finding is consistent with broader research on leadership and organizational transformation showing that change effectiveness depends heavily on leaders' ability to provide direction, meaning, and interpretive clarity during periods of uncertainty (Madufo et al., 2026; Mazhabi, 2025). It also aligns with research on change management and transformational leadership, which suggests that employees are more likely to support organizational transformation when leadership helps them understand the purpose and expected implications of change

(Umar et al., 2025). The present findings extend this argument by showing that transparent communication contributes not only to understanding but also to psychological safety. When leaders acknowledge uncertainty rather than conceal it, employees may interpret such openness as evidence of honesty and become more willing to ask questions or raise concerns.

The findings also identified accessible and responsive leadership as a major condition for psychological safety. Participants emphasized that employees were more willing to speak when leaders were visible, approachable, and willing to engage in two-way dialogue. This finding is strongly consistent with research on inclusive leadership, in which accessibility and openness are central mechanisms through which leaders encourage employee participation. Evidence from remote and hybrid work contexts has shown that inclusive leadership is positively associated with psychological safety and employee voice, indicating that employees are more likely to contribute when leaders signal that their perspectives are welcome (Mohase et al., 2025). Likewise, inclusive leadership has been associated with change-oriented extra-role behaviors through leader-member exchange and trust in leadership (Masih et al., 2025). These studies support the interpretation that availability itself is not sufficient; what matters is the quality of interaction that follows access. Participants in the present study distinguished between leaders who were formally available and those who demonstrated genuine responsiveness by listening carefully, asking clarifying questions, and returning to issues after they had been raised.

Respectful treatment of dissent was another prominent finding. Employees were more willing to express concerns or alternative opinions when leaders separated disagreement with a decision from negative judgments about the individual presenting the disagreement. This is particularly important during organizational change because disagreement may easily be interpreted as resistance. The findings suggest that employees closely monitor how leaders respond to critical input and that even indirect observations of punitive or dismissive responses can influence future voice behavior. This result aligns with research showing that toxic leadership is associated with maladaptive employee responses, including silence, neglect, and withdrawal (Sabino et al., 2024). It also corresponds with research on paradoxical leadership and organizational silence, which indicates that leadership approaches capable of managing competing demands may help reverse silence and encourage voice (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). The present findings

therefore reinforce the idea that voice is highly sensitive to leadership reactions. Formal invitations to speak are unlikely to be credible if employees observe that dissenting views are met with irritation, reputational labeling, or interpersonal exclusion.

Participative change processes also emerged as a key leadership strategy. Participants reported that consultation was meaningful when employees were involved before decisions became fixed and when their input could influence implementation choices. In contrast, consultation conducted after major decisions had already been made was often perceived as symbolic. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that transformational and inclusive leadership can encourage employees to go beyond formal role requirements and contribute ideas, knowledge, and change-oriented behavior (Masih et al., 2025; Sharif et al., 2024). It also reflects broader evidence that sustainable organizational transformation depends on integrating leadership, knowledge management, and employee participation rather than treating change as a purely top-down process (Umar et al., 2025). The results of the present study suggest that the timing and authenticity of participation are especially important. Employees appear to evaluate not simply whether consultation occurs but whether it occurs early enough to matter.

A further major finding concerned learning-oriented responses to mistakes. Participants described organizational change as inherently associated with uncertainty, experimentation, and implementation problems. Psychological safety was strengthened when leaders treated errors as opportunities to understand processes and improve future performance rather than as occasions for blame. This finding is compatible with research on safety leadership, which has shown that leadership can influence employee safety participation and compliance by shaping knowledge and behavioral expectations (Piao, 2025). It also aligns with work on psychosocial safety climate, which emphasizes that leadership competence is central to creating environments in which employees feel supported rather than threatened (Cataloni et al., 2026). The present study extends these insights to organizational change by showing that responses to mistakes may act as highly visible signals of whether openness is genuinely safe. When leaders respond constructively to early implementation failures, employees may become more willing to disclose emerging problems, allowing the organization to correct them before they escalate.

Interpersonal trust and leadership consistency were found to cut across all other themes. Participants did not base their judgments of psychological safety solely on formal policy or stated leadership intentions; rather, they assessed whether leaders kept commitments, handled confidential information appropriately, applied standards fairly, and behaved consistently under pressure. This finding is consistent with evidence showing that trust in leadership mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and change-oriented extra-role behavior (Masih et al., 2025). It is also supported by research on spiritual leadership and leader-member exchange, where high-quality relationships contribute to greater employee voice (Yu & Pitafi, 2024). Similarly, synergistic leadership behaviors have been linked with organizational voice and knowledge-related behavior, suggesting that collaborative and trustworthy leadership climates can facilitate information sharing (Mirghafouri et al., 2024). In the present study, trust appeared to reduce uncertainty about how leaders would react, thereby lowering the interpersonal cost of speaking.

Inclusive leadership across status boundaries was another important finding. Participants indicated that junior employees and less assertive staff were often unlikely to volunteer critical views unless leaders actively invited their participation. This suggests that hierarchy can inhibit voice even when formal communication channels are available. The result is consistent with research emphasizing the role of inclusive leadership in creating conditions where employees feel valued and psychologically safe (Mohase et al., 2025). It also aligns with evidence that leadership relationships and traditionality orientations can influence voice behavior, indicating that cultural and hierarchical expectations may shape whether employees feel entitled to challenge or advise leaders (Yu & Pitafi, 2024). In the Qatari context examined here, this finding is especially important because organizations may differ considerably in hierarchical structure, workforce composition, and cultural expectations regarding authority. The results suggest that leaders cannot assume that equal opportunity to speak exists simply because meetings are open to everyone; they may need to actively reduce status barriers and solicit contributions from employees who are less likely to speak spontaneously.

The theme of voice-to-action follow-through was particularly important in explaining why psychological safety alone did not always result in sustained employee voice. Participants indicated that even when they felt safe to express an opinion, they gradually disengaged if their input

repeatedly disappeared without explanation. This finding adds an instrumental dimension to the understanding of employee voice. Employees appear to evaluate both the interpersonal safety of speaking and the expected usefulness of doing so. Prior research on transformational leadership and innovative work behavior has similarly highlighted the importance of voice and knowledge sharing as mechanisms through which leadership contributes to organizational outcomes (Sharif et al., 2024). Research on digital leadership also shows that psychologically supportive leadership environments can stimulate engagement and innovative potential (Luo et al., 2025). The current findings suggest that such effects may depend on whether organizations establish credible feedback loops. Employees do not necessarily expect every suggestion to be accepted, but they appear to require evidence that their contribution has been considered.

The finding that contextual factors moderated the relationship between psychological safety and voice also deserves attention. Hierarchical distance, peer norms, confidentiality, timing of consultation, change fatigue, organizational response capacity, and leadership continuity all influenced whether employees translated a feeling of safety into actual communication. This result supports a broader systems-oriented interpretation of leadership. Research on organizational and institutional transformation increasingly emphasizes that leadership effectiveness is embedded in complex systems of governance, knowledge, and organizational structure (Aedi et al., 2026; Maduforo et al., 2026). Similarly, research on long-term institutional development and governance highlights the importance of mechanisms that connect information, learning, and strategic adaptation (Neto & Camkin, 2024; Taylor, 2026). The present findings indicate that even highly supportive individual leaders may face structural limitations if organizational systems do not provide channels through which employee input can be evaluated or acted upon.

The role of organizational response capacity can also be interpreted through the broader literature on knowledge and information systems. Effective organizational decision-making depends on the ability to collect, integrate, and use relevant information. Research emphasizing the strategic value of scientific data and comprehensive information systems demonstrates the broader importance of making knowledge accessible for complex decision processes (Cui et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2024). Within organizational change, employee voice functions as an important internal information channel. Employees often possess localized knowledge about workflow problems, stakeholder reactions,

technical limitations, and implementation risks. If leadership fails to create conditions for that information to move upward, the organization may be deprived of knowledge that is essential for adaptation. In this sense, psychological safety is not only an employee well-being issue but also a condition for organizational intelligence.

The findings further showed that leadership practices were evaluated dynamically over time. Psychological safety was not established once and then maintained automatically. Participants described repeatedly updating their judgments based on leaders' responses to questions, mistakes, disagreement, and bad news. This temporal interpretation is consistent with research showing that leadership competence becomes especially important in evolving work environments where psychosocial conditions are continually changing (Cataloni et al., 2026). It is also compatible with research on leadership during crisis and educational change, which emphasizes adaptability and continuous responsiveness rather than static leadership attributes (Mazhabi, 2025). The implication is that leaders must demonstrate consistent openness throughout the different phases of change. A single punitive response may undermine a previously supportive climate, while repeated constructive responses may gradually rebuild trust.

Differences between managerial intentions and employee experiences represented another important pattern. Managers often described themselves as open and supportive, while employees judged psychological safety through specific behavioral evidence such as how leaders reacted under pressure, whether concerns were followed up, and whether disagreement produced negative consequences. This discrepancy is important because leadership practices may be evaluated differently by those who enact them and those who experience them. Research on psychosocial safety climate similarly suggests that organizational commitments must be translated into observable leadership practices if employees are to perceive them as genuine (Cataloni et al., 2026). Furthermore, values-based leadership perspectives emphasize that consistency between professed values and actual conduct is central to credibility (De Silva et al., 2026). The present findings therefore suggest that leaders should not infer psychological safety from their own intentions or from the existence of formal feedback channels; it must be assessed through employees' lived experiences.

The broader implications of the findings are also consistent with sustainability-oriented and systems-oriented perspectives. Organizational resources create value only when mechanisms exist to activate and coordinate them

effectively, a principle that has been emphasized in research on ecological resource activation and institutional development (Lang & Wang, 2024). Employee knowledge can similarly be understood as an organizational resource whose value depends on whether employees are willing and able to share it. Leadership provides a critical activation mechanism by creating trust, lowering interpersonal risk, and demonstrating that input can lead to meaningful responses. At the same time, long-term organizational learning requires institutions to retain, evaluate, and act on accumulated feedback rather than relying solely on episodic consultation (Neto & Camkin, 2024). These broader perspectives reinforce the present conclusion that employee voice should be integrated into the architecture of organizational change rather than treated as an optional interpersonal benefit.

5 Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate that effective leadership during organizational change is best understood as a relational and process-oriented capability. Transparent communication, accessibility, respect for dissent, participative decision-making, constructive treatment of mistakes, trustworthiness, inclusion, and follow-through collectively create the conditions under which employees are more willing to contribute. These results are broadly consistent with evidence across inclusive, transformational, spiritual, socially responsible, digital, paradoxical, and safety leadership research (Kyambade et al., 2025; Luo et al., 2025; Masih et al., 2025; Mohase et al., 2025; Piao, 2025; Sharif et al., 2024; Sulphrey & Jasim, 2025; Yu & Pitafi, 2024). The contribution of the present study lies in bringing these mechanisms together within the specific context of organizational change and showing that employee voice depends on both psychological safety and perceived voice efficacy. Employees need to believe not only that they can speak without unacceptable interpersonal consequences but also that speaking has a realistic possibility of producing consideration, learning, or action.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was qualitative and involved 24 participants from organizations in Qatar, which allowed for detailed exploration of lived experiences but limits statistical generalizability to the wider workforce. The sample included employees and managers from different sectors and professional backgrounds, yet it cannot represent the full diversity of organizational forms, industries,

nationalities, occupational groups, and leadership arrangements present in Qatar. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported interview data. Participants' accounts may therefore have been influenced by retrospective recall, social desirability, current attitudes toward their organizations, or reluctance to discuss sensitive leadership experiences in detail. Third, participants had experienced different types and intensities of organizational change, meaning that leadership practices perceived as effective in one form of change may not operate identically in another. Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the interviews meant that changes in psychological safety and voice were reconstructed retrospectively rather than observed longitudinally across different phases of the change process. Finally, although both managerial and employee perspectives were included, the study did not systematically match managers with employees from the same teams, which limited direct comparison between leadership intentions and employee perceptions within specific leader-member relationships.

Future studies should examine the identified relationships using larger and more diverse samples across sectors and organizational levels in Qatar and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Quantitative studies could develop and test a model in which specific leadership behaviors predict employee voice through psychological safety and perceived voice efficacy, while variables such as hierarchical distance, trust, change fatigue, and organizational response capacity are examined as moderators. Longitudinal research would be particularly useful because the present findings suggest that psychological safety changes over time as employees observe leadership behavior throughout different stages of organizational change. Future studies could collect data before, during, and after major change initiatives to determine how leadership credibility and employee voice evolve. Comparative studies could also investigate whether different forms of change, such as digital transformation, restructuring, merger, leadership transition, or policy reform, require different psychological-safety strategies. Additional research should examine cultural and workforce characteristics that may influence voice, including power distance, nationality, professional status, contract type, and language. Multi-source designs that link employee reports with manager assessments, meeting observations, organizational communication records, and actual implementation outcomes would further strengthen understanding of how employee voice contributes to change effectiveness.

Organizations should treat psychological safety and employee voice as core components of change management rather than as secondary aspects of employee engagement. Leaders should communicate the rationale, expected impact, uncertainties, and evolving status of change initiatives clearly and repeatedly throughout implementation. Managers should provide structured and informal opportunities for employees to raise questions, identify risks, and propose improvements, with particular attention to junior employees and individuals who may be less comfortable speaking in hierarchical settings. Leaders should respond to disagreement calmly and respectfully, avoid labeling critical employees as resistant, and focus on the informational value of dissent. Errors associated with new systems or processes should be examined through a learning-oriented approach that emphasizes causes, correction, and prevention rather than public blame. Organizations should also establish clear feedback loops so that employees are informed about what happened to their suggestions and why particular ideas were accepted, modified, deferred, or rejected. Confidential reporting options should be available for sensitive concerns, and leaders should be trained to maintain discretion when such issues are raised. Finally, organizations should monitor psychological safety throughout the change process rather than assume that an initial communication campaign is sufficient, because employees continuously reassess whether speaking up is both safe and worthwhile based on leadership behavior and organizational responses.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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