Speaking without Hurting: Assertiveness and Psychological Safety in Receiving Criticism

Hablar sin herir: asertividad y seguridad psicológica para recibir críticas

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Abstract: Receiving criticism for improvement can be difficult, especially when that feedback comes from subordinates. One way to make receiving this information easier is to create a team environment that facilitates addressing these sensitive issues without harming personal relationships. This article analyses two factors that can contribute to channelling this type of criticism: assertiveness and psychological safety. To explore these concepts, we carried out a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with team managers. The practices that facilitated receiving criticism from subordinates included speaking respectfully, tolerance for errors, and focusing on the problem rather than the person. In general, receiving this feedback was appreciated and served to strengthen the bond with the other team member.

Keywords: Psychological Safety; Assertiveness; Communication; Organisational Silence

Resumen: Recibir críticas de mejora puede resultar difícil, sobre todo cuando esos comentarios provienen de subordinados. Un modo de facilitar que llegue esta información consiste en crear un clima de trabajo en el equipo que permita abordar estos temas delicados sin dañar la relación personal. El presente artículo analiza dos elementos que contribuyen a dar cauce a este tipo de críticas: la asertividad y la seguridad psicológica. Para ello, se ha realizado una investigación cualitativa basada en entrevistas semiestructuradas a directivos de equipos. Entre las prácticas que facilitaron recibir críticas ascendentes, los participantes destacaron el hablar con respeto, la tolerancia al error y el enfoque al problema en lugar de la persona. En general, el haber recibido este *feedback* era visto con agradecimiento y servía para reforzar el vínculo con la otra persona.

Palabras clave: Seguridad Psicológica; Asertividad; Comunicación; Silencio Organizacional

I. INTRODUCTION

Receiving criticism is a valuable source of information that can improve performance and enhance learning (Argyris, 1999; Edmondson, 2019; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Organisations implement formal processes so the team leader can evaluate the performance of their employees. In these meetings, objectives are established, problems are addressed, and aspects to be improved are identified (Arvey & Murphy, 1998). These channels communicate information to improve work performance from the top down. However, sharing this information from the bottom up requires an environment that differs from these formal channels (Kegan et al., 2006). Aspects related to a manager's performance or competence are not easy to address by subordinates as they may result in workplace conflicts (Detert & Burris, 2007; Milliken et al., 2003). This is why a manager should know how to build personal relationships that allow their subordinates to communicate these issues openly, even if that sometimes means receiving negative criticism (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Griffin & Mathieu, 1997; Men, 2014).

This study analyses how managers receive criticism based on two components of people management: assertiveness and psychological safety. Both components influence how communication of sensitive information affects others. Communicating assertively is described as talking about one's own interests or perspective while trying to minimise the negative impact they can have on the people affected (Ames et al., 2017; Smith-Jentsch et al., 1996). Psychological safety is understood to exist when team members do not fear reprisals from their peers for expressing their opinions when they carry a certain risk for the group (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). Both assertiveness and psychological safety facilitate receiving criticism that helps improve performance, as they pull down the barriers that prevent people from speaking in an environment of trust. To investigate these relationships, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals who had experience with working in team management. The main objective of this article is to study how team leaders create the adequate conditions to allow their subordinates to communicate their constructive criticism from the bottom up based on assertive communication and psychological safety.

This article is structured as follows. The literature review looks into the basic concepts of assertiveness, psychological safety, and organisational silence, and concludes with three research questions. We subsequently outline the methodology followed and briefly describe the interviewees' profiles. The results

section explores the information collected guided by the three research questions. Finally, we discuss the results found by the study, identify certain practical implications, and note the limitations of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Assertiveness*

Assertiveness is someone's ability to actively defend their interests or objectives by communicating them to others in an interdependent relationship (Ames et al., 2017). It can be manifested proactively, such as when one expresses a need, or reactively, such as when someone defends themselves from abuse. Ames and Flynn (2007) characterise assertiveness as persistence in communicating and defending one's own ideas and interests firmly, speaking confidently and not being intimidated by the interlocutor. They also note that this behaviour lies between two extremes. A person with low levels of assertiveness may tend to act submissive and communicate their ideas in a timid manner (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). These people usually find it difficult to ask for help or to take the initiative (Bohns, 2016). When opinions are not expressed clearly and confidently, people who are not assertive easily give in when negotiating and agree with other people's opinions and perspectives (Friedman et al., 2000). This lack of assertive skills makes it difficult to achieve objectives. However, high levels of assertiveness results in creating other obstacles to achieving objectives. Forcefully or inflexibly affirming opinions can be received by others as aggressive and hostile (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). Achieving objectives through being extremely assertive can entail a high social cost as other people may subsequently distance themselves from that person (Anderson & Shirako, 2008). Studies have shown that highly assertive behaviours can generate resentment between the interlocutors and lead to retaliation (Tinsley et al., 2002). In summary, low levels of assertiveness make it difficult to achieve objectives, and high levels of assertiveness complicate relationships with others.

The importance of finding a balance was also noted by Ames and Flynn (2007) in their study on the relationship between assertiveness and leadership. Their research found that assertiveness was not associated with strong leadership, but a lack of assertiveness was the main trait that characterised weak leadership. These authors suggested that the relationship between assertive-

ness and the image of leadership corresponded to an inverted U, where the midpoint of assertiveness levels would align with a positive perception of leadership (Ames & Flynn, 2007).

Finding the right balance requires combining cognitive and emotional factors. Ames et al. (2017) noted that being able to anticipate consequences is significant in assertive communication. When the social cost of speaking is believed to be greater than that of remaining silent, the person tends to remain silent; but if they believe that remaining silent will result in harm, aggressive intervention will occur. When the perception of consequences and emotional responses are adequately integrated, assertiveness emerges as positive behaviours for the team, such as knowing how to ask relevant questions at opportune moments, granting requests explicitly and tactfully, saying no appropriately, and listening carefully (Ames et al., 2017).

Assertiveness plays an important role in addressing conflicts. Thomas and Kilman (1974) classified the various management conflict styles according to two individual variables: cooperation and assertiveness. The first assesses the level of consideration given to the interests of others, while the second determines the degree to which the person focuses on their own interests. Thomas et al. (2008) studied the effect of these styles at various organisational levels. Their results found that assertive styles predominated among higher hierarchical levels, and less assertive ones predominated at lower levels.

2.2. Psychological safety

Psychological safety can be considered at an individual or group level. Schein and Bennis (1965) understood psychological safety to be when a person assumes a risk knowing they will not be penalised for it. These authors developed this construct in a context of organisational change. For Kahn (1990), knowing that you are safe is a psychological base that can encourage commitment at work. If someone feels as though they are able to be themselves at work and not have to worry about negative consequences affecting their image, position, or career, they are more likely to be more personally involved in their work. The above suggests that psychological safety is an individual state or belief. Edmondson (1999) goes further and addresses psychological safety at the team level. For Edmondson, psychological safety is a shared belief that risks of an interpersonal nature can be taken within the team. This mutual awareness affects group performance, especially when the team is continuously processing information. This study will focus on psychological safety at the team level.

Interpersonal risks comprise possible negative consequences that can affect relationships with other colleagues (Edmondson, 2019). Suggesting an improvement, pointing out an internal problem, or expressing a concern can have negative consequences, such as receiving a negative label, being excluded from certain tasks, or even being fired (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Milliken et al., 2003). Psychological safety also means knowing that comments about how the team operates will not have personal consequences, but will be understood to have the objective of wanting to improve work processes (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). In these circumstances, it is easier to look for feedback, share information, ask for help or openly talk about the errors made. In short, there is a widespread perception that interpersonal risks in the team are minimised (Frazier et al., 2017).

When a team or workplace is understood to be psychologically safe, performance at the group and organisational level improves. Studies have found an association between psychological safety and the learning capacity of the team (Edmondson, 1999). Other researchers have found evidence of the positive effects of psychological safety on group creativity (Liu et al., 2021), workers' commitment (Ito et al., 2022), and company integrity (Jiang et al., 2019).

The construct of psychological safety has many similarities with that of organisational trust. Both share the idea of making themselves vulnerable (Mayer et al., 1995). However, Edmondson (2004) notes that trusting someone means giving them the benefit of the doubt, while knowing that you are safe in the team implies understanding that others would be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt when you act in a certain way. To create this type of safe environment, the team leader's involvement is essential (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). The management style that the team leader uses and how they interact with their subordinates, establishes a certain work environment (Griffin & Mathieu, 1997; Spreitzer et al., 2012). Based on that, the leader can minimise the perception of risks, as the environment they create will make it easier for the people in their team to feel safe enough to intervene and express themselves without fear of repercussions (Detert & Burris, 2007; Duan et al., 2020; Edmondson, 2003; Tu et al., 2019).

2.3. Organisational silence

The opposite of psychological safety is employee silence. In this context, silence is understood to be the attitude of keeping silent about the organisation in front of those who have the capacity to change the situation (Van Dyne

et al., 2003). Studies on silence have identified individual and organisational factors that affect it. Pinder and Harlos (2001) suggest that the decision to remain silent responds to a perception of injustice. When employees predominantly feel as though they cannot make a change, there is a tendency to be silent, indifferent or detached; but if they predominantly fear possible punishment, silence is characterised by seeking self-protection. At an organisational level, Morrison and Milliken (2000) note the effect of a systematic culture of silence that discourages speaking up. The widespread belief that individual opinions are not valued, or the eventual cost of telling the truth, influences people to refrain from participating and expressing their opinions. Some organisational policies favour this, preferring the centralisation of decisions and an absence of formal mechanisms for bottom-up feedback. In such environments, certain managerial practices hinder the confidence to speak. This occurs when management rejects suggestions for improvement, responds negatively to discrepancies, or is not open to receiving feedback (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

From the employee's perspective, Milliken et al. (2003) have studied the topics on which people tend to remain silent and the reasons for doing so. The most difficult issue to discuss in the workplace is the competence of a superior or colleague. Dealing with this issue entails an intense emotional cost. Other issues that are difficult to address are those related to the organisation's processes and discontent about remuneration. These issues are not tackled because there is a fear of being seen negatively (a troublemaker, a complainer, or even a whistleblower), a risk of losing the senior colleague's trust, and a risk of being fired. Employees rationalise this situation by believing the situation will not change even if it is brought out into the open (Edmondson, 1999; Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). This belief makes taking the risk of providing bottom-up feedback very difficult.

The main objective of this study is to explore the relationship between assertiveness and psychological safety within the framework of team management. If assertiveness facilitates gauging what is said without harming others, the second helps to overcome the fear of expressing opinions. These two constructs play a key role in addressing critical issues for the team. In our field study, we focused on managers receiving criticism from subordinates, the role played by an assertive style of communication, and awareness of being in a safe environment to speak. The specific research questions this article has are:

RQ1: *What role does assertiveness play in internal team communication?*

RQ2: *How do managers foster psychological safety in their team?*

RQ3: *How do team leaders create the conditions to facilitate receiving constructive criticism from subordinates?*

III. METHODOLOGY

To address these questions, a qualitative methodological study based on semi-structured interviews was carried out. We chose this methodology because it ensures a holistic approach to the problem and provides sufficient flexibility to deal with sensitive issues and adapt to the study participants' variety of circumstances (Patton, 2015).

We decided to interview managers who had people working for them. The selection criteria for choosing each interviewee were: (i) having experience managing work teams; (ii) belonging to heterogeneous sectors; (iii) having a proven record in their competence of team management, and (iv) ensuring a balance between females and males. Seventeen professionals who met these criteria were contacted, and 12 agreed to participate in the study. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the people interviewed.

Table 1. Profile of the people interviewed.

Current position	Sector	Location	Sex
CEO	Technological distribution	Valencia	Male
HR manager	Law	Valencia	Female
Manager	Bank	Madrid	Female
Manager	Consultancy	Madrid	Male
Senior Manager	Bank	Valencia	Female
Managing Director	Commerce	Valencia	Male
CEO	Culture	Valencia	Female
CEO	Food and beverages	Valencia	Male
CEO	Digital technology	Valencia	Male
President	Car industry	Valencia	Male
Marketing Manager	Electric tools	Melbourne	Female
CEO	Solidarity	Valencia	Female

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The interviews took place between November 2020 and February 2021. They were held remotely. The interviews were conducted in Spanish except in one case, which was carried out in English. The mean duration was 46 minutes. Participants were explained that the interview was part of an research study on leadership and communication within work teams, and that their identity would be kept anonymous. The interviews were subsequently transcribed. The information review followed the constant comparison method which states that the data must be analysed and coded simultaneously through several reviews. By following this method, we ensured that relevant points were identified and their interrelation in the set of documentation were detected (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). The software used was Atlas.ti.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Assertiveness

Most of the interviewees agreed that assertiveness was essential for communication within the team. And also that it sets the tone in which people express themselves. However, the interviewees believed that assertiveness was not a common communicative style. The interviews gave examples of difficulties in communication, due to both a lack of and excessive assertiveness. More timid people had a lack of assertiveness and difficulties expressing their opinion, while people who were excessively assertive tended to speak in a tone that was too forceful, and even aggressive.

The managers helped people who were less assertive in several ways. Some interviewees would help them by asking them questions, either directly in team meetings so they could participate, or in one-on-one meetings, where they would feel more comfortable expressing their opinions.

The managers interviewed noted certain reasons people tended to remain silent. These reasons included organizational aspects, such as the company culture or the hierarchical structure. Some interviewees also indicated that the manager's personality sometimes played a role in keeping employees silent. However, the most cited factor for not speaking was the impression that this would not change the system. The perception of pointlessness was a major reason people did not speak out.

It's not that I am afraid to speak out, it's just that I don't think I'll get anything out of it: "Why bother? Why am I going to give my opinion if I know it's not going to go anywhere, or it won't look good, or it won't be taken into account?" But yes, it is common for team members to feel afraid of it, it does happen and it shouldn't happen, that is, it is awful. [...] there are people who go to work thinking that what they do doesn't matter, and that is sad [Interviewee no. 8].

The interviewees mainly believed that people who tended to use excessive assertiveness to express their opinion we like that naturally. This could stem from a feeling of being threatened or from believing they are superior to other people. Aggression can also be passive, and manifests itself not so much in an explicit and evident defence of an opinion, but rather in silences, glances, and sarcasm. In both cases, there is a risk that communication with people who are excessively assertive will be limited to what is strictly necessary, to prevent conflict arising. In this context, several interviewees highlighted the value of being *respectful* when communicating, to avoid hurting others. This difficult but necessary balance must be found to ensure trust in communication.

I demand that people show respect, if I treat others with respect, everyone should. And not just towards me, right? Everyone has to treat each-other respectfully. I don't let someone, or try not to let someone, crush someone else's ideas. There are rules, nothing is rejected simply for saying it. And that is very important to me [Interviewee no. 5].

Saying things respectfully and ensuring everyone feels respected is a fundamental basis for fluid communication within the team. The perception of psychological safety also plays an important role in this point.

4.2. Psychological safety

The managers interviewed described various ways in which they tried to create psychological safety in their teams. One of the more common was to help people in the team grow, especially in regard to decision-making. This growth is effective when the strengths and weaknesses of the people who report to the manager are known, as challenges can be personalised to them ensuring they are not overwhelmed. Psychological safety becomes operational when subordinates know their manager supports them in that certain task or challenge, even if they fail.

I always identify people's strengths, what they do best, and where they can grow. In other words, I give them opportunities. (...) And I also give them more responsibility. (...) Then, I make sure they stick their necks out: "Hey, what would you do? What do you think?" To train them. Even though it is me who makes the final decision, (...) I give them different tasks to help them foster their decision-making and team-leading skills, so they can better coordinate with colleagues, with people who have more responsibilities than they do, with external people [Interviewee no. 7].

Certain interviewees noted there was one concept that was very effective in helping subordinates grow. This concept worked in a variety of situations, such as when delegating tasks or training. This concept could be formulated into the following statement: "I trust you". It did not necessarily have to be explicitly said, but it did have to be transmitted effectively. These managers had experienced the strength this message had on helping employees overcome their fear of making mistakes.

Several of the interviewees stated that tolerating errors was very important. When employees commit an error, the response from their superior is important. No interviewee stated that they minded when their employees made mistakes; they were willing to accept a margin of error to help them learn. This reinforces psychological safety as they accept the possibility of mistakes being made, as long as they end up contributing to the best performance of the team.

I often think: "He's going to make a mistake, but it doesn't matter, you have to trust people". And they later say "I was actually wrong", and you say, "it doesn't matter", and they had already guessed that you had previously thought the idea wasn't going to work, but you had let them do it anyway; there is no training for that, it is a golden lesson [Interviewee no. 4].

In addition to an understanding attitude towards errors, some of the interviewees also mentioned taking the time to guide their subordinates and provide them with appropriate feedback. That time, which might seem unproductive, was perceived to be an investment: the interviewees knew that their employees would subsequently commit to making the team and the organisation more effective.

All this focus on the development of the subordinate is a risk for the person leading the team, as that employee might eventually be promoted or find another job at another company, and they would consequently lose that talent and the time invested. Despite this danger, many of the interviewees did not

seem to be concerned with that risk, and even considered it to be gratifying. Certain interviewees noted having been aware their subordinates were seeking employment with other companies and that they had not tried to keep them in their position at all costs. They prioritised the good of the other person before their own interest as team leader. Certain interviewees believed this loss was a sign that they had done their job well.

Along with supporting the growth of subordinates and tolerance for error, the interviewees also noted the importance of encouraging the team to share the experiences of their errors and not be driven by fear. Although this type of message is not always properly understood, there was one interviewee who mentioned that this idea could be transmitted with their attitude. She specifically mentioned the significance of making herself vulnerable to the team. When subordinates see that their managers makes mistakes or that they don't know everything, they feel safer when they find themselves in similar situations. Managers' vulnerability encourages their employees' feeling of safety. Mistakes do not mean that person is weak; errors are a learning curve for everyone. Interviewee number two explained it well:

> *Well, look, you often need to be the first person telling everyone what your vulnerabilities are, what you can't do well, what makes you suffer, without judgements. […] Express yourself. If you are not afraid to express yourself, the rest of the team will not be afraid to express themselves. Because if you don't, and you don't share those vulnerabilities, or don't make visible the things that you should do, you can't ask the others to do it; as a leader you always have to be the worst and the best. People expect you to be an example. If you have certain behaviours, and show your vulnerabilities, and not project a perfect image – which isn't true anyway – the rest will feel free to show their vulnerabilities and not be afraid to share them with you [Interviewee no. 2].*

The manager's willingness to make themselves vulnerable leads us to the critical point of the article: how assertive communication and a safe environment can make it easier to address a subject as sensitive as their own competence.

4.3. Receiving criticism

When the manager fosters respectful communication and creates an appropriate environment to express opinions without fear, they assume certain risks. One of them was discussed extensively. Willingness to listen involves exposing the manager to receiving criticism. Certain interviewees spoke about

cases in which they received unhelpful and even unpleasant comments. They all thought differentiating between criticism that was constructive and tried to improve performance and criticism expressing individual dissatisfaction or frustration, was essential. A manager described one criterion they used to distinguish the two: if the observation included a proposal for improvement, it was constructive criticism; if there was no such proposal, then it was most likely destructive criticism.

The tone of communication influences the effect of these comments. Normally, receiving criticism makes people defensive, and an aggressive tone can produce an even more defensive attitude. As such, all the interviewees agreed that managing their immediate emotions during this type of conversation was difficult, as was producing the self-control required to ensure that it did not affect their personal relationship with the person giving the criticism. However, there were also a few interviewees who did not believe the tone of the communication was important: these managers stressed that the message was more important than the way it was delivered. They valued the information received if it could improve processes, even if was given disrespectfully.

When a manager is open to listening, they are open to receiving help to further their professional growth. If the manager shows a positive attitude towards helping their subordinates grow, then that attitude can also be found in the managers themselves; i.e., they are also open to receiving constructive criticism so that they can grow and improve their individual performance for the good of the team. However, providing bottom-up feedback implies taking a very serious risk. This is key to understanding the impact of giving positive criticism.

Those interviewed who had experienced that mentioned the criticism was framed as being essential to improve the team's work. And, unlike what occurs when destructive criticism is given, the employee giving positive criticism was seen in a good light, both emotionally and cognitively. The feeling of vulnerability or the fear of being exposed could generate defensive reactions. However, these managers were aware of why they could not let themselves be carried away by those reactions: they had to take ownership of what they asked of others when they helped them with positive feedback. This refocusing was not always immediate and accepting criticism was not always easy. This process is illustrated by the following quote:

You also have to be open to someone telling you something that you don't want to hear: But if that person tells you that to benefit the project, to move forward together, to improve processes and options, well, you have to accept it and say: "OK, we're not talking about me, we're talking about management". And you have to know that, obviously, you are not, and you will never be perfect, and that everything can always be improved [Interviewee no. 2].

Accepting criticism is a first step to change. But acknowledging the risk taken by the subordinate is also important. The interviewees who benefited from receiving constructive criticism realised it had been possible because, to a large extent, the appropriate circumstances had been created to allow their subordinates to give criticism. When criticism is given respectfully, and with a willingness to help, it is easier to benefit from it, and it generates a sincere gratitude towards the subordinate who gave it.

One of the interviewees gave an example where a subordinate was able to give them difficult criticism. The interviewee realised that giving this criticism was only possible because they had managed to create a safe space to speak. Furthermore, when recalling that incident, it became clear the conversation had also served to strengthen the bond between the two people.

I congratulated NN, who is the person I have worked with the most, my assistant, for having the courage to give me constructive feedback, that is, real constructive criticism that I was not aware of. And apart from receiving the feedback, I thanked them for that. And also [I told them]: "I am proud that you have the courage to tell me this, that I have created a space of trust for you where you know that I am prepared to receive criticism, even if it was from the bottom up" [Interviewee no. 7].

After accepting criticism, certain interviewees detailed the way in which they tried to frame that feedback. A point that was frequently mentioned was the importance of being aware that nobody is perfect. This leads on to being aware that everyone needs help. If, indeed, it turns out that the criticism received is pertinent, doing everything possible to rectify what has been criticised is essential. Active listening must be followed by the appropriate actions. This effort, which does not go unnoticed by others, results in send the message that comments to superiors are listened to and can influence their performance, with a possible multiplier effect within the team. One of the interviewees expressed this idea:

That is the most difficult thing, especially with me maybe, with the person they think is the boss, it is very difficult for them, but you have to try to open those

channels. I'm sure there are things they don't tell me, in fact, I'm certain there are; and you have to try to get that information out. And fundamentally, it's how you act after you receive it. If you receive it well, and own it and try to work on what you have been told, then more will come. If you receive it with hostility, well, you won't receive any more information, and no one will tell you anything again [Interviewee no. 3].

V. DISCUSSION

One of the most difficult topics to talk about in a team is the competence of the team leader (Milliken et al., 2003). In the context of managing people, this study addresses that problem from a double perspective: assertiveness, in terms of communication method (Ames et al., 2017), and psychological safety, which assumes a certain risk at group level (Edmondson, 1999). For this, we carried out 12 semi-structured interviews with professionals from different sectors who were experienced in team management.

The interviewees believed assertiveness to be essential for healthy communication within the team, and they also noted that it was difficult to find people who knew how to express themselves assertively. Assertiveness is thus a form of communication that requires training. The communication patterns that emerged in the interviews reflected those posited by Ames and Flynn (2007). These authors described assertiveness in communication as a balance between two ends: silence and aggressiveness. Assertive communication expresses the speaker's opinion, especially when contributing to the good of the team, and transmits that message without threatening others (Ames et al., 2017).

The managers interviewed were aware of the difficulty of achieving this balance. That is why they tried to foster the participation of subordinates who tended to be silent and knew how to set limits when someone became aggressive. In this context, the concept of respect played a major role. As managers, they were sensitive to ensuring communication within the team did not negatively affect others. They were aware that a lack of respect could damage interpersonal relationships within the team. By using respect as a counterbalance to aggressive communication, these managers were indirectly referring to an essential element of assertiveness (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Fostering respectful communication also helps to minimise risks within the team (Frazier et al., 2017).

All interviewees were aware of the importance of ensuring a psychological safe environment to enhance team performance, although none referred to this construct explicitly. Creating open spaces for communication involves ensuring people know they will be heard. This cannot be achieved without managers' participation. The literature on psychological safety notes that the role of the leader is to shape an environment that facilitates psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017).

A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of employees' professional development, and in some cases, their personal growth too. Certain managers carried out the functions of a life coach (Berg & Karlsen, 2016; Edmondson, 1999). Providing constructive feedback and giving responsibilities are useful resources that can help people grow. This concept concurs with the transformational leadership approach (Burs, 1978). Unlike transactional leadership, which is oriented towards the achievement of established goals through well-defined processes, transformational leadership adds value by inspiring subordinates to go beyond their own interests for the good of the organisation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). An important element in this approach to leadership is the perception of benevolence and trust (Mayer et al., 1995). These points are closely aligned with an awareness of psychological safety.

In our field work, two ways of promoting psychological safety emerged: tolerance for error and exposure of the manager's own vulnerabilities. On one hand, a certain degree of human error was acceptable, as long as the team's performance was not negatively impacted. It was a controlled risk with the aim of consolidating confidence. This approach in no way meant the task was not to be carried out, it served to make subordinates know and feel that they could do things better. This tolerance to allowing for a certain degree of error is a fundamental pillar of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

On the other hand, the leader was aware of the repercussions of not hiding their mistakes or performance errors. If the boss makes mistakes and admits having done so, it will be easier for a subordinate to overcome the fear of being vulnerable within the team (Edmondson, 2003, 2012). Such an attitude demonstrates that problem solving takes precedence over personal considerations, and provides a solid foundation for fostering psychological safety (Milliken et al., 2003).

Assertiveness and psychological safety fuse together through the management of criticism received by the manager. This is a delicate and difficult matter (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Edmondson, 1999). The issues most sensitive

to silence in organisations are those related to professional competence and organisational processes (Milliken et al., 2003). In our interviews, examples emerged addressing these topics, whose initiative corresponded to the subordinate. This type of bottom-up communication involved taking a significant risk. However, these managers had created the conditions that allowed these criticisms to be received. The emphasis on respect for the other person when speaking to ensure they are not hurt directly affects assertiveness, but also ensures the perception of fairness and justice within the team. This point is essential, because the perception of injustice leads to silence (Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Two of the reasons for keeping silent about issues that could otherwise contribute to improving team work, is the fear of being labelled negatively and of losing trust and support within the group (Milliken et al., 2003). In our interviews, these were offset by the way in which managers had fostered an open attitude to improvement. Tolerance to errors, knowing how to acknowledge mistakes made, and a sincere interest in the growth of the team members created an environment where everyone could address negative aspects of their own performance.

The exemplary nature of these managers has a double benefit: by fostering concern for their subordinates, employees were able to show their concern for their manager, also ensuring that they improve, without fear of reprisals or labels. The above concurs with the model developed by Van Dyne et al. (2003) who associate motivation to speak or remaining silent with an observer's perception. When the agent's motivation was correctly captured by an observer, the relationship between the two strengthened. This ratio was greater if the motives were pro-social in nature. In our cases, the motivation to speak was not a desire for retaliation, but rather to improve the process. Thus these conversations on difficult topics often ended by the interviewee feeling gratitude towards the subordinate who had known how to deliver criticism appropriately.

This aspect of gratitude concurs with the leadership model put forward by Collins (2001). According to this author, managers capable of promoting the growth of a company are characterised by a personal humility that leads them to put the good of the organisation before their particular interests and the needs of their ego. A manifestation of humility is the awareness of knowing that one is not perfect and, therefore, of needing help.

If the manager is capable of separating negative professional criticisms from personal criticisms and of focusing on the issues being raised, they are in a position to improve company processes and employee commitment (Collins, 2001; Kegan et al., 2006). The effort to foster assertive communication and an environment of psychological safety within the team results in more respectful relationships between people, but can also result in a long-term boost for the team, strengthening cohesion, and ensuring more solid growth on the company's output.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Assertiveness and psychological safety are linked in a reciprocal relationship. On one hand, an assertive communication style facilitates addressing potentially conflictive issues between people who have an interdependent relationship. Assertiveness supposes a balance between silence and aggressive ways of speaking (Ames & Flynn, 2007). On the other hand, psychological safety facilitates certain communicative actions as such a context allows certain interpersonal risks to be assumed. It is easier to point out negative aspects about the project, share sensitive information or communicate bad news in a safe environment (Edmondson, 1999). An example that reflects the positive combination of these concepts is when the leader correctly receives negative criticism from a subordinate. It is a delicate matter, which usually ends in silence (Milliken et al., 2003).

We analysed the cases in which this bottom-up feedback occurred, and explored the role played by assertive communication and psychological safety, and found the practices that most served to facilitate this were when managers: (i) took an interest in the personal growth of subordinates; (ii) ensured that everyone could express their opinion; (iii) had a tolerance to errors; (iv) ensured that there was respect when communicating within the team, and (v) did not fear being vulnerable to the team.

This article has some limitations. The research focuses on managers' perspectives. The facts are, therefore, observed and reflected on by only one of the sides of the argument. However, the construction of a work climate can be perceived differently by other sides, and these visions can qualify or specify managers' statements. For example, detecting distortions in perception could be of interest: the manager might believe they are doing well while their subordinates do not share this feeling. The opposite could occur. Another li-

mitation of the study is that it focuses on positive situations. The cases where receiving negative criticism have serious consequences for the subordinate have not been explored. This point could serve to better understand the role that the manager has in shaping their team's work environment.

In order to broaden the present study, we suggest furthering it by including the subordinates themselves and critically reviewing specific situations of bottom-up criticism from both perspectives. Another possible future line of research could be to contrast behaviours depending on the sectors where the interviewees work. This would consider the type of project and even different corporate cultures. These lines of work are of great interest because they would contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics that help manage difficult issues in the team through speaking without hurting.

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