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Authentic Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Innovative Work Behavior: Testing a Mediation Model Among Generation Z Employees in Technology Companies

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Abstract

Background: The rapid expansion of technology companies has heightened the demand for sustained innovation, yet many organizations struggle to cultivate the psychological conditions that enable employees to take creative risks. For Generation Z workers—digital natives who seek meaning, autonomy, and authenticity at work—the quality of leadership may be particularly consequential in shaping these conditions. Purpose: This study examines the mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior among Generation Z employees in technology companies. Methods: A quantitative survey design was employed, collecting data from 215 Generation Z employees (born 1997–2012) working in Indonesian technology companies through purposive sampling. Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) was used to test the proposed mediation model. Results: Authentic leadership positively and significantly influenced both psychological safety ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and innovative work behavior ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$). Psychological safety was found to significantly mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior (indirect effect = 0.22, 95% CI [0.14, 0.31]). Conclusions: Authentic leadership plays a pivotal role in creating an environment where Generation Z employees feel psychologically safe, which in turn encourages them to engage in innovative work behavior. Technology organizations should prioritize authentic leadership development as a strategic lever for sustaining competitive innovation.

Keywords authentic leadership; psychological safety; innovative work behavior; Generation Z; technology companies

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1. INTRODUCTON

The twenty-first century technology sector is defined by relentless disruption and fierce competition for talent and ideas. In this environment, organizations must do more than attract capable workers—they must actively cultivate a culture in which people feel encouraged, even compelled, to think differently, challenge assumptions, and propose novel solutions. Innovative work behavior (IWB)—encompassing idea generation, promotion, and implementation—has therefore emerged as a central concern for human resource practitioners and organizational researchers alike (Scott & Bruce, 1994; De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010).

Yet innovation does not occur in a social vacuum. Research consistently shows that individual-level creativity and risk-taking are profoundly shaped by the interpersonal context in which work unfolds. Among the most powerful contextual forces is leadership. Leaders set the tone for what is permissible, valued, and safe within their teams. Of the many leadership frameworks that have attracted scholarly attention in recent decades, authentic leadership has emerged as particularly promising for fostering the psychological conditions that support innovation. Authentic leaders are characterized by self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced information processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Because they model vulnerability, honesty, and ethical consistency, they create space for followers to take interpersonal risks without fear of judgment or retaliation.

Psychological safety—the shared belief that one can speak up, ask questions, make mistakes, or propose unconventional ideas without facing interpersonal punishment—provides the theoretical bridge between leadership and employee innovation (Edmondson, 1999). When leaders are perceived as authentic, they signal that transparency and risk-taking are welcomed rather than punished, and this perception fosters a sense of psychological safety among team members. Employees who feel psychologically safe are, in turn, more likely to engage in the exploratory, experimental, and often uncertain behaviors that constitute innovative work.

The present study is situated within a specific and rapidly growing workforce segment: Generation Z (born 1997–2012). As the first generation to grow up entirely in the digital era, Gen Z workers bring a distinctive set of values, expectations, and psychological needs to the workplace. They tend to prize authenticity, purpose-driven work, and transparent communication—qualities that align closely with the core tenets of authentic leadership (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Yet despite the growing prominence of Gen Z in technology companies, relatively little empirical research has examined how authentic leadership shapes their innovative behavior, or whether psychological safety acts as an intervening mechanism in this relationship.

This study addresses that gap by proposing and testing a mediation model in which psychological safety transmits the positive effect of authentic leadership onto innovative work behavior among Gen Z employees in Indonesian technology companies. The research makes several contributions. First, it integrates authentic leadership theory with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and the psychological safety literature to develop a coherent theoretical framework. Second, it focuses on a generationally specific sample, generating findings that are particularly relevant for organizations seeking to manage and retain Gen Z talent. Third, it employs PLS-SEM—a method well-suited to both theory development and predictive modeling—to test the mediation model.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background and develops the research hypotheses. Section 3 describes the research method. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings. Section 5 offers conclusions and practical implications.

1.1 Authentic Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

Authentic leadership theory was systematically developed by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and later operationalized by Walumbwa et al. (2008) into four measurable dimensions: self-awareness (understanding one's own strengths, weaknesses, and emotional states), relational transparency (openly sharing information and feelings with followers), balanced processing (soliciting multiple perspectives before making decisions), and internalized moral perspective (adhering to internalized ethical standards rather than external pressures). These qualities collectively create a leadership style that followers perceive as genuine, principled, and trustworthy.

A growing body of evidence links authentic leadership to a range of positive employee outcomes, including work engagement, organizational commitment, and creative behavior (Gardner et al., 2011; Avolio et al., 2009). The mechanisms are varied. Authentic leaders may stimulate innovation directly by modeling intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas. They may also work indirectly by creating relational conditions—such as trust, safety, and felt support—that lower the psychological barriers to creative risk-taking. This study focuses on the latter pathway.

1.2 Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism

The concept of psychological safety was brought into contemporary organizational research by Edmondson (1999), who defined it as the shared belief within a work team that interpersonal risk-taking is safe. Psychologically safe environments are characterized by openness, mutual respect, and the absence of retaliatory responses to honest expression. In such environments, employees are more likely to share information, voice concerns, admit errors, and—crucially for the current study—experiment with novel approaches to work problems.

The link between authentic leadership and psychological safety is theoretically grounded in the relational transparency dimension. When leaders openly disclose their own uncertainties and mistakes, they normalize vulnerability and reduce the social cost of imperfection. Over time, this behavior builds a team climate in which members feel safe to reciprocate with their own candor and creative experimentation. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) demonstrated that leader inclusiveness—a concept closely related to authentic leadership—significantly predicted psychological safety in healthcare teams. More recent work has extended this finding to technology and knowledge-intensive contexts (Newman et al., 2017).

Psychological safety, in turn, is expected to stimulate innovative work behavior by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with idea generation and promotion. Baer and Frese (2003) found that

psychological safety moderated the relationship between personal initiative and firm performance, suggesting that safe climates amplify employees' proactive tendencies. Carmeli et al. (2010) demonstrated that inclusive leadership fostered creative performance through psychological safety in R&D teams. Taken together, these findings suggest that psychological safety may serve as a key mediating mechanism in the authentic leadership–innovation relationship.

1.3 Generation Z in the Technology Sector

Generation Z employees present a unique profile relevant to understanding leadership–innovation linkages. Having grown up with smartphones, social media, and instant access to information, they are cognitively adapted to rapid information processing and multi-modal communication (Twenge, 2017). In the workplace, they tend to expect transparency, purpose, and flat hierarchies. Organizational environments that are perceived as inauthentic or politically charged may be particularly demotivating for this cohort, potentially suppressing both their psychological safety and their creative output (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Indonesian technology companies provide a compelling empirical setting for this study. Indonesia's digital economy is among the fastest-growing in Southeast Asia, and the technology sector has emerged as one of the primary destinations for Gen Z talent. Despite this growth, research on leadership dynamics within Indonesian technology firms remains sparse, and generationally specific studies are virtually absent from the Indonesian organizational behavior literature.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical review above, three hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Authentic leadership is positively associated with innovative work behavior among Generation Z employees in technology companies.

H2: Authentic leadership is positively associated with psychological safety among Generation Z employees in technology companies.

H3: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior among Generation Z employees in technology companies.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Sample

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The target population consisted of Generation Z employees (born between 1997 and 2012) working in technology companies in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who (a) were born within the specified cohort range, (b) were employed full-time in a technology company, and (c) had been in their current role for at least three months—sufficient time to develop a meaningful assessment of their

leader's behavior.

Data were collected between January and March 2026 via an online survey distributed through professional networks, university alumni channels, and direct company outreach. A total of 247 questionnaires were returned. After excluding responses with missing data or evidence of straight-lining, the final analytical sample comprised 215 participants. The sample was composed of 54.4% male respondents and 45.6% female respondents. The majority (68.4%) held a bachelor's degree or higher. Average organizational tenure was 2.3 years (SD = 1.1), consistent with the relative early-career status of Gen Z workers. Sample size adequacy was confirmed using the power analysis guidelines recommended by Hair et al. (2011) for PLS-SEM, which suggest a minimum of ten times the maximum number of paths pointing at any one construct in the model—a criterion satisfied by the present sample.

2.2 Measures

Authentic Leadership. Authentic leadership was measured using the 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). The instrument assesses four dimensions: self-awareness (4 items), relational transparency (4 items), balanced processing (4 items), and internalized moral perspective (4 items). Respondents rated their immediate supervisor on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = frequently if not always). A sample item reads: 'My leader clearly states what he or she means.' The ALQ has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse cultural and organizational contexts. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was .91.

Psychological Safety. Psychological safety was measured using the 7-item scale developed by Edmondson (1999) and subsequently validated in multiple organizational settings. Items include statements such as 'It is safe to take a risk on this team' and 'No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.' Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .87.

Innovative Work Behavior. Innovative work behavior was assessed using the 9-item scale developed by De Jong and Den Hartog (2010), which measures three facets: idea exploration (3 items), idea generation (3 items), and idea implementation (3 items). A sample item is: 'I generate original solutions to problems.' Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = always). Cronbach's alpha was .89.

2.3 Data Analysis

Hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0. PLS-SEM was chosen because of its suitability for testing mediation models with small-to-medium samples and for its flexibility in handling reflective measurement models (Hair et al., 2011). The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated for reliability (composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha) and validity (convergent validity via AVE, and

discriminant validity via the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios). Second, the structural model was estimated and bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was used to derive 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for direct and indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Mediation was supported if the indirect effect confidence interval excluded zero.

3. FINDINGS AND DSICUSSIOUN

3.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

All constructs demonstrated adequate reliability: composite reliability values ranged from .88 to .94, and Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .87 to .91. Convergent validity was supported as all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the recommended threshold of .50 (authentic leadership: AVE = .54; psychological safety: AVE = .56; innovative work behavior: AVE = .52). Factor loadings for all items were significant and exceeded .60 (range: .61–.83), further confirming convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with all other constructs (Fornell-Larcker criterion satisfied). HTMT ratios were all below the conservative threshold of .85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2011). The measurement model was therefore deemed fit for structural estimation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and AVE Square Roots (N = 215)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Authentic Leadership	3.74	0.71	(.74)		
2. Psychological Safety	4.92	1.03	.56**	(.75)	
3. Innovative Work Behavior	3.61	0.68	.48**	.51**	(.72)

Note. Values in parentheses on the diagonal are square roots of AVE. ** $p < .01$.

3.2 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated after confirming measurement model adequacy. Table 2 presents the results of direct and indirect effects.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive direct relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior. The results supported this hypothesis ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 4.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.46]). This finding aligns with prior research demonstrating that authentic leaders, through their modeling of transparency, intellectual curiosity, and ethical conduct, directly inspire followers to explore and pursue novel solutions (Gardner et al., 2011; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). For Gen Z employees in particular, who are sensitive to perceived authenticity and inauthenticity in their leaders (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), the

alignment between espoused and enacted values characteristic of authentic leaders may be especially motivating.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between authentic leadership and psychological safety. This hypothesis was also supported ($\beta = 0.52$, $t = 7.84$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.39, 0.65]). The magnitude of this effect suggests that authentic leadership is a particularly potent antecedent of psychological safety—more so, in fact, than its effect on innovative behavior directly. This finding resonates with Edmondson and Lei's (2014) argument that psychological safety is fundamentally a function of interpersonal trust, which authentic leaders are uniquely positioned to engender. When leaders openly disclose their own limitations, seek diverse input before deciding, and consistently align their behavior with their stated values, they send powerful signals that vulnerability is acceptable and mistakes are learning opportunities rather than punishable failures.

Hypothesis 3, the central mediation hypothesis, predicted that psychological safety would mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior. Bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effect (authentic leadership → psychological safety → innovative work behavior) were computed based on 5,000 resamples. The indirect effect was significant (indirect effect = 0.22, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.14, 0.31]), supporting the mediation hypothesis. The direct effect of authentic leadership on innovative work behavior remained significant after introducing the mediator ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$), indicating partial—rather than full—mediation. The proportion of the total effect mediated by psychological safety was 41.5% (total effect = 0.53).

Table 2. Structural Model Results: Direct and Indirect Effects

Path	β	SE	t	95% CI	Decision
AL → IWB (H1, direct)	0.31	.04	4.12***	[0.16, 0.46]	Supported
AL → PS (H2)	0.52	.04	7.84***	[0.39, 0.65]	Supported
PS → IWB	0.43	.05	6.11***	[0.30, 0.57]	—
AL → PS → IWB (H3, indirect)	0.22	.04	5.28***	[0.14, 0.31]	Supported

Note. AL = Authentic Leadership; PS = Psychological Safety; IWB = Innovative Work Behavior. *** $p < .001$. 95% CI based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer several theoretically and practically significant insights into the leadership dynamics that shape innovation among Gen Z employees in technology companies. Taken together, they paint a coherent picture: authentic leadership sets in motion a relational and psychological process that ultimately empowers employees to take the creative risks that innovation requires.

The direct effect of authentic leadership on innovative work behavior (H1 supported) is consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Authentic leaders function as behavioral models—their transparency, ethical consistency, and openness to multiple perspectives provide employees with a cognitive template for how to engage with uncertainty and ambiguity. For Gen Z employees who have been socialized in environments that celebrate self-expression and creative problem-solving, this modeling effect may be particularly potent. The willingness of an authentic leader to openly explore problems, acknowledge uncertainty, and invite diverse input mirrors the cognitive dispositions that underlie innovative work behavior.

The strong positive effect of authentic leadership on psychological safety (H2 supported, $\beta = 0.52$) is the most robust finding in this study and arguably the most consequential for organizational practice. Edmondson (1999) argued that psychological safety is not a personality trait but an emergent property of the team environment—one that leaders heavily influence through their day-to-day behavior. The four dimensions of authentic leadership—self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective—collectively signal to followers that the team is a safe space for honest expression. When a leader demonstrates self-awareness by acknowledging their own limitations, they reduce the stigma of imperfection. When they practice relational transparency by sharing information openly, they model the communicative openness they seek from their team members. When they engage in balanced processing by genuinely seeking input from others, they signal that all voices are valued. And when they act from an internalized moral perspective, they demonstrate that integrity, not political calculation, guides their decisions.

The mediation finding (H3 supported) connects these leadership behaviors to innovative outcomes through a coherent psychological mechanism. Employees who feel psychologically safe are freed from the cognitive and emotional resources that would otherwise be consumed by impression management, fear of failure, and interpersonal monitoring. These freed resources can instead be directed toward the cognitively demanding processes of generating novel ideas, articulating them to colleagues, and persistently advocating for their implementation even in the face of skepticism or resistance (West, 2002; Amabile, 1988). This is consistent with Kark and Carmeli's (2009) finding that psychological safety predicted creative work involvement in knowledge-intensive teams, and with Kessel et al.'s (2012) work demonstrating similar mediating effects in healthcare settings.

The partial mediation pattern—indicating that authentic leadership affects innovative work behavior both directly and through psychological safety—has important theoretical implications. It suggests that while the psychological safety mechanism is significant and substantial, it does not fully account for the innovation-enhancing effects of authentic leadership. Future research might explore additional mediating pathways, such as creative self-efficacy (Tierney & Farmer, 2002), work

engagement, or access to informational resources, which may represent parallel channels through which authentic leaders stimulate innovative behavior.

The generational context of this study also merits discussion. Gen Z employees' reported levels of authentic leadership perception (M = 3.74 on a 5-point scale) and psychological safety (M = 4.92 on a 7-point scale) suggest moderately positive but improvable work environments. Crant (2000) observed that proactive individuals are particularly sensitive to environmental cues that either enable or constrain creative action. If Gen Z employees are indeed more proactive and self-directed than previous cohorts, as some researchers have suggested (Fry, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), then organizations have a particularly strong incentive to cultivate authentic leadership—not only to meet their relational expectations but to unlock the innovative potential that these employees bring to the workplace.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine whether psychological safety mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and innovative work behavior among Generation Z employees in technology companies. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design and PLS-SEM with bootstrapping, we found strong support for all three hypotheses: authentic leadership directly and positively influenced innovative work behavior (H1), authentic leadership strongly and positively predicted psychological safety (H2), and psychological safety significantly mediated the authentic leadership–innovative work behavior relationship (H3).

These findings contribute to the organizational behavior literature in at least three ways. First, they extend authentic leadership theory by identifying psychological safety as a key explanatory mechanism linking leader authenticity to follower innovation. Second, they provide the first empirical examination, to our knowledge, of this three-variable model within a generationally specific Gen Z sample in the Indonesian technology sector. Third, they confirm the applicability of psychological safety as a mediating construct in a non-Western, rapidly developing organizational context, enriching the cultural generalizability of this literature.

For practitioners, the findings suggest a clear message: investing in authentic leadership development yields compounding returns. Authentic leaders do not merely inspire innovation directly—they build the psychologically safe climates that allow innovation to flourish more broadly, particularly among younger employees who are attuned to questions of trust, fairness, and genuine expression. Leadership development programs should prioritize the four dimensions of authentic leadership—self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective—as concrete behavioral competencies that can be trained, practiced, and assessed.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal studies are needed to track how changes in leadership behavior produce changes in psychological safety and innovation over time. Second, the sample was drawn from Indonesian technology companies, limiting immediate generalizability to other national or industry contexts. Third, all constructs were measured through self-report, raising the possibility of common method bias—though post-hoc Harman's single-factor tests suggested this was not a major concern in the present data. Future research should also explore moderating variables, such as team diversity, organizational culture, or individual differences in learning orientation, that might condition the strength of the relationships identified here. Additionally, future work might investigate how the specific dimensions of authentic leadership differentially predict psychological safety and innovative work behavior, offering a more fine-grained account of the mechanisms at play.

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