A Dialogue-Based Intervention Model for Nurturing Team Psychological Safety in Strategic R&D Project Teams

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Abstract. Strategic R&D projects are complex in nature, include several uncertainties and necessitates risky decisions involving knowledge, skills, attitudes or perceptions of team members. A strategic R&D project aimed at development of innovative technology and new products requires a team environment which facilitates team members to contribute intellectually, listen intently to each other and communicate their viewpoints, opinions or feedbacks in a free and honest manner. Psychological Safety, defined as a shared confidence that team members are in a safe climate for taking interpersonal risks, can be considered as an essential team quality for these project teams. In a psychologically safe climate, team members will be forthcoming to share their knowledge and engage pro-actively in project activities, without being afraid of any negative consequences or criticisms. Unfortunately, R&D team members are generally core technical specialists with limited inter-personal communication skills and may not be naturally comfortable in working collectively as part of a team. These professionals should enjoy good working relationships with other teammates and should inherently feel that it is comfortable to propose fresh ideas, innovative suggestions and work together to achieve the project objectives. Such a collaborative environment can be created only through methodically planned team interventions that nurture psychological safety and enhance mutual trust between team members. Several research studies have conclusively found Organizational Dialogue, which is a discipline of shared thinking, inquiry and communication, as an effective tool in this regard. In this paper, a team intervention model designed based on Bohm's dialogic method is proposed. A case study of a strategic R&D project in which the proposed intervention model was applied is also discussed along with preliminary results based on direct observations of the first author, in his role as the leader of the project team.

Keywords: Psychological Safety · Dialogue · R&D projects

1 Introduction

With the advent of science and technology in the past decades, the nature of Research & Development (R&D), especially in strategic areas like defense and space has become

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more and more complex and uncertain. R&D has migrated from *unidisciplinary*, which was based on techniques, concepts and methods of a single unique discipline, to *transdisciplinary*, which transcends disciplines and creates new fundamental conceptual models by integrating various approaches [1]. Strategic R&D project teams are challenged not only by their research goals, but also by features like a) highly diverse team members b) large team size c) high interdependency in tasks d) permeable team boundaries e) integration of knowledge across disciplines etc. These challenges can be addressed only through implementation of right team processes which will help team members to utilize their cognitive, affective and behavioral resources for carrying out necessary tasks for accomplishing the collective goals of the project.

One of the most critical cognitive team processes for enhancing team effectiveness is psychological safety [2, 3]. Research studies across teams and organizations have concluded that dialogue, a process which can transform the quality of communication between individuals through shared thinking and inquiry, can nurture psychological safety and enhance mutual trust between team members [4]. In this paper, we discuss a team intervention model designed based on dialogue method for creating psychologically safe team climate. A case study of a strategic defense R&D project in which this intervention model was applied is also presented along with preliminary results based on direct observations of the first author, in his role as the leader of the project team. This paper can be considered exploratory in nature, as it focuses on the development of a theoretical model, based on principles of dialogue method, and examines how the model can enable psychological safety in R&D project teams working in complex and strategic fields.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Team Psychological Safety

Psychological safety may be defined as a shared mental state of safety, experienced by the members, about the consequences as a result of experimenting and taking interpersonal risks within a team [2]. With higher levels of psychological safety in a team, the members are encouraged to share new ideas, perspectives and opinions in a free and frank manner. Team psychological safety can positively influence team learning behaviour among team members and will facilitate them to think critically and take risks, while having a safe feeling [5]. Mutual trust, an emergent process in teams, also results from having a psychologically safe climate of communication in teams [6]. These parameters are critical for complex R&D projects as the teams strive to meet the challenging project objectives.

2.2 Dialogue

Dialogue may be defined as "a sustained collective enquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience" [7]. It is an interpersonal conversation in which participants express their opinions and then listen to others to explore possibilities that they might otherwise have not been able to perceive [7]. Dialogue also

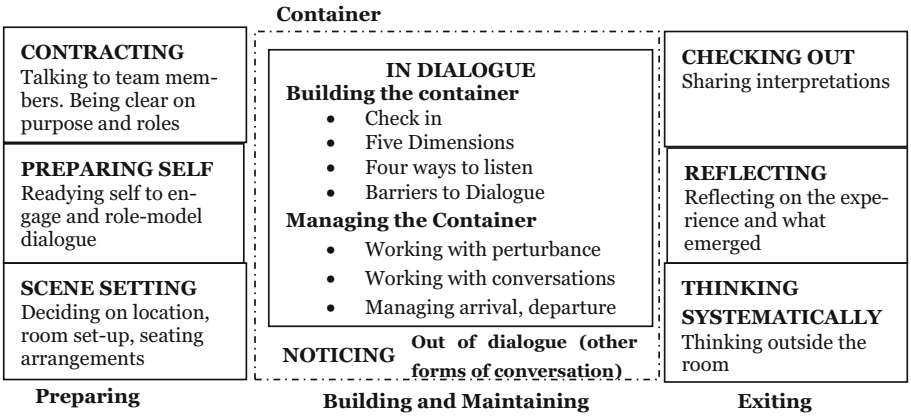

Fig. 1. The dialogic process

denotes the ability of members of the team to honestly express opinions amongst themselves, explore others' ideas and perspectives and building on each other's ideas [8]. Dialogue upholds the principles of empathetic listening, exploration and expression of assumptions, and continual search for collective innovations [7].

The dialogue method can create a setting where team members, at their will, can become aware of the fundamental process in which implicit assumptions and rigid beliefs are formed in them, and how they are rewarded by each other for doing that. Through this awareness, they can develop a collective strength and competence to act and produce things together. New possibilities can evolve from this unhindered facilitation of inquiry and flow of meaning. Dialogue brings to light the myriad ways in which shared patterns of thinking and feeling are shaped – both as hardened, mechanical impulses and also as emerging, dynamically evolving conversations. Dialogue also facilitates "triple-loop learning" which nudges team members to collectively question and understand the underlying "why's" including the purpose for which the team is formed and how they are together planning to achieve that purpose. Figure 1 shows the dialogic process in its entirety [9].

2.3 Dialogue as a Tool for Nurturing Team Psychological Safety

The effectiveness of complex R&D project teams depends on developing a valid communication methodology across the members based on a common language and shared mental models, which will also foster team learning. Dialogue facilitates new prospects for valid communication, which will ensure effective problem solving and resolution of conflicts in teams. Individuals are generally "culturally over-trained not only to think in terms of certain consensually validated categories but also to withhold information that would in any way threaten the current social order" [10]. In every interpersonal interaction, individuals try to maintain or enhance a social value or status relative to others. Such mutual face saving is an integral part of normal social relations. But in that process, certain cultural rules that emasculate valid communication also gets into operation.

Expressing truth may bring out defensive responses from others, undermining relationships and adversely affecting communication & psychological safety of members and finally, successful accomplishment of team objectives. In this context, dialogue-based intervention models can facilitate creation of a shared ground and foster mutual trust, making a psychologically safe climate for team members to communicate what is really in their minds. Dialogue creates shared frames of reference, common medium of languages and brings out hidden assumptions to open, thus forming genuine culture of safety in teams.

3 A Dialogue-Based Intervention Model for R&D Project Teams

3.1 Antecedents of Psychological Safety

Various studies have identified four broad factors as precursors to team psychological safety – relationships between team members, team dynamics, team norms and leadership [11]. Similarly, a three-stage toolbox has been proposed by Edmondson for building psychological safety in teams. This includes a) setting the stage b) inviting participation and c) responding productively [12]. On the other hand, dialogue process intends to create a sense of wholeness in interpersonal communication and accentuates the four principles of participation, coherence, awareness and unfolding. Based on these principles, four practices have been evolved. They are listening (underscoring participation), respecting (underscoring coherence), suspending (underscoring awareness) and voicing (underscoring unfoldment) [7]. The proposed intervention model will utilize the inherent principles and practices of dialogue process to realize the antecedent conditions for psychological safety in teams. It will have 3 major phases, with multiple sub-phases in each phase, which will ensure the emergence of the antecedent factors, thus building psychological safety in teams.

3.2 The RRR Dialogue Model

The proposed dialogue-based intervention model includes three distinct phases namely RESONATE, REFLECT and RESPOND. Each of these phases will have three sub-phases each. Resonate Phase is divided into sub-phases as a) Set the purpose b) Create safe container and c) Build mutual trust. Reflect phase is divided into a) Listen with empathy b) Clarify assumptions and c) Suspend with awareness. Respond phase has sub-phases as a) Reveal perspectives b) Commit to plan and c) Steer to action. The RRR model is depicted in Fig. 2.

Each stage in the RRR dialogue model is explained in following sections: -

Resonate. The first stage of RRR model is named Resonate as the aim of this stage is that the team members should be in resonance with each other. This is achieved through three sub-phases as elucidated below: -

Set the purpose. Any R&D project team is always constituted to achieve some specific organizational goals. But in practice, there will be a core team who carries out the entire sequence of pre-project activities, starting from conceiving the project requirement to

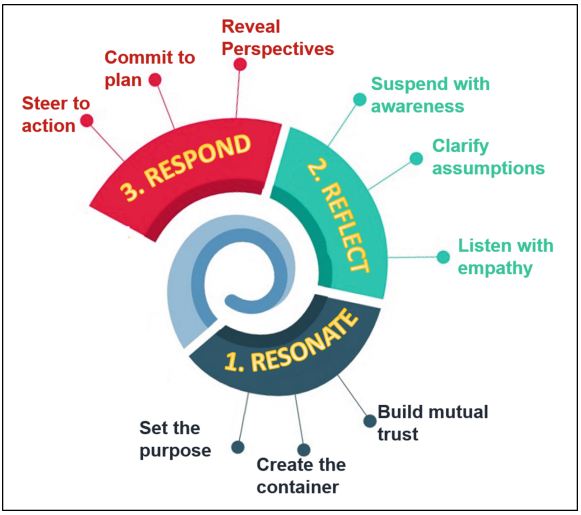

Fig. 2. The RRR dialogue model

carrying out the necessary technical and financial review processes, finally obtaining a formal sanction for the project. At this stage only, a formal project team is created and experts from different technical fields are made part of the project. Due to the late entry, the latter group may lack a holistic picture about the project objectives and may not be aware of the necessity and scope of the project. In the first sub-phase, the entire project team is made to sit together for few sessions and the project management team (including project leader and other core members) need to give a clear picture about the project, including the perceived role of each team member, contributions expected from them, method of evaluation and prescribed timelines. This is similar to what is stated in Mayan book Popolare Vuh which says, "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed. Then we decided" [13]. Thus, this sub-phase sets the purpose of the project among team members and bring them to a common platform, which becomes a starting point for the dialogue process.

Create safe container. One of the most important preliminary steps for nurturing dialogue in teams is to create a safe 'field' or 'container' [14]. This includes the physical settings where dialogue process takes place as well as the atmosphere that surrounds it. For instance, it is always preferred that team members should sit in a circle during team interactions, as it enables everyone to see and hear each other. This arrangement also implies that all are in the same level, without hierarchies. Setting the boundaries of the container is also crucial as a set of mutually accepted explicit and implicit norms will enable members to handle 'crucial' issues without personalizing or getting emotionally involved in them. A container also requires a facilitator, preferably the project leader, who can keenly witness the dialogic process in a nonjudgmental manner and intervene when task related conflicts start shifting to personal ego clashes [15]. In those moments, the facilitator can nudge the team members to accept conflict as a part of team dynamics and to observe it with complete attentiveness and presence.

Build mutual trust. Once the team members have experience of being in a safe container, they will start to be more open and develop mutual trust through dialogue [16]. In this phase, the team members are prodded to present more about their personal side to others. Here, a typical team meeting will involve brief self-introductory sessions by team members where each of them speaks about their family, education and work background, their life journey, remarkable life moments, their ideas, philosophies and belief systems, their strengths and weaknesses, hobbies, interests etc. Other members are also encouraged to be inquisitive and ask probing questions to the presenting member, who has a choice to answer or not answer them. These conversational interactions will create a holistic picture about each member in others' minds and helps in understanding the paradigms, conventions and perspectives with which each member views the world [17]. With more such interactions between team members, mutual trust will begin to emerge, setting a foundation for psychological safety.

Thus, at the end of first phase, the team members start to resonate with each other in terms of thinking, sharing ideas and communicating.

Reflect. The second stage of RRR model is named Reflect, which is expected to equip team members to listen to others' viewpoints and opinions empathetically, encourage them to clarify the assumptions involved and suspend the ideas in a mutually generated dialogue field for examination with total focus and awareness. This is achieved through three sub-phases as explained below: -

Listen with empathy. When team members start to carry out the task processes, it becomes a necessity for them to listen to each other's views and feedbacks. Listening is the core of dialogue process and is a critical factor for complex R&D projects as it enriches team members' viewpoints and create a common space from which innovative ideas and solutions can come up [18]. Listening is defined as "a behavior that manifests the presence of attention, comprehension, and good intention toward the speaker." [19]. Team members experience safety and they feel valued and accepted when there is an atmosphere of empathetic listening in teams [20]. The idea of listening empathetically doesn't imply that there will be complete approval of everything told by the speaker and absolute refrain in criticism by the listener. On the other hand, such listening gives confidence to the speaker that there is focused attention by the listener on what is being spoken, in an environment of openness, transparency and trust. The speaker is assured that his views will be received holistically and will be evaluated based on their intended meaning. Studies have also shown that, in a contrasting environment where members are worried about the negative reactions of their teammates, they will abstain from sharing their points openly [21]. In dialogic process, listening is not a singular activity and it happens collectively with the entire team looking at individual viewpoints from the perspective of the whole web of relationships that interconnects them. It creates a profound experience of shared understanding among the team members and fosters intimate connections between them, thus nurturing psychological safety [22]. Thus, listening with empathy becomes a crucial starting stage in the Reflect phase of RRR model.

Clarify assumptions: Empathetic listening is followed with asking probing questions by the team members in an effort to better understand what has been said. In this stage, members employ assertive inquiries with the aim of clarifying veiled assumptions, mutually

exchanging their tacit and explicit knowledge and synergistically creating new knowledge [23]. This process pushes members to arrive at creative, innovative and novel ideas. Simple questions like "Can you tell me more?" or "Why do you say so?" can be relevant in following up on a topic with the speaker, after listening intently [24]. These will help in clearing not only the speaker's assumptions, but the listeners' too. Similarly, adjoining questions can be used to explore other aspects related to the matter under consideration. Questions like, "How can this concept be applied in a different context?" or "What are the other related uses of this technology?" come under this category. These enquires are explorative in nature and can help the members to get a broader understanding of the matter [25]. Funneling questions can also be used at this stage to clarify how a perspective solution was arrived at and identify the root cause behind assumptions. Sometimes, taking a step back from the immediate task under consideration and seeing it from a larger frame can also help the members to see the interconnections between various parameters in a better manner. At the end of this phase, the members will have a clear picture of the reality sans individual assumptions that distort it.

Suspend with awareness. Suspension is a critical part of dialogic process where the opinions, feelings, impulses and even reactions of a team member are exposed in such a way they can be felt and reflected back by others in the team [26]. Suspension is necessary for R&D teams as they delve in topics and challenging situations which require creativity, exploration, new discoveries, and innovative ideas, solutions and possibilities. Here members defer judgment and certainty about any viewpoint, but explore them with absolute attention so that new possibilities can open up. Suspension involves taking a pause to step back, ponder and reflect, adopt a new point of view and then assess things, acknowledging what is not known or not understood and disclosing hidden fears [27]. When team members include suspension in their interactions, they avoid instantaneous reactions to other members' opinions, whether supportive or opposing. The practice of suspension arises from the principles of insight, attention, awareness and flexibility. It helps to look beyond the obvious and bring into open the reasoning behind individual and collective views, the conclusions from which beliefs are made and their implications [28]. This empowers the team members to be more open minded when they engage with each other. When everyone in a team collectively suspends their views with awareness, it enables a deeper thought process with subtle meanings and implicit distortions revealed, leading to a new kind of coherent, synergistic intelligence.

Respond. The final stage of RRR model is named Respond, which is aimed at helping team members reveal their opinions and feedbacks openly, evolve and commit to a plan to achieve the team's objectives and steer that plan into action. The three sub-phases in this stage are explained as below: -

Reveal perspectives. Voicing one's perspectives may perhaps be the most challenging part of any dialogic process. It is an information-sharing phase in which members introduce new contents and initiate a team socialization process. Sharing personal details, useful information, team member's appreciation about shared information and willingness to provide feedback are some of the factors that allow voicing amongst team members [29]. Here each team member has to reveal what she feels true, regardless of

the effects and influences of doing so. This requires self-trust and strong conviction that what is going to be said is relevant to the team as a whole. It is also necessary to have the willingness to be still enough sufficiently to choose consciously what to say and not to say, which can provide a high level of control and stability to the individual [30]. In teams which employ dialogue, collective voicing creates a common pool of meaning and shared understanding, which is much beyond casual interaction. Synchronicities often arise in this phase: one member may be thinking to tell something and another may say the same thing. The members experience a collective flow, as if they are playing their part in creating a complex musical piece, even though no individual has all the notes. Members become aware of the impact their words have on the entire team as they connect with others' words and experiences. In R&D project teams, where members are involved in high risk and complex research areas, such an open communication leads to a feeling of safety, reducing errors, improving quality and enhancing collective learning capabilities [31].

Commit to plan. As a team passes through the previous stages of RRR dialogic model, an environment of safe and open communication would have evolved amongst team members. The members would have internalized the overall purpose of team's existence, their individual roles and outputs expected from other members towards achieving the team goals. Through the interplay of dialogic practice and collective cooperation in one another's contributions, a holistic team plan slowly starts emerging. Each member of the team is cognizant of own actions, others' actions and how it impacts the progress of the team. This mutual awareness evolves into a total commitment towards a shared plan on how to organize and execute various tasks for achieving team's mission [32]. Such a plan instills focus and alignment among the team members.

Steer to action. By now, what started as a group of individual members, would have transformed into a cohesive team with a unique identity. Also, after the previous sub-phase, they would have been committed to a mutually agreed action plan. In the last sub-phase of the model, focus is on steering this team to action through a synergy of personalities, talents and efforts. The team experiences a feeling of joint progress as individual identities, differences and egos are replaced with coordinated activities and effortless collaboration [33]. Team members start responding instantaneously and harmoniously to challenging situations (common in R&D scenario) and enjoy feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment on successfully tackling them. Whenever a member faces difficulties, others are pro-active to offer encouragement, support and necessary resources. Thus, the team evolves into a single organism, steering towards its mission with a holistic focus.

As any R&D team traverse itself through these three phases of dialogic model, the members become more and more open and they feel free to express their opinions, criticize or disagree with other views and admit their mistakes, thus making themselves vulnerable to each other [2]. This psychological safety in R&D teams enable the members to strive towards excellence, perform in best possible ways, keep learning and innovate consistently, thus meeting the team's objectives in an effective and efficient manner.

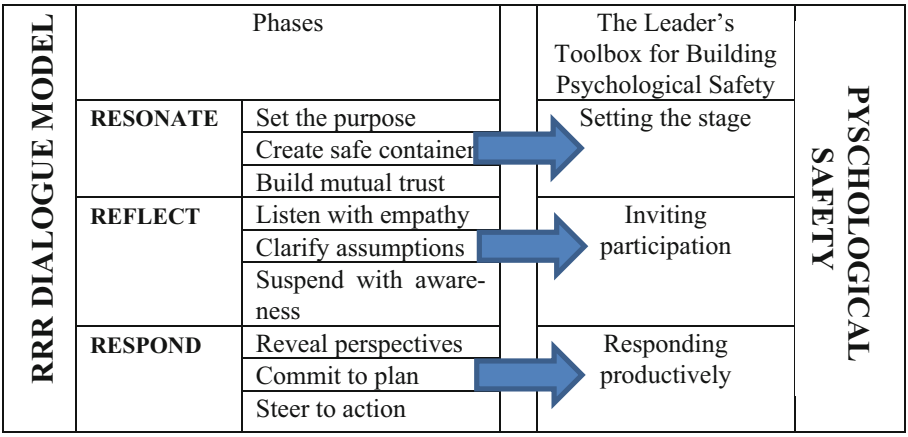

Fig. 3. The RRR dialogue model and Leader's Toolbox for psychological safety

3.3 RRR Dialogue Model and Framework for Building Psychological Safety

The RRR dialogue model is developed in such a way that it meets the necessary conditions prescribed in the Leader's Toolbox for building psychological safety, proposed by Edmondson [12]. An adapted version of the same, incorporating RRR dialogue model is shown in Fig. 3.

The RESONATE stage in RRR model will create the base for nurturing psychological safety by giving a frame for the work to be carried out, emphasizing the purpose and building mutual trust. The REFLECT stage will bring in intense listening, practice of inquiry and broad structures and processes for team interactions. The RESPOND stage will create an environment, where members discuss and brainstorm future steps, evolve a mutually agreeable plan and steer to action. Failures, which are an inherent part of R&D projects, are destigmatized and members orient themselves towards continuous learning from setbacks and look forward to offer mutual support to overcome them.

3.4 Applying the RRR Dialogue Model – A Case Study

Here the case study of a defense R&D project, led by first author, to develop an underwater surveillance system is presented, where RRR dialogue model was extensively used from the inception to inspection stages. The project team consisted of 11 young scientists (including three ladies), aged below 35 years and belonging to varied technical and cultural backgrounds. The team had been constituted in a hurry, to meet the sudden requirements from top management, and team members were selected purely based on their technical competency. The members were part of a larger organization, working in different technical groups and had only minimal interactions with each other before being part of this team. Hence there was an evident lack of psychological safety when the team members met for the first few times to discuss the team's objectives.

To create an environment of safety and mutual trust, the team leader and his deputy decided to instill the three steps of dialogue based RRR intervention model. In the first

stage, the team members were encouraged to open up about how they viewed the purpose of the team. Based on the collective opinion of the team members, the initial 'top-down' purpose of the team, proposed by the top management, was modified and approval was obtained for the new purpose. Next, as part of setting up a safe container, a room was made available for the team to sit together with facilities like office infrastructure, conference table, refreshments etc. Using this as a physical container, several interactive sessions were conducted between the team members. This included self-introductory sessions also, which had a remarkable impact in fostering mutual trust between the members.

In the second stage of implementing RRR model, the members were introduced to the concept of empathy and empathetic listening. During interactions, it was made mandatory that only one person can speak at a time. All others were trained to note down their comments/views, which could be presented on a turn-by-turn basis. Personal ego-based comments, derogatory remarks were discouraged and team members were reprimanded, if indulged in such behavior repeatedly. Asking questions and clarifying assumptions were given extreme importance in technical interactions. The members were also trained in meditation and self-awareness techniques, so that they could suspend other's views, without immediately reacting to them. By the end of this stage, the members had slowly begun their transformation as a unified team.

By the time of implementing third stage of RRR model, the members had become proactive in expressing their voice in an open and transparent manner. The plan for the team to achieve its purpose evolved in a collective manner, with all members having a feeling of ownership and committing themselves to that plan. And, as the team got fully evolved, taking necessary action to move ahead as per the plan became a synergistic activity of collective flow, with harmonious contributions from all members.

As a result, the defense R&D project team under discussion, could achieve all the project objectives with in the scheduled cost and time. The team created an indigenous underwater surveillance system, the first of its kind in the country, and developed several related technologies, which have now found applications in various naval defense purposes. Further details cannot be divulged in the paper considering to the classified nature of the R&D project.

3.5 The RRR Dialogue Model – Ongoing Empirical Study

The following hypotheses were proposed based on the model and an empirical study is currently being carried out to validate the model.

H1: Setting the purpose is positively related to psychological safety
H2: Creating safe container is positively related to psychological safety
H3: Building mutual trust is positively related to psychological safety
H4: Listening with empathy is positively related to psychological safety
H5: Clarifying assumptions is positively related to psychological safety
H6: Suspending with awareness is positively related to psychological safety
H7: Revealing perspectives is positively related to psychological safety
H8: Committing to plan is positively related to psychological safety
H9: Steering to action is positively related to psychological safety

The role of psychological safety as a mediator between RRR model and team performance is also studied. The study is done with seven defence R&D project teams and a 9-scale questionnaire has been developed by the authors for this purpose. Each scale consists of 2–5 questions on a 5-point Likert scale. The measurements are made on team level phenomena and members are asked to answer to factors related to their team and not individual factors. One sample question from this survey is "Members of this team enjoy high levels of trust with each other". As this study is not under the scope of the present paper, the results are not presented here.

4 Way Ahead

This paper highlights the importance of dialogue practices in nurturing psychological safety in strategic R&D project teams. The paper proposes a dialogue based RRR intervention model which has the potential to create a safe and open environment, fostering innovation and creativity crucial for strategic R&D projects. With limited research on dialogue and psychological safety in strategic R&D teams, this is possibly the first study to propose a model connecting both these critical factors. The strong association between dialogue practices and psychological safety has been demonstrated with an example of a defense R&D project that was led by the first author. Further empirical studies are in progress to establish the positive relationship between various factors described in RRR model and psychological safety. The authors also understand the inherent limitations of the applicability of the model, especially in large R&D teams. Also, the effect of similar models in other teams and workgroups need to be studied in detail in future.

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