

FREE DIGITAL EDITION

Before Anyone Speaks Up

A Short Introduction to
The Supervisor Effect

Vernon S. Brown, Ph.D., Ed.D.

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1. The Moment Before

Every workplace has a moment that never shows up in a report.

It happens in the second or two after someone notices something. A number that does not add up. A procedure that has drifted from what the manual says. A better way to do a task that everyone has been doing the hard way for years. In that second, the person who noticed makes a quiet calculation. Is this worth saying? Who will hear it? What happened the last time someone said something like it?

Then they decide. Most of the time, nobody else ever knows a decision was made.

If they speak, the organization gets a chance to learn something. If they do not, nothing visible happens. No one is disciplined. No meeting is called. The concern, the idea, or the warning simply stays where it started, inside one person's head, and the organization carries on without it.

I spent twenty-two years on active duty in the Navy and ten more in civil service with the Department of the Navy, much of that time supervising military members, civilian employees, and contractors. I watched that calculation play out more times than I can count, usually without recognizing it for what it was. Later, I studied it twice, once by listening to federal employees describe it in their own words and once by analyzing survey responses from more than nine thousand Navy civilians. Both studies kept returning me to the same person: not the agency head, not the policy writer, but the supervisor the employee sees every day.

This short edition is an introduction to that finding. It is not a summary of the full book, and it does not try to be. Its job is to name the problem, show you what the evidence says in broad strokes, and leave you with a few questions worth carrying back to your own team.

The full answers, with the stories, the data, and the limits laid out in detail, are in *The Supervisor Effect*.

2. Why Silence Is Expensive

Researchers have a name for what happens in that second when someone decides not to speak. *Employee silence* is the individual choice to hold back information, ideas, concerns, or feedback, whether from fear of consequences, a sense that speaking up will change nothing, or a lack of trust in leaders. When that choice becomes a pattern across a whole workforce, it is called *organizational silence*.

The opposite condition is *psychological safety*: the belief that you can speak up, ask a question, or raise a concern without being punished for it. When a group shares that belief, researchers describe it as a *psychological safety climate*.

Silence is easy to underestimate because its costs are invisible by design. An idea that is never offered cannot be counted. A warning that is never raised leaves no paper trail. But the research I reviewed for both of my studies describes the cost in several concrete ways.

Ideas go unspoken. Gallup data cited in my first study found that only three in ten U.S. workers believed their opinions mattered. Where people do not feel safe, keeping quiet usually looks like the smarter personal bet.

Engagement drains away. When people feel secure voicing concerns, they invest more time and energy in their work and their team's goals. When they do not, they pull back from the mission.

Mistakes go unreported, and organizations stop learning. An agency can only correct what it hears about.

In government, these costs carry extra weight. Public agencies are responsible for defense, safety, emergency response, and services people depend on. Many operate under conditions that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, where a hazard must be reported quickly and a crisis calls for every person's judgment. And government is built in

ways that make silence more likely: rigid hierarchies, frequent turnover in political leadership, and cultures in which whether you are heard can depend on your rank.

That is the uncomfortable starting point. The places where speaking up matters most are often the places where it is hardest.

There is a hopeful side to it, too. Hierarchy is not only an obstacle. The same chain of command that can pass silence downward can also pass openness downward. Which one it carries depends a great deal on how the people in it lead.

3. What the Data Show

When I began this work, very little research had examined psychological safety inside U.S. federal organizations. Most studies of leadership and psychological safety had been done in private companies, in health care, or in education, often outside the United States. So I set out to test the question directly in one of the most structured organizations in government.

Using the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which the Office of Personnel Management administers across the federal workforce, I analyzed the responses of 9,160 Department of the Navy civilians. I asked whether employees who saw more *transformational leadership* from their leaders also reported a stronger climate of psychological safety.

Transformational leadership is a bundle of four distinct behaviors:

- **Idealized influence:** leading by example and with integrity.
- **Inspirational motivation:** communicating vision and purpose.
- **Individualized consideration:** attending to each person's needs and growth.
- **Intellectual stimulation:** inviting new ideas and challenging assumptions.

To capture psychological safety climate, I used five survey items that come close to the moment described at the start of this edition. They asked, in effect, whether employees can report wrongdoing without fear of reprisal, whether they share what they know, whether they can influence decisions, whether new ideas are taken up, and whether they can voice a different opinion. To capture leadership, I mapped sixteen survey items onto the four behaviors above. Both measures proved highly reliable.

The overall answer was clear. The relationship between transformational leadership and psychological safety climate was strong, positive, and statistically significant. On its own, transformational leadership accounted for about two-thirds of the variation in psychological safety climate: 65.5 percent. When I placed all four behaviors into a single model, together they accounted for a little more, 68.4 percent.

In a workforce this big and this varied, that is a large share. It suggests that hierarchy does not cancel out leadership. Even inside a highly bureaucratic department, how people see their leaders is closely tied to whether they are willing to flag a problem, pass along what they know, or disagree out loud.

The more interesting result came next. The four behaviors did not pull equally. Two of them carried most of the weight. One added a little. And one, the behavior many people would have guessed matters most, added nothing of its own once the other three were taken into account.

Which behaviors those are, why the result surprised me, and what it means for how supervisors spend their limited time is the subject of two full chapters of the book. For now, I will offer only a hint: the behaviors that mattered most were the close, practical ones, not the grand ones.

A word of caution belongs beside these numbers, as it does throughout the book. The Navy study captured a single point in time and measured association, not cause. Leadership and psychological safety climate move together in the data; the data cannot say which drives which. The data were self-reported, the scores clustered toward the favorable end of the scale, and the sample came from a single department. Those limits do not erase the finding. They define it.

4. What Employees Say

Numbers can show how strongly two things move together. They cannot tell you what it feels like from the inside. For that, I went back to an earlier study.

In 2022, I invited federal employees in Hawai'i to describe, in their own words, how they experience psychological safety at work and how their supervisors influence it. Forty-six people answered an open-ended questionnaire, and fourteen of them sat for in-depth, one-on-one interviews. From what they told me, six themes emerged. Three described what psychological safety means to them, and three described how supervisors shape it.

I want to be fair to these participants. Most described their organizations as generally safe places, where people were, for the most part, respected and encouraged to speak up. This was not a study of broken workplaces. It was a study of ordinary federal employees describing what helps them speak and what makes them hold back.

Put simply, participants said that feeling safe made them more motivated and better at their jobs, that it felt like belonging to a family-like support network, and that it meant everyone was included. When they talked about their supervisors, they described leaders who were committed to their needs, who pushed back against organizational barriers on their behalf, and who made engagement possible. The full book walks through each theme in the participants' own words.

Two patterns stood out, and both point to the same person.

The first was proximity. When participants described the support that made them feel safe, it came primarily from their immediate supervisor, the leader they saw most often. As they described leaders further up the chain, that sense of commitment weakened. Senior leaders, many said, felt distant and out of touch. One participant,

Aiden, drew the line in a single sentence: “Upper management might be unpleasant and exploitative, but I trust my immediate supervisor.”

The second was memory. People learn from what happens when they speak, and they remember it. Another participant, Joe, described repeatedly hearing that upper-level leadership did not know or care what his office did. His conclusion was quiet and final: “I have since refrained from offering up new ideas or concerns.” Nothing in that sentence describes a punishment. It describes a lesson, absorbed over time, and an organization that will now never hear whatever Joe would have told it next.

Those two sentences frame the problem this book is about. Trust in the person closest to you can survive a great deal of distance from everyone else. Silence, once learned, can outlast the people who taught it.

5. The Supervisor Effect

The two studies were never designed as one project. They used different methods, drew on different people, and came from different years. One listened to a few dozen employees in a single state. The other measured thousands across a single department. Still, they asked nearly the same question, and that is what makes it worth setting them side by side.

Interpretation. Read together, the two studies point to a single idea, which I call *the supervisor effect*. Whether federal employees feel safe enough to speak depends heavily on the leader closest to them, and on a small set of everyday behaviors: listening, paying attention to the person as well as the work, inviting ideas, and doing something with what one hears. Commitment from senior leaders and written policy matter too, and the employees in Hawai'i said so. But the decisive moments happen in the space between one supervisor and one employee.

One lesson from this work changed my own thinking. For most of my career, the people skills of leadership sat somewhere below the technical and tactical ones, useful but optional. The Hawai'i participants said that leaders above their immediate supervisor often lacked them: approachability, transparency, and connection with employees at all levels. In the Navy data, the behaviors that carried the most weight were made of the same material. I now think hierarchical organizations routinely underrate the very skills that decide whether their people speak.

That reading is mine, and I label it that way throughout the book. Neither study can prove that a supervisor's behavior causes psychological safety. What they can show is that the stories and the statistics, gathered in very different ways, keep pointing at the same leader.

This short edition stops here, deliberately. The full book takes up the questions this introduction raises but does not answer:

- **Which leadership behaviors carry the most weight**, and why the one that sounds most inspiring did not add anything of its own in the Navy data.
- **Where the stories and the statistics disagree**, and what that disagreement reveals about how employees experience leaders at different levels.
- **How federal employees themselves define safety**, in six themes drawn from their own words, including how a workplace can come to feel like family.
- **Why the skills often dismissed as “soft”** turned out to be among the strongest drivers of psychological safety in a hierarchical setting.
- **What agencies, senior leaders, and supervisors can do**, grounded in what both studies found.
- **What the evidence cannot show**, stated plainly, and the research still needed.

6. Three Questions for Your Own Team

You do not need the full book to start paying attention to the moment before anyone speaks up. Here are three questions to sit with. They are not a checklist or a training plan. They are a way of looking at your own team with the findings above in mind.

Who has gone quiet?

Think about the people on your team who used to raise issues and no longer do, or who have never said much in the first place. Do you know why? Joe's decision surfaced only because a researcher happened to ask him. Silence of that kind rarely announces itself. It has to be noticed, and the person best placed to notice it is usually the supervisor.

Where does the distance begin?

The Hawai'i participants described support that was strongest from the immediate supervisor and weaker at each level above. If your team were asked where leadership starts to feel distant, would they point above you, or at you? And if they pointed above you, are you a bridge to those levels, or one more layer between your people and the people who make decisions?

What do you spend your time on?

Vision and purpose matter. But in the Navy data, the behaviors most closely tied to psychological safety were not the ones about broadcasting a vision. They were closer to the work and closer to the person. In an ordinary week, how much of your attention goes to telling your team where things are headed, and how much goes to hearing what they see from where they stand?

There are no scores for these questions. If one of them was uncomfortable to answer, that is probably the one worth starting with.

7. Where to Go Next

The Supervisor Effect: What Federal Employees Say, and What the Data Show, About Psychological Safety brings both studies together in full. It tells the Hawai'i stories in the participants' own words, reports the Navy results behavior by behavior, sets the two side by side, and turns what they found into guidance for agencies, senior leaders, and supervisors. Every finding is tied to the published research, and every interpretation is labeled as one.

It is written for supervisors and managers at every level of government, for the senior leaders and human capital professionals who develop them, and for anyone who has ever been in that quiet second before deciding whether to speak.

Get the full book

- Paperback and Kindle: <https://vebro.net/se>
- More from Vernon S. Brown: <https://vern.in>

The quiet second before someone speaks up is not something any agency can afford to leave to chance. The good news, and the reason I wrote the book, is that the most important part of the answer is already within reach of the person reading this.

About the Author

Vernon S. Brown, Ph.D., Ed.D., is a U.S. Navy veteran who has served the U.S. government for more than three decades: twenty-two years on active duty in the Navy, including service as a Navy Chief, and ten years in civil service with the Department of the Navy, supervising active-duty military personnel, civilian employees, and contractors. He holds a Doctor of Education (2023), whose dissertation examined how federal employees in Hawai'i describe psychological safety and their supervisors' influence on it, and a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership (2025), whose dissertation analyzed 9,160 Department of the Navy civilian responses to the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. *The Supervisor Effect* brings the two studies together.

About the Sources

Every finding in this edition comes from the author's two published dissertations, cited below by short name and printed page. No new data were collected.

EdD: Brown, V. S. (2023). *Supervisor influence on employee psychological safety in U.S. federal government organizations: A qualitative descriptive study* [Doctoral dissertation, Doctor of Education]. Atidbit Open Repository. <https://atidbit.io/dissertation/05312023>

PhD: Brown, V. S. (2025). *The relationship between supervisors' transformational leadership behaviors & employees' psychological safety climate among U.S. Department of the Navy civilians* [Doctoral dissertation, Doctor of Philosophy]. Atidbit Open Repository. <https://atidbit.io/dissertation/09302025>

- Employee and organizational silence; psychological safety: PhD, pp. 11, 30–31.
- Gallup “three in ten” (Herway, 2017): EdD, p. 39.
- Engagement; high-risk and high-demanding government settings; hierarchy and political change: PhD, pp. 15, 69–70, 89–94.
- Research gap in federal settings: EdD, pp. 3, 7; PhD, pp. 16–17.
- Navy sample (n = 9,160) and 2023 FEVS: PhD, pp. 23–24, 148–159.
- Survey items and reliability: PhD, p. 154 (Table 3); pp. 259–263 (Appendix E).
- Overall relationship (Spearman's $r_s = .796$; $R^2 = .655$, 65.5 percent): PhD, pp. 183–184 (Tables 11–12), 201, 211.
- Four-behavior model ($R^2 = .684$): PhD, p. 186 (Table 15); individual contributions, p. 187 (Table 16), p. 188.
- Limits (cross-sectional, self-report, ceiling effect, single department): PhD, pp. 219–220.
- Hawai'i study (n = 46 questionnaire, 14 interviews; six themes): EdD, pp. 161–163, 198, 202.
- Most participants described workplaces as generally safe: EdD, pp. 279, 316–317.
- Support primarily from the immediate supervisor; senior leaders “out of touch”: EdD, pp. 279, 301.
- Aiden (questionnaire): EdD, p. 257. Joe (questionnaire): EdD, p. 204.
- Soft skills lacking above the immediate supervisor: EdD, p. 279. Soft skills as drivers of psychological safety: PhD, p. 228.

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Every workplace has a moment that never shows up in a report.

In the second after someone notices a problem or a better way, they decide whether to speak. Drawing on two studies of federal employees—one listening to their own words, one analyzing survey responses from 9,160 Navy civilians—this short introduction names the person who most shapes that decision: the supervisor they see every day.

The full story, the data behavior by behavior, and what leaders can do about it are in *The Supervisor Effect: What Federal Employees Say, and What the Data Show, About Psychological Safety*.

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