



Soft Skills and Effective Leadership: A Conceptual Framework Integrating Psychological Safety as a Mediator and Team Virtuality as a Moderator

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Abstract

Leaders' soft skills are widely treated as a condition for effective leadership. Yet the literature says little about the team-level mechanism that drives the effect or the conditions under which it holds. This paper develops a conceptual framework in which leader soft skills (emotional intelligence, communication, conflict management, adaptability, and empathy with relationship building) influence leadership effectiveness both directly and through team psychological safety. Team virtuality moderates the direct path and the first stage of the indirect path, and media richness conditions that moderation. Transformational leadership theory provides the translation of capability into observable behaviour; emotional intelligence theory, the underlying capability set; psychological safety theory, the climate mechanism; and virtual team theory, the communication conditions that constrain it. Five hypotheses follow. The framework treats soft skills as an integrated behavioural repertoire rather than a list of desirable attributes. It situates their effect within a team climate that can be measured independently of the leader and the outcome. It also makes explicit a disagreement in the existing evidence: findings that relational leader behaviour matters more in mediated settings run counter to the attenuation logic adopted here, and the hypotheses are stated so that the two accounts can be tested against one another.

Keywords: Soft Skills; Leadership Effectiveness; Psychological Safety; Team Virtuality; Media Richness; Moderated Mediation.

1. Introduction

Leadership theory has steadily moved towards the view that leaders influence others primarily through the quality of their interpersonal conduct. A leader is no longer described only as a decision-maker who allocates tasks. The role also involves conveying meaning, building trust, regulating emotions, handling disagreements, and maintaining commitment across teams whose members have diverse backgrounds and are often dispersed. Soft skills, being non-technical skills that affect interpersonal behaviour and self-regulation, thus, have become an ongoing area of interest in the realm of leadership research and management as well, owing to their direct implications for the relationship-based nature of leadership

(AbuJbara & Worley, 2018; Goleman, 1998; Rao, 2017). The interest driving this area is rooted in practical considerations.

Work is more interdependent than it used to be; project teams cross departmental lines, and much of what teams produce depends on shared problem-solving rather than individual output. Leaders are therefore judged partly on the climate they establish for that work (George et al., 2025; Northouse, 2021; Phiri, 2025). What the literature has not settled is how soft skills produce their effects. Studies repeatedly link particular skills to positive outcomes, but the intervening team-level process is usually left implicit, and the boundary conditions are rarely specified. Two constructs are needed to close that gap. Psychological safety, the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999), is the climate through which relational leader behaviour would have to work if it is to produce learning, voice, or innovation; a leader who is skilled, but whose team will not speak up, cannot obtain those outcomes. Team virtuality, the degree to which members are dispersed and depend on technology to communicate (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005), determines how much relational information reaches followers in the first place. Neither construct has been brought into a single account of how leader soft skills translate into leadership effectiveness.

This paper therefore sets out a framework in which leader soft skills affect leadership effectiveness both directly and through team psychological safety, with team virtuality moderating the direct path and the first stage of the indirect path. Existing models fall short in three specific ways. Competency models of leadership specify what skilled leaders do but stop at the individual level, so they cannot explain why the same competencies produce different results across teams. Psychological safety research identifies leader behaviour as a strong antecedent (Frazier et al., 2017), yet it treats leadership as a style label rather than as a trainable skill set. Virtual team research establishes that mediation changes what leadership does (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Purvanova & Kenda, 2022), but does not connect this finding to the interpersonal capabilities that mediation makes harder to display. The framework developed below joins these three literatures and states the resulting predictions in a form a multilevel study could falsify.

2. Problem Statement

Three problems run through the current literature on soft skills and leadership. The first is conceptual. There is no settled boundary to the construct: lists of soft skills differ from study to study, and much of the empirical work is conducted on students rather than on people who hold leadership positions (Abbaszadeh Baghali et al., 2025; Karimi & Piña, 2021; Ramírez-Ramírez et al., 2025; Žilinskienė & Knyvienė, 2024). Findings from that work do not transfer cleanly to organisational leadership, where the skills are exercised within authority relations and under performance pressure that student teams do not replicate.

The second problem is explanatory. Studies establish that soft skills correlate with leadership outcomes but rarely model the process. Zeb et al. (2018) make this point in their review of the leadership effectiveness literature, and Riggio and Saggi (2015) note that soft skills tend to be invoked as a residual explanation rather than specified as a mechanism. Where mediation is examined at all, it is usually

tested for a single leadership style and a single outcome, and moderation by the communication context is seldom examined simultaneously (Phiri, 2025; Trevelin et al., 2023).

The third problem is methodological, and it constrains what any framework built on this literature can claim. Measurement of soft skills relies heavily on self-report. Harms and Credé (2010) show what those costs are: in their meta-analysis of 62 samples, the estimated validity of emotional intelligence for transformational leadership was .59 when both ratings came from the same source and .12 when they came from different sources. Antonakis, Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2009) argue further that mixed-trait measures confound emotional ability with personality, so that part of the reported association reflects the measure rather than the construct. A framework built on this evidence has to be stated in a way that invites designs capable of separating the two.

The purpose of this paper is to specify a conceptual framework linking leaders' soft skills to leadership effectiveness, with psychological safety as the mediating mechanism and team virtuality as the moderator, and to derive testable hypotheses. Four questions organise the argument. Which soft skills recur in the leadership literature, and on what evidence? Through what team-level process would they affect leadership effectiveness? How does the degree of virtuality alter that process? Moreover, where the existing literature offers competing predictions, which does the framework commit to?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Core soft skills associated with effective leadership

Soft skills are the non-technical capabilities that allow people to work with others, manage themselves, and coordinate action. The construct is widely used and loosely defined, and the disagreement is not merely terminological. In their approach, Lotzar (2018) defines soft skills broadly, incorporating both interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects, hence the inclusion of emotion regulation within the construct. On the other hand, AbuJbara and Worley (2018) define soft skills in relation to job-related behavioural requirements, rendering them highly context-specific and impossible to compile into a comprehensive list. As such, the difference leads to different recommendations for leadership development: the former calls for general capability training, whereas the latter advocates role-specific training. This paper takes a similar approach to soft skills as AbuJbara and Worley by treating them as context-specific in their manifestation, but agrees with Lotzar in recognising the importance of intrapersonal regulation as part of the same construct. In leadership literature, the following clusters consistently emerge: emotional intelligence, communication, conflict management, adaptability, empathy, and relationship building. The clusters overlap, and this overlap allows us to draw theoretical conclusions about the nature of these constructs, as they rely on the same underlying ability, perception and regulation of social interaction.

Emotional intelligence is often considered the most researched and debated cluster. Goleman's (1998) mixed model defines emotional intelligence as a set of competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill, a definition widely adopted in leadership literature. On the other hand, Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008) challenge the mixed-model approach, arguing that it combines dispositional attributes with a supposed ability, thereby rendering the very idea of emotional intelligence non-intelligent. The importance of this discussion lies in the fact that the two models yield different

predictions: according to the ability model, leadership effectiveness depends on enacted behaviour, whereas a mixed model posits that the dispositional attribute itself confers the leadership advantage. Empirical evidence seems to favour the narrower definition of emotional intelligence. Radha et al. (2018) and Yulianti et al. (2024) find a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness, and George et al. (2025) credit high-quality communication, adaptability, and composure under pressure to emotional intelligence. At the same time, Harms and Credé (2010) demonstrate that the same correlation decreases from .59 to .12 when skill and leadership ratings come from different evaluators, and Antonakis et al. (2009) claim that the relationship can be attributed to general mental ability and personality. Moreover, Wangchuk (2021) and Jadhav and Gupta (2014) consider emotional intelligence and communication to be the same leadership resource; while theoretically acceptable, this perspective introduces further confounding. The position taken in this paper is that emotional intelligence is a regulatory capability that underpins the other four clusters and should be operationalised through behaviour.

Communication consists of speaking, listening, questioning, persuading, providing feedback, and tailoring the message to the audience. According to Westover (2020), communication is a tool leaders use to create alignment, establish trust, and implement change. Its impact on effectiveness goes beyond pure clarity: while providing clear expectations reduces mistakes, listening means that a subordinate's view is appreciated – it is a status assessment in addition to the information exchange. It is possible that the two functions contradict each other: a leader might be precise but perceived as condescending. During reorganisations or periods of uncertainty, listening is particularly important, as it addresses whether to accept an explanation of events that is unverifiable by the organisation's members.

Conflict management, negotiation, and recognition form the third cluster. Rao (2017) subsumes the three attributes under the umbrella of soft leadership, claiming that power is applied in relations with others rather than through formal authority. According to Abood and Tari (2019), such a relational mode reduces the gap between an individual's personal and organisational perceptions. It works in terms of identification rather than compliance. What separates conflict management is that its value is preventive and therefore hardly observable; solving a problem before it fully emerges does not leave a trace in performance data. Leaders intervening in the early stages of a disagreement also convey that initiating such a discussion is not punishable. This intersection demonstrates how conflict management is connected to the creation of psychological safety, and the two bodies of literature should be considered together.

Adaptability is the fourth cluster. Leadership is always carried out in a changing environment, and the behaviour that is effective in one case might be ineffective in another. Adaptability refers to the ability to adjust behaviour, communication, and problem-solving strategies depending on the circumstances. AbuJbara and Worley (2018) argue that soft skills cannot be taught in a generic curriculum, as context determines what constitutes correct behaviour. George et al. (2025) see adaptability as the result of emotional intelligence, whereas Makri and Vlachopoulos (2019) list it as one of the leadership skills. This difference is meaningful: if adaptability emerges from emotional intelligence, development occurs indirectly through emotional self-regulation; if it is an independent ability, it requires specific training and measures.

The fifth cluster includes empathy and relationship building. Empathy refers to the ability to recognise and respond to another person's experience, whereas relationship building includes mentoring, coaching, support, and the accumulation of trust. Phiri (2025) suggests that empathy and Ubuntu should be the central leadership competencies in African public sector contexts rather than desired ones. Such an argument exceeds the typical Western view of empathy, which is viewed as an additional ability to technical and strategic ones. Li and Tang (2022) provide a narrower understanding of it, focusing on the observable behaviours rather than dispositions. Both Phiri's perspective and Li and Tang's inform the current analysis: the former explains the need to include this cluster, and the latter helps identify what it means in practice.

The value of empathy lies in providing leaders with information that would otherwise be unavailable, especially during periods of difficulty and change, when people are unlikely to report their state. If a leader recognises the feelings of frustration, overload, and exclusion, he/she can address them. Then, relationship-building makes the influence sustainable by grounding it in accumulated trust rather than in charisma and authority. Teams anticipating support can tolerate greater ambiguity before disengaging.

Based on the above relationship, the following hypothesis was formulated. Hypothesis 1: Leader soft skills, measured as an integrated behavioural repertoire, are positively related to leadership effectiveness.

3.2 Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is a criterion problem as much as a construct. Northouse (2021) defines leadership as influence directed toward a common goal, leaving effectiveness to be judged by whichever outcome the observer selects: follower satisfaction, performance, trust, cooperation, learning, innovation, commitment, or organisational results. The choice is consequential because soft skills do not relate equally to all of them. Skills that improve satisfaction need not improve performance, and Harms and Credé's (2010) results suggest that some reported relationships hold mainly for perceptual criteria rated by the same person who rated the leader. This paper treats leadership effectiveness as a multi-criterion construct. It predicts effects on those outcomes that depend on team members contributing something they could withhold, which is where a climate mechanism would be expected to operate.

Transformational leadership theory provides the clearest account of how capability becomes influence. Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1994) describe four behaviour sets: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. It also has an analogue in terms of soft skills. Self-regulation and consistency are requirements for idealised influence; meaningful communication is required for inspirational motivation; openness to being proven wrong is required for intellectual stimulation; and empathy and awareness of individuality are required for individualised consideration. The social exchange theory is another way to interpret transformational leadership. In the classic formulation from Blau (1964), as well as in the more up-to-date one by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), relationships build through mutual obligation, and respectful communication and conflict management lead to cooperation. There is a difference between the two theories in what

produces the effect: transformational leadership concerns the leader's behaviour and how followers perceive it, while social exchange concerns obligations between the two sides. This will be explained in Section 4.5, which explains why the former is used as a primary model.

The competence perspective adds a new dimension by viewing soft skills not as inherent to an individual but as trainable. Both AbuJbara and Worley (2018) and Westover (2020) state that people management, ethical communication, and change management, along with technical skills, are increasingly evaluated when leaders are assessed by their organisations. However, if soft skills were fixed attributes, the implications of using such a framework would be selection. Competencies, in turn, can be developed, which is what organisations want to achieve.

3.3 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety has become the leading candidate mechanism connecting leader behaviour to what teams actually do. According to Edmondson (1999), psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe taking interpersonal risks. This definition is necessarily collective, as it describes a shared belief about how the specific group would behave. Even capable and motivated individuals may choose not to ask questions, apologise for mistakes, or present unfinished ideas because of fear of embarrassment. Edmondson and Lei (2014) trace the construct to work published in the 1960s and attribute its revival to the shift towards interdependent knowledge work, in which the cost of silence rose.

Two distinctions have proved important. Psychological safety is not trust. Edmondson (2008) treats trust as dyadic and focused on expectations about a specific other, whereas psychological safety describes a group-level climate in which a team can trust its leader yet still suppress dissent among its members. Nor is it comfort; Edmondson (2012) argues that psychological safety supports learning and innovation because it permits disagreement, not because it removes it. Newman, Donohue and Eva (2017) qualify both claims in their systematic review, pointing to inconsistencies in whether the construct is measured at the individual or team level and to the difficulty this poses for comparing findings across studies. That inconsistency is unresolved, and it is a reason to state the hypotheses below at a specified level of analysis rather than leaving the level implicit.

Leadership behaviours of the kind described in section 3.1 are among the strongest known antecedents. Frazier et al. (2017), in a meta-analysis of 136 independent samples covering more than 22,000 individuals, found supportive leader relationships and leader inclusiveness to be among the strongest predictors of psychological safety, ahead of most structural and individual factors. Individual studies converge on the same conclusion by different routes. Li and Tang (2022) attribute the effect to inclusive leader behaviour; Winarto (2018) to transformational leadership; Miao et al. (2018) and Hu et al. (2014) to entrepreneurial leadership; and Wong et al. (2010) to leaders' values of participation. The styles differ; the behaviours they share do not. Each involves listening, accessibility, and a measured response to error. This convergence is what justifies treating soft skills, rather than any particular style, as the antecedent of interest. Regarding the dimension of outcomes, there is a broader but inconsistent evidence base. According to Ashauer and Macan (2013), leaders' mastery goals are linked with learning behaviour in the presence of psychological safety. Behaviours associated with integration mediate the relationship between psychological safety and a management team's effectiveness, according to Mogård

et al. (2022). Jha (2019) shows that psychological safety affects team performance through learning orientation, while Fransen et al. (2020) link identity leadership, mediated by psychological safety, to teamwork, resilience, and athletes' well-being on sports teams. Frazier et al. (2017) shed further light on the matter, providing relevant information for the current theoretical approach: psychological safety is strongly associated with engagement, satisfaction, and commitment, but less so with task performance. The underlying mechanism operates through discretionary rather than mandated behaviour, which aligns with the logic provided above.

3.4 Team Virtuality

Virtuality of teams denotes the degree of dispersion within a team and the reliance on technology rather than face-to-face communication. According to Bell and Kozlowski (2002), virtuality is a continuum rather than an either/or phenomenon. Based on this view, Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) refine the concept of virtuality to include the information content of the technologies used by the team and the synchronicity of communication among team members. This point is especially relevant in the current case. On the geographic definition, a co-located team that works through written channels is not virtual; on Kirkman and Mathieu's definition, it is. The second is more useful for the present argument, because what constrains the display of soft skills is the channel rather than the distance.

Virtuality bears on leadership by changing what followers can observe. Co-located work conveys meaning through timing, availability, informal contact, and nonverbal responses, as well as through explicit messages. Mediated work strips out much of that. Petska and Berge (2009) identify deliberate compensation for the loss of physical presence as a core virtual leadership competency. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) found that higher virtuality weakened the relationship between hierarchical leadership and team performance, while structural supports became more important, suggesting that leadership's role changes rather than ceases to matter.

Other studies report the same context-sensitivity. Jury (2008) found that virtuality alters the relationships between leader behaviours and outcomes such as trust and role clarity, both of which are products of soft-skill use. Tyran and Tyran (2008) argue that virtual team leaders must reallocate their attention because technology limits which leadership functions they can perform directly. Wilson et al. (2021) show that leadership emerges differently in virtual and face-to-face teams, and Shen et al. (2025) show that the communication channel changes which personality characteristics predict leadership over time.

Four mechanisms would account for attenuation. Empathy becomes harder to exercise because text carries almost no affective information, and video carries less than presence. Informal contact declines, and with it the incidental observation through which leaders detect problems; West (2017) shows that poorly designed virtual meetings degrade relationship quality, which makes meeting structure a leadership instrument rather than an administrative matter. Misreading becomes more likely, since brevity in text is easily taken for indifference. Moreover, identity and cohesion are harder to sustain. Op't Roodt et al. (2021) found that identity leadership reduced subgroup formation in diverse virtual teams.

That last finding points to a disagreement in the literature, which should be stated plainly rather than passed over. Purvanova and Bono (2009) found that transformational leadership had a stronger effect on team performance in virtual teams than in face-to-face ones, and that the most effective leaders were those who increased their transformational behaviour when working virtually. Purvanova and Kenda (2022), meta-analysing 73 samples of organisational teams, concluded that virtuality is not a direct input to team effectiveness at all. Read together, these results support a compensation account rather than an attenuation account: relational behaviour may be scarcer in mediated settings and therefore more consequential when it does occur. The two accounts cannot be reconciled by argument, and the framework below is written so that they generate opposite signs on the same interaction term.

Media richness is what empirically separates them. Daft and Lengel (1986) define richness as the capacity of a channel to carry information that can resolve ambiguity and rank channels accordingly, with face-to-face contact at the top and unaddressed written documents at the bottom. Nguyen and Bell (2023) argue that the dimensions of virtuality have distinct consequences and that richness matters most for leadership. If the loss of relational cues drives attenuation, it should be strongest where media are leanest and should weaken as richness rises. With compensation as the dominant model, richness would have less impact, as it would depend on the leader's effort rather than on the information communicated through the medium. Treating virtuality as a single variable ignores this fact; treating richness as a moderating variable makes it testable.

3.5 Synthesis of the Literature

Three findings can be drawn from the reviewed literature, but one issue remains contentious. The first finding states that soft skills are always correlated with leadership effectiveness, but this correlation is not explained and is exaggerated when both the skill and effectiveness are rated by the same person (Harms & Credé, 2010). The second finding reveals that psychological safety is the most proven mediator. The behaviours of leaders who listen, include people in the process, and respond appropriately to their mistakes predict psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017), which, in turn, predicts learning, voice, and innovation better than task completion alone. The third finding suggests that virtuality influences the relationship between leader behaviour and results (Hoch & Kozłowski, 2014; Jury, 2008; Shen et al., 2025), although there is no consensus on the mechanisms by which this occurs. There is only one issue of contention regarding the direction of influence. Cue-loss reasoning predicts that mediation weakens the effect of relational behaviour; Purvanova and Bono (2009) and Purvanova and Kenda (2022) report evidence to the contrary. Nothing in the existing literature settles this, partly because studies rarely measure virtuality as a graded property and rarely separate its dimensions.

What is missing is an account connecting the three conclusions. Most studies examine one skill, one style, or one context. Few models a combination of soft skills that operate on effectiveness through a team climate, whose strength depends on the communication conditions under which the team works. That is the framework set out below.

4. Theoretical Foundations

The framework draws on four theories, each doing work the others cannot. Emotional intelligence theory specifies the capabilities. Transformational leadership theory explains how capability translates into observable behaviour. Psychological safety theory specifies the team-level process that behaviour sets in motion. Virtual team theory specifies the conditions under which the process is constrained. Section 4.5 explains why two obvious alternatives were not adopted as primary foundations.

4.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory supplies the link between capability and influence. Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1994) hold that effective leaders work through purpose, modelled values, intellectual challenge, and individualised attention rather than through transaction and formal authority. These behaviours are soft skills in action: idealised influence requires self-regulation and consistency; inspirational motivation requires emotionally intelligent communication; intellectual stimulation requires openness to challenge; and individualised consideration requires empathy. In this reading, soft skills are not adjacent to leadership behaviour; they are its content. The theory is used here solely for that translation function, not as a claim that transformational leadership is the effective style.

4.2 Emotional Intelligence Theory

Emotional intelligence theory specifies what must be present for those behaviours to be available. Goleman (1998) holds that effective performance draws on the regulation and understanding of emotion in oneself and others, as well as on cognitive ability. It is valuable because it separates internal regulation from external social action: a leader who cannot control his/her own feelings of anger and defensiveness will always struggle to communicate effectively when under stress, regardless of their intentions. Mayer et al.'s (2008) objection to mixed models is accepted to this extent: emotional intelligence enters the framework as a capacity expressed in behaviour rather than as a trait with direct effects on outcomes.

4.3 Psychological Safety Theory

Psychological safety theory supplies the intervening mechanism. Edmondson (1999, 2008) holds that team performance depends in part on whether members believe the group is safe for interpersonal risk. The behaviours at issue all require exposure: stating an opinion, disagreeing, asking for help, admitting that one does not know. The theory claims that the climate governing those behaviours is produced rather than given, and that leaders' conduct is among its strongest producers.

4.4 Virtual Team Theory

Virtual team theory supplies the boundary condition. Leadership influence travels through a communication structure, and that structure varies. A leader may be skilled and still fail to convey support if the channel cannot carry social presence or spontaneous exchange. Bell and Kozlowski (2002), Kirkman and Mathieu (2005), and Daft and Lengel (1986) between them provide the reason to

expect virtuality to moderate both the direct path and the first stage of the indirect path: the issue is that skills depend on relational information, and richness determines how much of it arrives.

The process works as follows. The ability is explained by emotional intelligence theory, the behaviour by transformational leadership theory, the climate by psychological safety theory, and the conditions by virtual team theory, all of which limit the transfer process. These theories are at different stages of the same process, which explains their synergy rather than competition.

4.5 Explanation for Choosing These Theories Among Others

Leader–member exchange theory and social exchange theory are the main competitors and were considered. Leader–member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) explains leadership influence through the quality of the individual relationships a leader forms, and differentiation between those relationships is central to its predictions. That is precisely why it is not used here as the primary foundation. Psychological safety is a shared property of a team. In contrast, leader–member exchange is dyadic, and a leader can maintain high-quality exchanges with several members. In contrast, the team as a whole remains unsafe for anyone to speak in. Building the framework on a dyadic theory would misalign the level of explanation with that of the mechanism.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) has the opposite difficulty. It is compatible with the framework and supplies a plausible motivational account of why members reciprocate respectful treatment, but it is general enough to accommodate almost any pattern of results. Cropanzano and Mitchell themselves note that its conceptual ambiguities leave tests of it underspecified. It is therefore used as supporting reasoning in section 3.2 rather than as a foundation, because it does not generate the differential predictions that distinguish this framework from its rivals.

Two further candidates were set aside for shorter reasons. Trait approaches cannot accommodate the developmental claims that follow from treating soft skills as competencies. Contingency theories address the fit between leadership style and situation but say nothing about team climate, which is where the mechanism proposed here operates. Leader–member exchange remains the most useful of the alternatives, and section 6.3 identifies a design that would allow the dyadic and climate accounts to be compared directly.

5. Conceptual Framework Development and Hypotheses

5.1 Direct Relationship Between Leader Soft Skills and Leadership Effectiveness

The direct path is the least contentious element of the framework, but it needs to be stated with more precision than the literature usually affords it. Two claims have to be separated. The first question is whether the repertoire described in section 3.1 relates to leadership effectiveness at all, i.e., the total effect. The second is what remains of that relationship once team psychological safety enters the model: the residual direct effect. Hypothesis 1 addresses the first. The second follows from Hypothesis 2 and is treated in section 5.2.

Three routes would carry an effect that does not pass through team climate. Soft skills operate dyadically as well as collectively, so a leader who reads an individual's difficulty and reallocates work accordingly improves that person's output whether or not the team as a whole believes it is safe to speak. Soft skills also lower coordination costs, since clear expectations reduce rework, and early intervention in disagreements keeps effort from being diverted to positioning. Section 3.1 identified a third route, in which empathy supplies information about frustration, overload, and exclusion that members would not volunteer, allowing a leader to act on a problem before it registers in performance data. None of these requires a shared climate as an intervening step.

The framework does not predict a large direct effect. If the argument in section 5.2 holds, most of what soft skills accomplish runs through the collective inference a team draws about the consequences of exposure, and the residual path should be small for outcomes that depend on discretionary contribution. A substantial direct effect surviving the entry of psychological safety would count against the mechanism proposed here rather than in favour of the framework as a whole. Saying so in advance matters, because the alternative is a model in which any pattern of results can be read as confirmation.

Criterion choice conditions the expected size. Section 3.2 treats leadership effectiveness as a multicriteria construct and reserves the strongest predictions for outcomes that require team members to contribute something they could withhold. Perceptual criteria behave differently. Where subordinates rate both the leader's interpersonal conduct and the leader's effectiveness, a shared evaluative disposition inflates the association, which is what Harms and Credé (2010) show when the estimate falls from .59 to .12 across rating sources. Hypothesis 1 is therefore a claim about the total effect, estimated with effectiveness measured independently of the source rating of soft skills. A test using single-source data estimates something the hypothesis does not assert.

Soft skills enter as an integrated repertoire rather than as five separate predictors, as defended in section 6.1. The clusters draw on a common capacity for perceiving and regulating social interaction, and they are exercised and observed together. Entering them separately would reproduce the redundancy familiar from studies that regress heavily overlapping competencies on a single outcome and then read unstable or suppressed coefficients as evidence about which skill matters most.

Hypothesis 1: Leader soft skills, measured as an integrated behavioural repertoire, are positively related to leadership effectiveness.

5.2 Psychological Safety as a Mediator

The following hypothesis refers to the underlying mechanism. Soft skills do not matter because they make a leader nice, but because they create a climate of shared beliefs about the outcome of speaking openly. Inquiring communication, empathy for an individual's difficulties, managing conflict as information rather than disobedience, and adapting to the person rather than the situation—these repeated behaviours become the evidence from which a team draws its conclusion about its safety. And thus, psychological safety embodies this shared conclusion.

Mediation is expected because the outcomes associated with effective leadership usually require personal risks from team members. Innovation requires an open disclosure of an incomplete idea; learning requires an admission of ignorance; coordination requires help; preventing errors requires reporting a problem that is still small enough to be solved by an individual. A leader who does not create a climate for such actions will be unable to achieve outcomes that depend on them, regardless of their strategy and techniques. Both parts of this chain of reasoning are supported by Frazier et al. (2017). However, the stronger relationship between psychological safety and discretionary activities, rather than tasks, implies that the indirect effect should be larger for learning and innovation than for performance indicators. Partial rather than full mediation is therefore expected. The routes set out in section 5.1 do not run through team climate, so a direct path should remain once psychological safety is entered, smaller than the indirect path for learning, voice, and innovative performance, and comparatively larger for task criteria that members cannot easily withhold.

Hypothesis 2: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between leaders' soft skills and leader effectiveness.

The indirect effect does not end with psychological safety. Edmondson (1999) links it to learning activities; Wong et al. (2010) and Jha (2019) link it to learning and team performance; Li and Tang (2022), Miao et al. (2018), and Hu et al. (2014) link it to innovative performance. Thus, it makes sense to consider psychological safety not as an end result but as a climate for these activities, thereby justifying the formulation of the second hypothesis in two parts.

Hypothesis 2a: The indirect effect of leader soft skills on leadership effectiveness is realised through psychological safety and team processes supported by it, such as team learning, voice behaviour, and innovative performance.

5.3 Team Virtuality as a Moderator

Team virtuality is used as a moderator for both the direct effect and the first part of the indirect effect. First, let us discuss the direct effect. In in-person teams, soft skills are communicated through a wide range of signals: tone, timing, the leader's presence during difficult moments, and spontaneous communication. Mediated interaction decreases the number of such signals, leaving a narrower list of communications. Reducing signals will reduce the influence of soft skills on effectiveness if that influence depends on observing them. This prediction is included in the model.

What would refute it explicitly? Purvanova and Bono (2009) observed the opposite result for transformational leadership, which they explained by the fact that the value of signals is higher when they are scarce: when relational signals are rare, a leader who sends them attracts more attention than when such signals are always sent. If this mechanism holds, the coefficient in Hypothesis 3 will be positive. The hypothesis is formulated in this direction because the theory of cue loss has wider acceptance in virtual leadership research (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Jury, 2008; Tyran & Tyran, 2008); however, the alternative remains possible, and the test is simple.

The first stage of the indirect effect is expected to be more sensitive to virtuality than the direct effect for this specific reason. Psychological safety is based on behavioural evidence: how a leader reacts to disagreements, the emergence of problems, and questions that reveal gaps. In mediated interactions, these reactions become more compact and without cues for their interpretation. Pausing before answering has different meanings in a meeting and in a message thread. Silence can mean disagreement, distraction, or a bad connection, and team members have no way to distinguish among these possibilities. In case of ambiguous evidence, members are cautious by default.

A leader can compensate for this problem, but the compensation requires effort: explicitly explaining what was meant to be implicit, reacting to disclosure rather than receiving the information, and engaging in additional informal contacts that would not otherwise occur. The prediction does not imply a decrease in the importance of soft skills in virtual teams; rather, the same level of soft skills yields lower psychological safety due to channel limitations.

Hypothesis 3: Team virtuality moderates the relationship between leader soft skills and leader effectiveness, such that the positive relationship weakens as virtuality grows.

Hypothesis 4: Team virtuality moderates the indirect effect of leader soft skills on leader effectiveness via psychological safety, such that the positive effect of soft skills on psychological safety diminishes as virtuality increases.

5.4 Integrated Moderated Mediation Framework

Virtuality is not uniform, and the last hypothesis addresses its variation. Teams vary in communication channels. Some mostly use email and messaging; others prefer video conferences and shared workspaces that more closely resemble co-presence. Daft and Lengel (1986) rank channels by their capacity to resolve ambiguity, which determines the extent to which a leader's actions reach the team. Where richness is high, tone, timing, facial response, and the willingness to be interrupted remain visible, and the attenuation predicted in Hypothesis 4 should be modest. Where teams work through lean asynchronous text, it should be pronounced. Media richness, therefore, conditions the moderation rather than exerting an effect of its own, making Hypothesis 5 a three-way interaction and placing a corresponding demand on sample size.

Hypothesis 5: Media richness conditions the moderating effect of virtuality, such that the weakening of the path from soft skills to psychological safety is less pronounced when richer communication media are used.

Taken together, the five hypotheses specify a moderated mediation model in which the indirect effect of leader soft skills on leadership effectiveness through psychological safety is conditional on team virtuality, and in which the strength of that conditioning depends on media richness. Figure 1 presents the model.

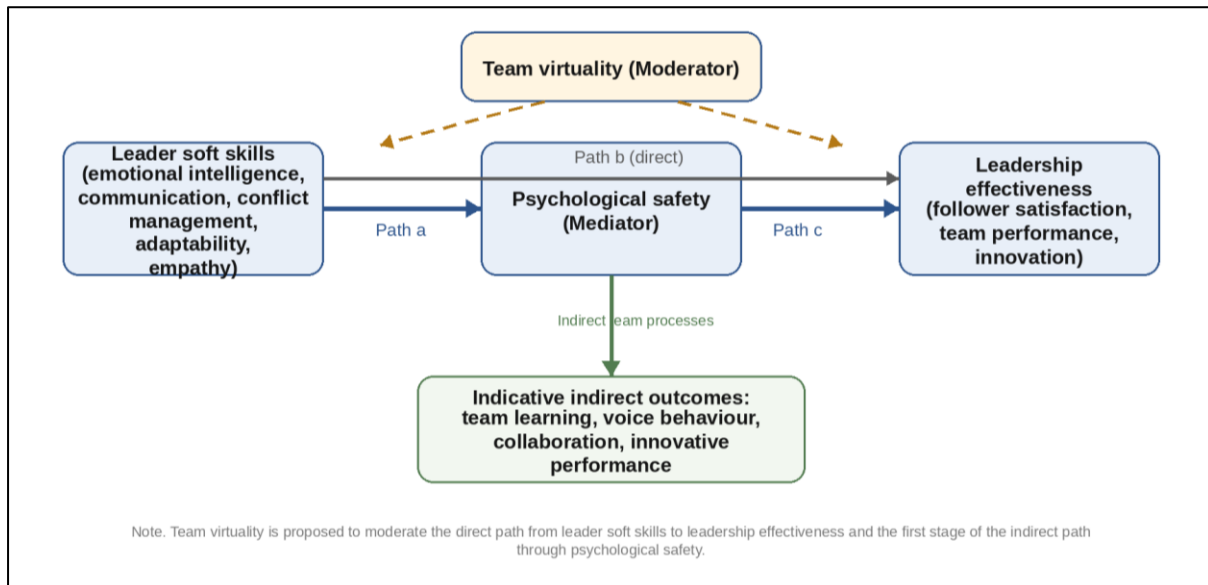


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework linking leader soft skills, psychological safety, team virtuality, and leadership effectiveness.

6. Discussion and implications

6.1 Theoretical contribution

The framework makes four contributions to the leadership literature.

It treats soft skills as an integrated behavioural repertoire rather than as a list of desirable attributes. Leaders do not influence teams through isolated competencies; emotional intelligence, communication, adaptability, empathy, and conflict management are exercised and observed in concert. Modelling them as a repertoire also avoids the redundancy problem that arises when heavily overlapping skills are entered as separate predictors.

It specifies a mechanism that the literature has generally asserted. Psychological safety is not an incidental by-product of considerate leadership. It is the team-level inference through which relational behaviour becomes collective action, and it is measurable independently of both the leader and the outcome. That independence matters given Harms and Credé's (2010) demonstration of how far same-source ratings inflate the direct association. In other words, the criterion of virtuality in the text is stated using the graded approach instead of the categorical one. The concept of virtuality is understood as an aspect of communication rather than a category of a team, and richness is decoupled from dispersion, allowing the model to distinguish between dispersed but richly connected teams and co-located teams that mostly communicate via text. The section presents an empirically testable statement amidst a contentious academic discourse. The attenuation and compensation views on virtual leadership predict different outcomes for the same interaction: the former is supported by the framework, while the latter has its predicted results defined. An invulnerable-from-errors conceptual contribution is not very

valuable from a scientific point of view, and the value of the contribution made by the author is that Hypotheses 3 to 5 can be wrong.

6.2 Practical Implications

From a leadership development perspective, the framework entails rethinking training content and the way outcomes are measured. Traditional programs generally offer training on soft skills, viewed as generalised interpersonal skills, and then measure progress through self-reporting at the end of a workshop. If the process works as suggested, then it becomes necessary to focus not on the skill but on the climate generated by the skill and, moreover, to consider the corresponding criterion a team-based measure based on the team, not the leader. The seven-item questionnaire developed by Edmondson (1999) is short enough to serve as a pulse check and to provide a reasonably defensible composite score, provided that the standard agreement statistics are validated. A program based on the outlined logic should include an initial measurement before training and repeat the same measurement after three and six months. Any changes in the team score will become the measure of performance.

As a result, the content of a program of this type should change as well. There are three types of behaviour which make up the lion's share of the variability that can be controlled by the leader. First, reaction to errors: a single negative response to reporting an error can undo all the good work done previously; role-playing different situations is much more useful than just active listening. Secondly, inviting people to speak out – this request has to be very specific to appear credible; asking people how they will voice their disagreement if they believe the decision is wrong is better than just asking whether there are any doubts. Thirdly, expressing uncertainty about the correctness of your decision yourself determines the acceptable level of risk. All those actions are observable, can be practised using a script, and can be measured by the team, not the leader.

For human resources practice, the framework suggests a diagnostic instrument. Underperforming teams are usually perceived as evidence of either poor judgment or inadequate understanding of strategy on the part of the leader. The framework also offers another hypothesis to test: that the team's climate makes it impossible for people to voice what they know. A low psychological safety score alongside adequate individual capability points to a behavioural problem rather than a capability problem, and the two call for different remedies. The same logic applies to selection and promotion. Where a role involves leading dispersed teams, evidence of relational conduct under mediated conditions is more relevant than a general interview impression, and a structured behavioural assessment drawing on the candidate's past mediated work is more informative than a competency rating derived from their own account.

In managing virtual teams, communication design becomes a leadership responsibility rather than an administrative one. Organisations operating at high virtuality can act directly on three things. Channel policy should match richness to purpose: decisions with a personal or evaluative element belong in synchronous video or voice rather than in written threads, and a stated policy removes an ambiguity that individual leaders would otherwise resolve inconsistently. Meeting design should protect interactions that no longer occur spontaneously, which means scheduling both unstructured contact and agenda-driven meetings; West's (2017) findings on the relational cost of poorly designed virtual

meetings apply directly here. Response norms should be made explicit because the interpretive burden that silence imposes in mediated settings is a design problem with a design solution: a stated expectation about response times converts an ambiguous silence into an unremarkable one.

6.3 Research Agenda

The framework is stated in a way that it can be tested, and the design requirements follow from its structure. Because the model spans leader behaviour, team climate, and team outcomes, it requires multilevel data: soft skills rated by team members; psychological safety aggregated to the team, with the agreement and reliability checks Klein and Kozlowski (2000) specify; and effectiveness assessed independently of both. Conditional process analysis, as set out by Hayes (2018), will estimate the moderated mediation directly, though Hypothesis 5 implies a three-way interaction, and the sample size needed to detect it is considerably larger than what most virtual team studies have achieved. Soft skills measurement, to the extent possible, should not utilise self-reports because of Harms and Credé's (2010) work on same-source bias. Coding observer recordings of interactions, as Purvanova and Bono (2009) did, is the better measure when resources are available.

There are three promising areas for future research. First, an experiment that manipulates media richness while keeping the leader and task constant will provide better differentiation between compensation and attenuation accounts than a field study comparing virtual and co-located teams, which confounds the two concepts. Second, a longitudinal study will establish whether psychological safety builds up gradually or changes in response to specific events, thereby providing insight into the nature of development efforts. Finally, a study measuring both leader-member exchange and team psychological safety will determine whether the climate account is more powerful than the dyadic one and help address the primary question of the framework's distinctiveness. Moreover, there is a need for cross-situational validation of the framework. The vast majority of the evidence for the framework comes from studies in North American and European organisations, but Phiri's (2025) argument about the differential importance of empathy in African public-sector organisations implies that antecedent relationships may not be universal. Comparative work across public, private, and non-profit organisations and cultural settings would establish the framework's scope. Followers' prior experience of mediated work and their expectations about it are likely individual-level contingencies worth modelling explicitly rather than treating as noise.

7. Conclusion

Effective leadership involves more than judgement and technical command of a domain. It also involves establishing the conditions under which a team will contribute what it knows. This paper has argued that leaders' soft skills, understood as an integrated repertoire covering emotional regulation, communication, conflict handling, adaptability, and empathy, affect leadership effectiveness both directly and through the psychological safety their conduct produces, and that the strength of that process depends on how much relational information the team's communication channels carry.

The theoretical contribution lies in the specification rather than in the assembly. Locating the effect of soft skills in a team climate that can be measured independently addresses the common-method problem

that has weakened this literature. Virtuality, as a variable continuum along the lines of communication, rather than an independent form of team, allows testing of the boundary condition. Stating the moderating influence directionally and specifying the evidence that would falsify it predetermines the result and does not allow for a flexible outcome based on results. All that remains is empirical analysis. The multilevel approach, including ratings of team soft skills, aggregation of psychological safety, independent measurement of team effectiveness, and assessment of virtuality through richness, rather than dispersion, will test all five hypotheses at once. Should Hypotheses 3 and 4 prove themselves incorrect in the direction predicted by Purvanova and Bono (2009), the mediation hypothesis would survive, demanding that the boundary condition be restated in terms of compensation rather than attenuation. In either case, more information is provided than is currently available, where both explanations are viable, and neither has yet been put at risk.

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