

Executive Summary

Teams Eat Culture for Breakfast

What 119 teams across 16 organisations actually show about Team Psychological Safety — and what it asks of leaders.

Cauwelier, P. (2026). *Teams Eat Culture for Breakfast*. TEAM.AS.ONE Working Paper. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21371825>



Psychological Safety lives at the level of a Team.

Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast.

However clever the strategy, it is the organisation's culture that determines whether it ever lands.

Widely attributed to Peter Drucker; no documented original source exists.

TEAM.AS.ONE

Teams Eat Culture for Breakfast.

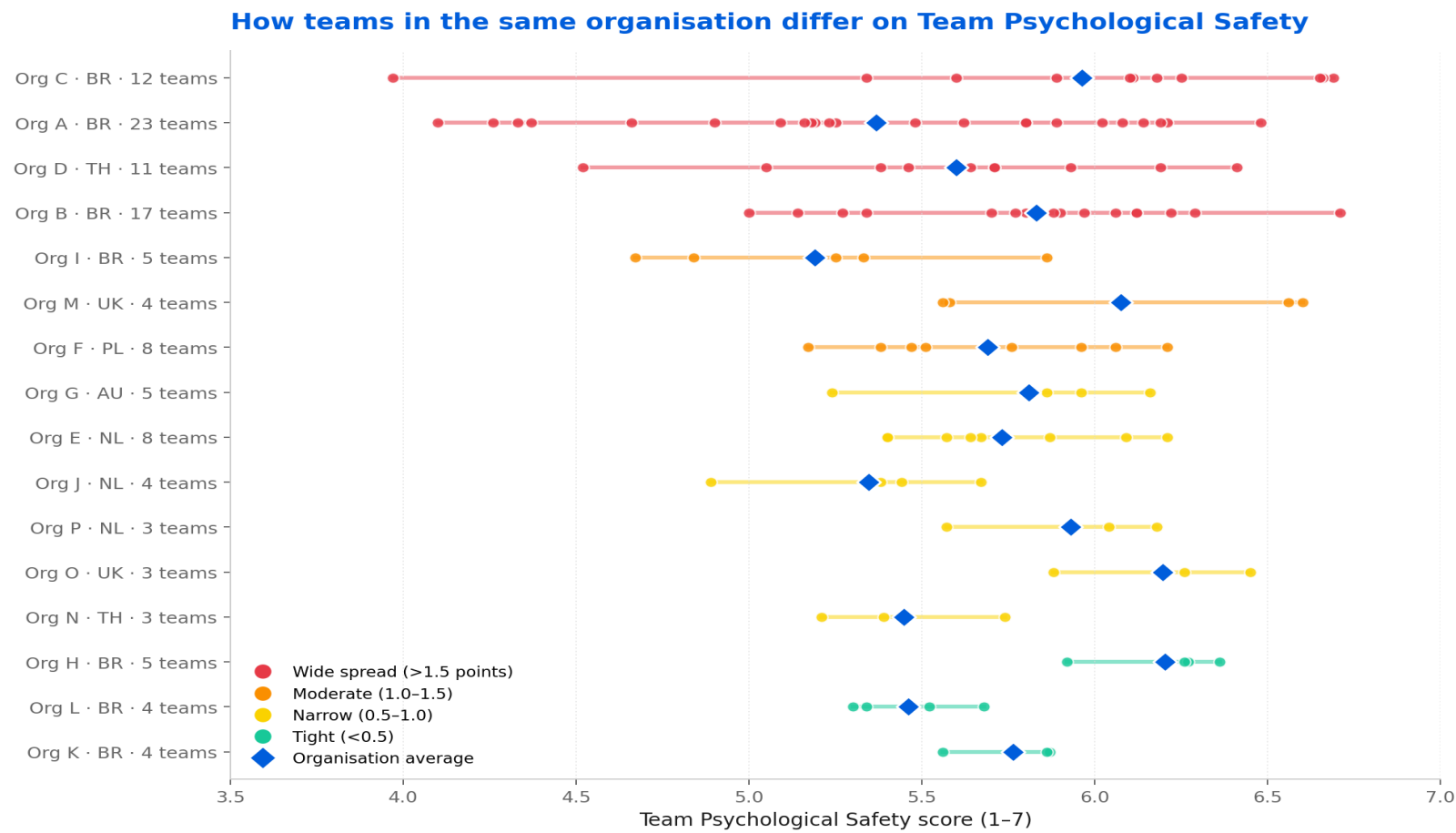
Engagement, motivation and performance live at the team level.
The team's micro-culture is the lived reality.

119 teams · 16 organisations · 6 countries · team psychological safety measured using Edmondson's original instrument.

Finding 1

Inside every organisation, teams differ a lot.

Every one of the 16 organisations shows a gap between its best and worst team when measuring team psychological safety. A small gap is the exception, not the rule.



Largest gap

2.72

equivalent to 2 different organisations · Organisation C, BR

Average gap

1.08

the mean across the 16 organisations

Tightest gap

0.31

the exception, not the rule Organisation K, BR

The organisation's average tells you nothing.

Correlation between an organisation's average score and its team-to-team gap

$r = -0.12$ · essentially no relationship

HIGH-SCORING ORGANISATIONS

can still contain a two-point gap between their best and worst team.

LOWER-SCORING ORGANISATIONS

can be remarkably consistent across all their teams.

The right question is "How are our teams?" — not "How is our culture?"

Finding 3

Behind every team's micro-culture is a leader.

Reading the verbatim from highest- and lowest-scoring teams in the same organisation, one pattern repeats.

HIGH-SCORING TEAMS

credit a leader explicitly.

“My director shares the decisions that affect our day-to-day. She also listens to our ideas and needs and escalates them when necessary.”

— Highest-scoring team, Organisation C, Brazil

“Yes — especially my manager. He addresses delicate topics carefully and without threats.”

— Highest-scoring team, Organisation A, Brazil

LOW-SCORING TEAMS

describe a leader-shaped vacuum.

“What we lack is to actually see ourselves as a team, and not as the people who follow [the leader].”

— Lowest-scoring team, Organisation C, Brazil

“The team members are not a problem, but the leader has high standards and pursuit of perfection that create a stressful environment.”

— Leadership team, Organisation D, Thailand

For the five widest-spread organisations: no low-scoring team praised its leader, no high-scoring team criticised its leader.

Three things follow from the data.

01

Measure at the team level.

The organisation's average can look fine (5.96) while one team inside is scoring very low (3.97 – Organisation C, Brazil). The organisation-level number is too smooth to be useful.

02

Watch Reaction to Mistakes first.

Of the seven elements that make up Team Psychological Safety, this is the most informative signal — strongest correlation with overall team-to-team safety disparity ($r = 0.83$). It bends first under pressure.

03

Hold the leader's behaviour as the principal variable.

Of the five foundations of Team Psychological Safety, leader behaviour is the single most impactful. The verbatim confirms it across all wide-spread organisations.

Take a closer look at what happens in the different teams in your organisation, and focus your efforts there.