

The role of psychological safety, communication climate, and employee engagement in preventing formal industrial disputes



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Abstract

This study examines how workplace-level organizational dynamics contribute to sustainable entrepreneurship and enterprise resilience in emerging economies, with specific focus on Indian manufacturing SMEs. Drawing on theories of psychological safety, employee engagement, and communication climate, the research explores how these internal factors influence the escalation of workplace grievances into formal industrial disputes and, in turn, affect long-term organizational sustainability. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups with employees, supervisors, and union representatives informed the development of context-specific measures, which were subsequently tested through a survey of manufacturing employees. The findings reveal that psychological safety and a supportive communication climate significantly enhance employee engagement and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation. Importantly, these workplace conditions foster trust, collaboration, and efficient conflict resolution, thereby strengthening firm-level stability, productivity, and sustainable growth. By positioning workplace climate as a strategic organizational capability, this study contributes to the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship by demonstrating how internal relational dynamics support resilience and value creation in SME contexts. The results also highlight the importance of inclusive and participatory management practices in shaping sustainable enterprise outcomes in Asia's emerging economies. The study offers practical implications for entrepreneurs, managers, and policymakers seeking to promote sustainable, inclusive, and conflict-resilient business environments.

Keywords: Sustainable Entrepreneurship; SMEs in Emerging Economies; Psychological Safety; Employee Engagement; Organizational Sustainability

Introduction

The fact that industrial conflict has been a characteristic of the employment relations in the contexts where there are elaborate institutional and legal frameworks to address disputes is a persistence issue. The Indian government has developed effective systems to solve workplace disputes in the form of conciliation, arbitration and adjudication through the industrial disputes act of 1947 and later labor reforms. Regardless of such provisions, industrial conflicts such as strikes, lockouts, and formal legal proceedings remain very frequent occurrences in the manufacturing industry, with the resulting impacts of productivity losses, poor labor-management relationship and the overall economic impacts. This continuity indicates that industrial conflict is not completely explained by the fact of the failure of formal establishments but should also be considered through the prism of the daily workplace processes, such as communication patterns, trust, and the grievance-managing processes (Bailey et al., 2017).

Industrial disputes in the new economy like India are a challenge to labor relations as well as a key impediment to sustainable enterprise development. This is especially important in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurial companies, which have limited resources and are often informal in terms of the dispute-resolution mechanisms. Workplace climate in these situations becomes a major predictor of organizational stability since internal processes often take the place of formal institutionalized governance. Studies have emphasized that sustainable performance within SMEs is closely associated with safety and well-being of employees in the workplace as well as internal organizational practices (Abbas et al., 2025; Caputo et al., 2024). Therefore, it is necessary to know the effects of factors involved in the workplace that contribute to rise of grievances in the work place as a way of fostering industrial harmony as well as business sustainability in the long run. The prevailing literature on industrial relations emphasizes that typical work-based disputes

manifest as a result of daily problems at work like supervisory attitudes, workload stress, and inequities and failure to communicate effectively. Dispute escalation models indicate that the accumulated grievance may turn into collective action when the employees feel that there is no internal mechanism to handle the grievance and it is unfair. Employee engagement is a crucial element in the process, as engaged workers are more prone to adopt constructive problem-solving methods, while disengaged workers might endorse antagonistic behaviours (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2016). The terms under which employees decide to raise or not raise issues are important in hierarchical and labor-intensive industries such as manufacturing where power inequality and job insecurity are commonplace and an outbreak of conflicts may turn into formal disputes.

In recent scholarship, it is becoming more and more evident that the micro-level organizational processes are crucial in determining employee voice, trust, and collaboration. Psychological safety has become one of these crucial constructs, and it is described as a collective assumption that people will be able to raise issues, report an error, and provide feedback without fear of being penalized. Despite its popularity in the literature on organizational behavior, its contribution to engagement and positive performance in the workplace has been extensively recognized (Bailey et al., 2017).

Tightly linked is the notion of communication climate which shows how organizational communication is open, transparent, and is seen as fair. Good communication may foster trust and enable early resolution of problems whereas poor communication can result into lack of understanding, dissatisfaction and mobilization. In a similar fashion, employee engagement, defined as a good and active relationship with work and organization, may also have an impact on how employees will deal with grievance in a constructive or adversarial way. This is especially applicable to organizations that aim to achieve long-term sustainability and viable performance (Abbas et al., 2025).

In addition to industrial relations, it has become increasingly apparent that the dynamics of the workplace have a strong connection with the wider discourse over sustainable entrepreneurship and organizational sustainability. The study of sustainable entrepreneurship highlights internal organizational capabilities and practices, which help to sustain long-term value creation and resiliency (Muñoz and Cohen, 2018). Also, the new studies bring to the fore the importance of innovation and organizational practices in solving sustainability issues (George et al., 2021).

The criticality of organizational context is further supported by the studies on entrepreneurial ecosystems, which indicate the impact of relationships, institutional structures, and organizational practices on the performance and sustainability of firms (Spigel, 2017; Stam and van de Ven, 2021). The internal workplace practices in emerging economies where institutional support might not be uniform, are even more important in determining organizational results. Past research on sustainable development and entrepreneurship also highlights the needs of ensuring that organizational and environmental objectives are combined in a manner that would lead to long term growth (Hall et al., 2010).

This paper fills this gap by considering the interaction between psychological safety and communication climate and employee engagement and their effects on whether or not grievances at work are escalated into formal industrial disputes in the Indian manufacturing industry. Their study is based on theories of conflict escalation, employee voice, psychological safety, and social exchange, and thus follows a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data of interviews and focus groups with a quantitative one of analyzing survey data. The study, by relating micro-level factors of climate in workplaces to the outcomes that have hitherto been analyzed at the institutional level, adds to the literature on industrial relations as well as sustainable enterprise. In particular, the study has three important contributions. First, it expands on the industrial relations theory by establishing psychological safety to be a cornerstone of employee voice and grievance management. Second, it incorporates organizational behavior insights by showing the effects of communication climate and employee engagement on the preferences of employees to informal or formal dispute resolution. Third, it presents empirical data of the Indian manufacturing sector which brings out the role of workplace dynamics in defining organizational resilience and sustainability within emerging economy setting.

This study, by linking the climate in the workplace to both the avoidance of disputes and the development of sustainable enterprises, can provide a number of valuable lessons to managers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, who are interested in developing stable, inclusive, and productive work environments.

2. Research context: Indian manufacturing

The manufacturing sector in India is marked by both capital and labor intensive manufacturing industries, high reliance on contract and casual labour as well as marked disparities in the employment relations at the regional and organizational levels. According to research

conducted by the official and academic sources, the problems with wages and allowance, working conditions, dismissal, rationalization and the existence of unions are common causes of industrial conflicts in this sector. These fights are very prevalent in some sub-sectors, including textiles, automobiles and engineering. The social and economic costs of such conflicts are significant, and they result in missed days of production, damaged reputations, and the after-effects on the workforce in the area.

The industrial dispute system of India is structured based on statutory methods like conciliation, voluntary arbitration and adjudication as outlined in the Industrial Disputes Act and other labor codes. Despite the stated objectives of these procedures to safeguard industrial peace, they are usually only used after the conflict situation has intensified, and the time and/or the perceived partiality of formal procedures may lead to further discontent. At individual work place level, most manufacturing facilities either have inadequate or poorly established grievance processes and the propensity of employees to utilize the grievances processes is highly influenced by their perception of fairness, the behavior of managers and the existence of unions.

Recent discussions about the Indian industrial sector demonstrate that there is an increasing issue with psychosocial risks and mental health in manufacturing. Workers are exposed to extended working hours, work pressure, safety issues and work insecurity. These situations may contribute to increased sensitivity to perceived injustice and exacerbate the effect of communication failures or uncivil behavior. Workers in the environment where the flow of information is limited, feedback mechanisms are not understood, and retaliation is perceived as possible, will choose to keep their complaints under wrap until it becomes critical, and then group or legal action becomes more appealing. It is this connection between formal and informal, context-specific practice, and this relationship that renders Indian manufacturing a key location in which one can examine the impacts of psychological safety, communication environment, and employee involvement on the dynamics of industrial conflict. It is noteworthy that a significant percentage of the manufacturing plants in India are SMEs or family owned businesses. Informal workplace practices and interpersonal relations in these kinds of environments have a great impact on organizational performances and thus a workplace climate is one of the main pre-requisites of long-term enterprise operation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study uses the sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach, which involves both qualitative and quantitative designs to examine how

psychological safety, communication climate and employee engagement impact the escalation of grievance into formal industrial disputes in the Indian manufacturing sector. Mixed methods are particularly appropriate in the case of industrial relations research, because conflict dynamics can be based on individual experience and institutional practice. The qualitative element was to comprehend the perception of different participants in the workplace in terms of grievance management and the dispute escalation, and the quantitative element was to evaluate the hypothetical connections between climate aspects at the workplace and outcome of disputes regarding a broader employee group.

3.2 Research context

The study was conducted in the Indian manufacturing sector which has been characterized by labour-intensive production process, hierarchical management systems, high dependence on contract worker, and dual grievance resolution system both formal and informal. The industrial disputes in this area are often caused by supervisory practices, wages, working conditions and job security issues. Data was collected in manufacturing plants located in the Peenya and Nelamangala industrial belts of Bengaluru, including firms belonging to the automotive components, textiles and engineering sub-sector that exhibit variation in size, unionisation and employment structures.

3.3 Qualitative phase

3.3.1 Sampling and participants

The qualitative stage employed purposive sampling to obtain a variety of opinions on grievance management and conflict escalation. The respondents included the shop-floor workers, line supervisors, human resource managers and the union or works committees. The selection measures were based on diversity in the employment conditions (permanent and contract), hierarchical level and participation in the union. This approach enabled triangulation of the various occupational jobs and reduced the chances of management and workers biasing the findings.

3.3.2 Data collection

The data collection will be done through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted between June and September 2025. The interviews were usually between 45-75 minutes and focused on the experiences associated with expressing grievances, the views of retaliating or supporting, forms of communication, and the channels through which workplace complaints remained informal or escalated into collective or formal conflict. All the interviews were conducted

with an informed consent and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data, with an iterative coding methodology. The first step of the open coding was to identify themes that kept reoccurring with regard to psychological safety, communication climate, and employee engagement and grievance escalation. These codes were further developed through axial coding to explain the relationships between factors of climate at workplace and dispute pathways. Member checks and researcher triangulation were used in order to enhance credibility. The results of the qualitative stage informed the changes in the survey items used in the quantitative stage, making them contextually pertinent to the Indian manufacturing context.

3.4 Quantitative phase

3.4.1 Survey instrument and measures

The quantitative survey employed the proven and tested scales that were modified to the Indian manufacturing context in accordance with the qualitative results. Psychological safety was measured using questions based on Edmondson scale that was adjusted to include items that measured the perceptions of the employees in terms of their safety when raising issues of concerns and mistakes. Items assessed the communication climate by assessing openness, supportiveness and clarity of communication at the organization. The items that measured employee engagement included feelings of vigor, commitment, and workplace absorption.

The results of the disputes were evaluated on two different levels. At an individual level, respondents reported how often they have grieved and how they think they will employ formal dispute process like union action, conciliation, or legal action. In cases where it is relevant, plant-level indicators (such as recent strikes, lockouts or officially registered dispute cases) were collected using managerial reports to supplement perceptual data.

Control variables were as follows; age, tenure, employment status (permanent or contract), union membership and organizational size. In cases where it was possible, perceptual measures were triangulated with plant-level measures of disputes (e.g., strikes or registered disputes) to increase validity. Everything was rated on five-point Likert-type scales. The survey instrument was pre-tested using a small sample of manufacturing employees to make it clear and contextually relevant.

3.4.2 Sample and data collection

Survey data were collected using 300 employees in the manufacturing industry using both paper-based and online surveys, depending on the availability of

the survey and the preference of the employees. Reaction was voluntary and the confidentiality was emphasized to overcome the fear of retaliation and social desirability bias. The surveys were done during out of working hours to reduce chances of any managerial influence on the surveys.

3.4.3 Analytical strategy

Data were run in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) and was implemented in SmartPLS/WarpPLS. PLS-SEM was selected due to the suitability of the research design to deal with prediction, complex mediation model, moderate sample size commonly used in studies involving industrial relations. The reliability was measured by the use of Cronbach alpha and composite reliability and convergent and discriminant validity were measured with average variance extracted (AVE) and the heterotrait monomethod (HTMT) ratios.

Hypotheses were tested using path coefficients, t-values and bootstrapped confidence intervals. Bias-corrected bootstrapping techniques were used to test the mediation effects. Robustness checks were done through the regression-based mediation analyses. All the analyses had taken into consideration relevant demographic and employment attributes.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The firm of research was ethically approved by the relevant industrial associations, which facilitated access to the firms. All participants gave informed consent prior to the start of data collection. The involvement was strictly optional and the respondents were assured that their identities and the answers would remain confidential and not be released to the employers or unions in a way that could identify them.

4 Findings

4.1 Qualitative findings

Interviews and focus groups revealed that grievances were frequently as a result of supervisory behavior, workload expectations, contract labor practices and perceived discrepancies in the application of rules. Respondents in facilities that had experienced

conflicts recently gave an account of an environment where there was fear and one-way communication, and this would lead to employees not facing problems directly with their supervisors but using informal group discussions or union membership. On the other hand, in facilities where a formal conflict had not occurred within the recent past, employees were more likely to report that they had access to supervisors, frequent meetings and that they clearly followed up on complaints, which promoted early expression and informal resolution. In different platforms, a lack of psychological security was associated with silence and indirect types of communication: employees expressed their fears about potential victimization, transfers, or even the termination of contracts in case employees challenged decisions, particularly when a high level of job insecurity existed.

On the other hand, where psychological safety was more prevalent, employees had a sense of empowerment to report their issues and errors, and managers reported that they used this to respond to workload, explain policies, and to intervene in interpersonal conflicts before they could get out of control. The communication climate became a key differentiator: those organizations that supported two-way communication and information transparency cultivated more trust and feelings of equity, whereas organizations characterized by ambiguous top-down communication experienced more rumors and mistrust, escalating conflicts.

Engaged employees (those who were proud of their organization and felt connected with their work) preferred negotiation and problem-solving tactics, and disengaged employees preferred confrontational tactics as the number of grievances grew.

4.2 Quantitative findings

The descriptive statistics indicated moderate scores of psychological safety, communication climate, and employee engagement, with a large difference in the results being witnessed among the various plants shown in Table 1. Correlation tests revealed that these constructs had a positive correlation with each other and had a negative relationship with the risk indicators of a dispute.

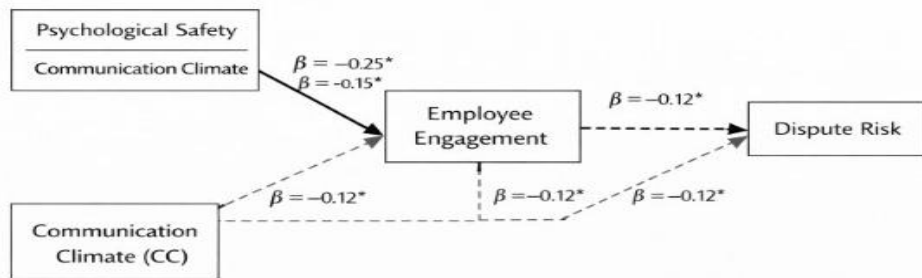
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations with Dispute Risk

Variable	N	M (SD)	R2 with Dispute Risk
Psychological Safety	300	3.9 (0.7)	-0.42*
Communication Climate	300	3.8 (0.8)	-0.38*
Employee Engagement	300	4.0 (0.6)	-0.45*

Perceived Likelihood of Disputes	300	2.3 (0.9)	—
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*p < 0.01

Regression analyses showed that psychological safety ($\beta = -0.25, p = 0.01$) and communication climate ($\beta = -0.21, p = 0.01$), had significant predictive ability of lower risk of dispute. Mediation analyses revealed that employee engagement had a partial mediation impact on these associations (indirect result = $-0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, -0.06]$). Plants that engaged in participatory communication and had greater psychological safety had lower levels of formal disputes is illustrated in Figure 1.



Note. Standardized regression coefficients are shown for each path. PS = Psychological Safety; CC \Rightarrow Communication Climate; EE = Employee Engagement; DR = Dispute Risk. Direct effects: PS \rightarrow DR ($\beta = -0.25$), CC \rightarrow DR ($\beta = -0.21$). Indirect effects via EE: PS \rightarrow EE \rightarrow DR ($\beta = -0.12$), CC \rightarrow EE \rightarrow DR ($\beta = -0.12$). $p < .01$ for all displayed paths.

Figure 1. Mediation model of workplace climate, engagement, and dispute risk.

Note. Additional variables, such as grievance frequency, strikes, and employee contract type, could be included in supplementary tables to provide a more comprehensive quantitative overview. Visual representations (e.g., bar charts or path diagrams) may aid in interpreting the correlations and mediation effects.

4.3 Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The qualitative and quantitative results emphasize the crucial importance of climate at workplace in avoiding conflicts. The qualitative narratives showed that the psychological safety and the communication climate influence the behavior of employees, and quantitative analyses proved that the negativity of the correlations between these constructs and the possibility of disputes is significant. Employee engagement was found to be a partial mediator between supportive environments and lower probability of escalation of a formal dispute.

The combined qualitative and quantitative results highlight the importance of climate in the workplace in averting conflicts. Qualitative narratives demonstrated the effect of psychological safety and communication climate on employee behavior, and quantitative analyses supported the hypothesis of strong negative relationships between these constructs and the risk of dispute. The employee engagement was found to be a partial mediator between the supportive environments and reduced chances of formal dispute escalation. These results also imply that conducive organizational working conditions are also related to organizational sustainability by minimizing

conflict related disturbances, creating stability in the workforce and ensuring effective utilization of resources.

5. Discussion

This paper shows that the presence of psychological safety, climate of communication, and employee engagement is paramount in determining whether or not workplace grievances become formal industrial disputes in the Indian manufacturing industry. The results align with previous studies that have noted that psychological safety is an important facilitator of open communication and risk-taking behaviors within organizations (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). The findings imply that employees who feel that their work environment is safe to express their personalities are likely to voice their concerns at an early stage, hence avoiding a situation whereby they end up in a formal conflict.

The qualitative results indicate that when the psychological safety level is low, employees are likely to repress grievances, as they are afraid of being reprimanded, losing their jobs, or be attacked by their managers. This is consistent with meta-analytic data that low levels of psychological safety prevent voice behavior and lead to dysfunctional organizational performance (Frazier et al., 2017).

On the other hand, companies that have positive communication atmospheres and available supervisory systems allow their workers to communicate positively, thus minimizing the escalation of conflicts. Some of the previous studies on internal communication and emotional culture also highlight the significance of communication in promoting supportive employee practices (Men and Yue, 2019). These findings are further supported by the quantitative findings which show significant negative correlations between psychological safety, climate of communication, employee engagement and risk of disputes. Engagement of employees, especially, proved to be a very important mediating variable. This confirms the literature that suggested that engaged employees tend to show a more proactive, cooperative, and problem-solving attitude (Saks, 2019; Jiang, 2017). Engagement is a good psychological association with the organization, which motivates employees to address problems in a constructive manner, instead of being adversarial.

Industrial relations In terms of industrial relations, these findings reveal the necessity to shift towards proactive, workplace-based interventions, as opposed to reactive ones that are institution based. The traditional systems are usually used to solve conflicts once they have escalated, but the factors of climate in the workplace are used in preventive measures. Good employee relations, being trustful and fair, have been found to enhance job satisfaction and mental health, thus decreasing the chances of conflict (Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska, 2021). Likewise, positive and supportive organizational cultures help to decrease deviant behavior and enhance organizational outcomes (Haldorai et al., 2020). Notably, the research also has a contribution to sustainable enterprise management in that it shows that the climate at the workplace is closely related to organizational sustainability. The industrial disputes affect the operations and raise the costs making it impossible to achieve favorable results in the long term. Psychologically safe and communicative environments can be developed in organizations to minimize inefficiencies and encourage stability which are vital elements of sustainability. This coincides with the perspectives of stakeholders, where internal organizational practices are important in creating sustainable outcomes (Hörisch et al., 2014).

The applicability of such results is especially high in the case of SMEs and entrepreneurial companies in the emerging economies. These types of organizations are characterized by a lack of formalized systems and interpersonal relationships, as well as informal forms of governance. Previous studies on social entrepreneurship and in the context of SMEs indicate that internal organizational processes are instrumental in facilitating sustainable development and impacts at

the community level (Lumpkin et al., 2018). In this respect, the workplace climate is a strategic asset that promotes resilience and sustainable development in an organization.

Considering the entrepreneurship view, the results highlight the significance of staff well-being and involvement in the process of determining the organizational results. The role of well-being and supportive workplaces in improving firm performance and their sustainability is also gaining a growing interest among the research on entrepreneurship (Wiklund et al., 2019). Engagement and trust enable organizations to establish positive work environments which in addition to minimizing conflict will also promote innovation and productivity.

Moreover, the results are consistent with the more general views of organizations as the agents of positive social change. Workspaces providing psychological safety, fairness, and engagement not only lead to internal organizational stability, but also to the wider social and economic sustainability (Stephan et al., 2016). This is especially applicable in the emerging economies where organizational practices play an important role in terms of labour conditions and social development.

In general, the research paper has added value to the theory of industrial relations, by incorporating micro-level organisational behaviour theories (psychological safety, communication climate, employee engagement) into theories of dispute prevention. Simultaneously, it adds to the existing sustainable enterprise and entrepreneurship literature by showing how the processes within the workplace affect the resilience and stability of an organization in the long term. The results imply that to minimize industrial conflicts, it is critical to develop psychologically safe, communicative, and engaging workplaces, which can foster sustainable and inclusive development of enterprises.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that psychological safety, communication climate, and employee engagement are critical workplace-level factors influencing whether grievances escalate into formal industrial disputes in the Indian manufacturing sector. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses indicate that when employees perceive a psychologically safe environment, experience open and supportive communication, and feel actively engaged in their work, they are more likely to adopt collaborative problem-solving approaches rather than adversarial or conflict-driven responses. Employee engagement further acts as a key mediating mechanism, linking positive workplace conditions to reduced dispute risk. These results highlight the importance of shifting from reactive, institution-based dispute resolution systems toward proactive strategies embedded in everyday

organizational practices. Beyond industrial relations, the study contributes to sustainable enterprise management by showing that effective workplace climate reduces operational disruptions, enhances workforce stability, and supports long-term organizational resilience. This is particularly relevant for SMEs and entrepreneurial firms in emerging economies, where formal dispute-resolution systems are often limited and organizational sustainability depends heavily on internal relational dynamics. By fostering trust, transparency, and participation, organizations can not only prevent conflicts but also improve productivity, employee well-being, and overall performance. The study thus integrates insights from industrial relations, organizational behavior, and sustainability literature, offering practical implications for managers, policymakers, and business leaders seeking to build stable, inclusive, and sustainable workplaces. Ultimately, promoting psychologically safe and communicative work environments is essential for achieving both industrial harmony and sustainable enterprise development.

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