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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Speaking Up or Thinking of Leaving? Ethical Climate, Psychological Safety, and Voice in B2B Salesforces

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B2B salespeople frequently possess information about customer concerns, operational problems, and questionable practices that may be difficult for sales managers to observe directly. Communicating such information can be valuable but also risky in interpersonal terms. This study examines how benevolent and principled ethical climates are related to psychological safety, promotive and prohibitive voice, and turnover intentions among B2B salespeople. Survey data from 284 U.S. B2B salespeople were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Both benevolent and principled ethical climates were positively associated with psychological safety, and psychological safety, in turn, was positively associated with both forms of employee voice. The relationships with turnover intentions were more selective. Psychological safety and promotive voice did not exhibit significant unique relationships with turnover intentions, whereas prohibitive voice was negatively related to turnover intentions. These findings extend sales ethics research by connecting ethical climate with the interpersonal conditions surrounding salesperson communication. They also demonstrate the value of distinguishing between improvement-oriented and problem-focused voice rather than assuming that all constructive communication has equivalent relationships with salesperson withdrawal. For sales managers, the results highlight the importance of combining concern for employees with clear ethical standards and creating conditions in which salespeople can raise problems and concerns without inappropriate interpersonal consequences.

INTRODUCTION

B2B salespeople regularly acquire information that managers cannot observe directly. Through interactions with customers and internal personnel, they learn about service failures, unmet expectations, competitive threats, questionable selling practices, and procedures that may undermine account relationships. Communicating this information can help sales organizations correct problems and adapt. Yet speaking up may require salespeople to question managerial decisions, challenge established routines, or acknowledge problems that reflect unfavorably on their performance. Thus, salespeople may possess information warranting managerial attention but remain reluctant to communicate it.

Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of suggestions, concerns, and opinions intended to improve organizational functioning (Morrison, 2011, 2014). Voice is especially consequential in sales because salespeople span organizational boundaries while depending on managers for evaluations, compensation, territory assignments, and career opportunities (Delvecchio, 2000; Hartmann et al., 2020; Schetzsle & Delpechitre, 2013; Verbeke et al., 2011). These dependencies make speaking up personally risky: raising concerns about customer harm, flawed policies, or established practices may be viewed as constructive but also as uncooperative, overly critical, or indicative of an inability to manage an account. Understanding salesperson voice therefore requires examining whether the organizational environment makes speaking up psychologically safe.

Psychological safety is the belief that individuals can express ideas, questions, and concerns without damaging interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Kerrissey, 2025). It is an important antecedent of voice because it reduces the perceived risks of interpersonal expression (Frazier et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012). Research, however, has emphasized proximal influences such as leadership behavior and team relationships (Detert & Burris, 2007; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), devoting less attention to whether the broader ethical context provides the relational reassurance and normative predictability from which psychological safety develops (Newman et al., 2017).

Ethical climate captures shared perceptions of the norms and decision criteria defining appropriate organizational conduct (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Sales research has primarily examined ethical climate as an antecedent of ethical judgments, role stress, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Friend et al., 2020; Jaramillo et al., 2006; Schwepker et al., 1997; Schwepker, 2001, 2015, 2017, 2025). Less is known about how ethical climate influences salesperson communication. By shaping whether employees expect concerns to be received constructively rather than dismissed or punished, ethical climate may foster the psychological safety needed to communicate information that might otherwise remain unspoken.

Two ethical-climate dimensions are particularly relevant. A benevolent climate emphasizes concern for others and may foster psychological safety by reassuring salespeople that organizational members care about their welfare. A principled climate emphasizes adherence to rules and standards and may foster safety by making judgments of employee conduct more predictable. Thus, benevolent offers relational reassurance, whereas principled offers normative predictability. Distinguishing these mechanisms provides a more precise explanation of how ethical context contributes to psychological safety.

The voice behaviors enabled by psychological safety also warrant differentiation. Promotive voice involves proposing improvements, whereas prohibitive voice involves raising concerns about practices, risks, or behaviors that could harm the organization (Liang et al., 2012). Prohibitive voice may be especially sensitive in sales because it can involve challenging policies,

disclosing service problems, questioning performance practices, or identifying conduct affecting customers. The two forms also may differ in their relationships with withdrawal. Suggesting improvements does not necessarily address the conditions that cause a salesperson to consider leaving. In contrast, raising concerns may offer a way to confront troubling conditions rather than respond with silence or withdrawal. Treating voice as multidimensional may therefore clarify how salesperson communication relates to turnover intentions.

This study tests a model in which benevolent and principled ethical climates are associated with psychological safety; psychological safety is associated with promotive and prohibitive voice; and psychological safety and both voice forms are related to turnover intentions. Data were obtained from 284 B2B salespeople. The study contributes to sales research in three ways. First, it examines psychological safety as a mechanism linking ethical climate to salesperson communication. Second, it distinguishes the relational reassurance of a benevolent climate from the normative predictability of a principled climate while considering their simultaneous relationships with psychological safety. Third, it evaluates the unique relationships of promotive and prohibitive voice with turnover intentions rather than assuming that all constructive communication has equivalent implications for salesperson withdrawal. Together, these contributions provide a focused account of how ethical context, interpersonal risk, and differentiated forms of voice operate within the salesforce.

Theoretical Overview

This study draws primarily on psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999), employee voice research (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison, 2011, 2014), and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) to explain how salespeople respond to organizational problems. B2B salespeople frequently encounter customer concerns, operational failures, and ethically ambiguous situations that managers cannot directly observe. When such issues arise, salespeople must decide whether to communicate what they know or withdraw from organizational involvement. Because speaking up may challenge existing practices, expose organizational shortcomings, or question managerial decisions, voice often involves interpersonal risk.

This study proposes that employees' responses to organizational problems are shaped by both contextual and psychological factors. Ethical climate is an important contextual influence because it signals how organizational members are expected to behave and how concerns will be evaluated. These signals shape perceptions of psychological safety, which reflect employees' beliefs that they can express ideas and concerns without fear of interpersonal consequences. When psychological safety is present, salespeople should be more willing to communicate information through promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors.

Social exchange theory further suggests that employees evaluate how organizations respond to their contributions and concerns. When salespeople believe they can raise difficult issues safely and constructively, they may be more inclined to remain engaged with the organization. Conversely, when communication is perceived as risky or ineffective, withdrawal may become a more attractive response. Consistent with this reasoning, the present study examines whether different forms of voice exhibit distinct relationships with turnover intentions. In particular, prohibitive voice may provide a mechanism for salespeople to address problematic organizational conditions rather than responding through psychological withdrawal or thoughts of leaving the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Climate and Psychological Safety

Whether salespeople choose to communicate concerns or remain silent depends partly on how they assess the interpersonal risks of speaking up. Psychological safety reflects the belief that individuals can express ideas, questions, and concerns without experiencing damaging interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 1999). It is a constructive socio-psychological climate that facilitates open communication, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning within the workplace Sumanth et al., 2024; Ubaka et al., 2026).

When psychological safety is high, employees are more likely to view voice as a viable response to organizational problems. When psychological safety is low, employees may avoid speaking up even when they possess information that could benefit the organization.

Ethical climate may also shape these perceptions. Ethical climate reflects shared perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior and how the organization should address ethical issues (Victor & Cullen, 1988). In B2B selling, ethical climate is particularly salient because salespeople frequently encounter ethically charged situations involving pricing discretion, product claims, service recovery failures, and conflicting stakeholder expectations (Schwepker, 2001, 2017, 2025). These situations carry significant relational and financial consequences, making the ethical environment a critical determinant of whether salespeople feel comfortable raising concerns (Babin et al., 2000; Briggs et al., 2012).

A benevolent ethical climate emphasizes interpersonal support, mutual care, and concern for employee well-being. In B2B contexts, such climates signal that the organization values the salesperson's welfare and will respond constructively when they raise issues related to customer dissatisfaction, operational breakdowns, or questionable requests. These signals reduce the interpersonal risks associated with speaking up and foster psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

A principled ethical climate emphasizes adherence to rules, standards, and organizational expectations. In B2B selling where salespeople must balance customer demands with internal policies clear behavioral norms reduce ambiguity and help salespeople navigate ethically complex situations (Schwepker & Good, 2013; Treviño et al., 1998). When expectations are predictable and transparent, salespeople are more confident that voicing concerns will be evaluated fairly rather than interpreted as insubordination or poor performance. Together, benevolent and principled ethical climates reduce perceived interpersonal risk and create conditions under which B2B salespeople feel safe expressing concerns or ideas.

H1: Benevolent ethical climate is positively related to psychological safety.

H2: Principled ethical climate is positively related to psychological safety.

Psychological Safety and Employee Voice

In B2B selling environments-characterized by performance pressure, customer contact, and complex buying centers-psychological safety is especially important. Salespeople who feel psychologically safe are more willing to communicate information that may challenge assumptions, reveal operational failures, or highlight customer dissatisfaction.

Employee voice consists of two distinct forms (Liang et al., 2012): promotive voice, which involves suggesting improvements, new ideas, or opportunities for value creation and prohibitive voice, which involves raising concerns about risks, inefficiencies, or harmful practices. Both forms of voice are valuable in B2B markets. Promotive voice contributes to innovation, customer responsiveness, and long-term value creation. Prohibitive voice helps organizations identify issues that could damage customer relationships, undermine trust, or lead to service failures. A meta-analysis by Chamberlin et al. (2017) demonstrates that promotive voice and prohibitive voice have distinct antecedents and consequences, underscoring the importance of examining them separately.

Because prohibitive voice often involves challenging existing practices or raising sensitive concerns, it carries greater interpersonal risk. Thus, psychologically safe environments are particularly important for encouraging B2B salespeople to communicate concerns that might otherwise remain unspoken.

H3: Psychological safety is positively related to promotive voice.

H4: Psychological safety is positively related to prohibitive voice.

Psychological Safety and Turnover Intentions

Psychological safety not only shapes communication behaviors but also influences employees' attachment to the organization. In B2B selling-where salespeople manage demanding customer relationships and face significant performance pressure-psychological safety signals organizational support, inclusion, and respect. These perceptions strengthen social exchange relationships and reduce withdrawal cognitions (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shore et al., 2006).

Salespeople who believe they can raise concerns, contribute ideas, and participate openly in organizational processes without fear of negative consequences are more likely to feel valued and less likely to consider leaving (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2014). Supportive environments have long been associated with lower turnover intentions among salespeople (Aggarwal et al., 2004; Jaramillo et al., 2006).

H5: Psychological safety is negatively related to turnover intentions.

Employee Voice and Turnover Intentions

Employee voice may reduce turnover intentions by increasing employees' sense of involvement, influence, and organizational impact. Voice represents a form of active participation through which salespeople contribute ideas, communicate concerns, and shape organizational outcomes (Morrison, 2011). When organizations encourage voice and respond constructively, salespeople interpret these actions as signals of trust and support, strengthening their attachment to the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Promotive voice allows salespeople to contribute to organizational improvement, innovation, and customer value creation. When salespeople perceive that their suggestions are welcomed and acted upon, they develop stronger feelings of ownership and involvement, which reduce turnover intentions (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014).

Prohibitive voice enables salespeople to raise concerns about practices or risks that may harm customer relationships or organizational performance. In B2B selling-where salespeople are responsible for preventing service failures and protecting key accounts-prohibitive voice may be especially important. When salespeople feel empowered to communicate concerns without negative repercussions, they perceive stronger organizational support and greater alignment between their own interests and those of the firm.

H6: Promotive voice is negatively related to turnover intentions.

H7: Prohibitive voice is negatively related to turnover intentions.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The study involved B2B salespeople. The sampling frame consisted of 800 sales managers obtained from a commercial list provider. To qualify for the study, sales managers had to confirm that they managed only B2B salespeople. All identified managers were employed in the United States. Managers received an email explaining the study's purpose and inviting them to share a link to an online questionnaire with salespeople who sold products or services primarily to organizational customers. Salespeople submitted their responses directly to the researchers, and managers were not informed about which employees participated or how individual employees responded.

Of the 800 manager email addresses, 34 were undeliverable, and 25 managers indicated that they were no longer employed in sales-management positions, leaving 741 eligible manager contacts. Of these, 112 agreed to distribute the questionnaire, representing a manager cooperation rate of 15.1%. Usable responses were received from 284 salespeople. An individual-level response rate could not be calculated because the number of salespeople who received the questionnaire from participating managers was unknown.

The mean age was 38.6 (range = 22 to 65), and the mean length of employment with their present employer was 8.2 years (range = 1–34). The sample was 62.0% (176) male, their average income was $75,436, slightly more than 73 percent were paid on a salary/commission/and/or bonus system (207, 72.9%), they averaged 10.4 years of sales experience, most of the salespeople had completed at least two years of college (241, 85.9%), and almost half of the salespeople sold physical goods (159, 56.0%), while the rest of the salespeople sold either services or a combination of goods and services. Almost all the salespeople sold in the services, manufacturing, or wholesaling areas (261, 91.9%).

Measures

The survey items are in the Appendix. All constructs were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree and have been validated in other studies. Benevolent and principled ethical climate were measured using scales developed by Victor and Cullen (1988). Psychological safety was measured using Edmondson's (1999) scale, and promotive and prohibitive voice were measured using Liang et al.'s (2012) scales. Turnover intentions were assessed using the measure developed by Hom and Griffeth (1991).

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

All constructs exhibited satisfactory reliability, with composite reliabilities ranging from .84 to .89, exceeding the recommended .70 criterion (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair et al., 2018). Convergent validity was supported because all standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and ranged from .63 to .87, and all AVE values exceeded .50, ranging from .53 to .70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was further examined using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT; Henseler et al., 2015). All HTMT values were below the conservative .85 threshold, with the highest value occurring between psychological safety and promotive voice (HTMT = .68). Collectively, these findings support the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measures. The results are in Table 1. Table 2 reports the correlations, means, and standard deviations.

Common Method Bias

Common method bias is a potentially important concern in survey research, particularly when predictor and outcome variables are obtained from the same respondents using the same measurement context (MacKenzie

Table 1. Reliability, AVE, and Factor Loadings

Variable	Reliability	AVE	Factor Loading Range
Benevolent EC	0.85	0.60	0.70 – 0.82
Principled EC	0.88	0.57	0.71 – 0.80
Psychological Safety	0.89	0.55	0.63 – 0.81
Promotive Voice	0.87	0.58	0.71 – 0.81
Prohibitive voice	0.84	0.53	0.68 – 0.77
Turnover Intentions	0.86	0.70	0.80 – 0.87

Table 2. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	BEC	PEC	PS	PMV	PHV	TI
Benevolent EC	.75					
Principled EC	.42	.75				
Psychological Safety	.64	.51	.74			
Promotive Voice	.46	.44	.66	.76		
Prohibitive Voice	.44	.35	.55	.37	.73	
Turnover Intentions	-.26	-.12	-.38	-.32	-.34	.84
Means	26.0	22.8	34.0	23.8	21.5	6.8
Standard Deviations	7.2	7.1	9.0	6.9	6.9	3.2

Notes: *N* = 284. BEC = benevolent ethical climate; PEC = principled ethical climate; PS = psychological safety; PMV = promotive voice; PHV = prohibitive voice; TI = turnover intentions. Values on the diagonal are the square roots of AVE; values below the diagonal are Pearson correlations. Values above the diagonal are omitted. Means and standard deviations are based on the sum of scale scores.

& Podsakoff, 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2012, 2024). Accordingly, both procedural and statistical approaches to assess and reduce the potential influence of common method bias were employed. Several steps were used to alleviate the potential problem of common method bias following recommended procedural remedies (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012). First, the authors assured respondents of anonymity. Second, the items were randomized to reduce response patterns. Third, a single-factor model provided a poor fit to the data compared to the hypothesized measurement model, indicating that a single latent factor does not account for most of the covariance among the measures. Fourth, following the confirmatory factor analytic approach described by Williams et al. (1989) and Podsakoff et al. (2003), a latent method-factor model in which each observed indicator loaded on both its theorized substantive construct and a common method factor was estimated. The addition of the method factor did not meaningfully alter the standardized substantive factor loadings or structural path estimates, and the significance of the hypothesized relationships remained unchanged. Moreover, the method factor accounted for only a small proportion of indicator variance relative to the substantive constructs. Collectively, these results suggest that common method variance was unlikely to account for the substantive pattern of relationships observed in the study.

Results

The measurement model demonstrated good fit to the data (χ^2 = 620.65, *df* =449, CFI = .964, RMSEA = .037, SRMR = .041), exceeding recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The structural model also exhibited very good fit (χ^2 = 634.42, *df* = 456, CFI= .963, RMSEA = .037, SRMR = .046), supporting the adequacy of the proposed model.

Consistent with hypotheses, both dimensions of ethical climate significantly influenced psychological safety. Benevolent ethical climate was positively related to psychological safety (β = .53, *t* = 8.05), supporting H1, and principled ethical climate was also positively related (β = .30, *t* = 4.96), supporting H2. These findings indicate that ethical environments characterized by concern for others and adherence to rules foster employees' perceptions of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety positively influenced promotive voice (β = .68, t = 9.64), supporting H3, and prohibitive voice (β = .56, t = 7.70), supporting H4.

These results align with prior research suggesting that employees are more willing to express ideas and concerns in psychologically safe environments (Liang et al., 2012). Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported: psychological safety to turnover intentions: (β = −.18, *t* = 1.75, *NS*) and promotive voice to turnover intentions (β = −.12, *t* = 1.31, *NS*). The results indicate that psychological safety may create conditions for voice, but those conditions appear insufficient by themselves to reduce withdrawal cognitions.

Hypothesis 7 was supported. Prohibitive voice was significantly related to turnover intentions (β = −.195, *t* = 2.30), supporting H7. Only prohibitive voice significantly reduces turnover intentions in the sales context. Thus, although psychological safety promotes both forms of voice, only prohibitive voice exhibited a significant relationship with turnover intentions. Based on squared multiple correlations, the model explained approximately 50% of the variance in psychological safety, 46% of the variance in promotive voice, 31% of the variance in prohibitive voice, and 17% of the variance in turnover intentions. These findings indicate substantial explanatory power for psychological safety and voice behaviors, while also suggesting that turnover intentions are influenced by additional factors beyond those included in the model.

Additional analyses examined total and indirect effects within the structural model. Benevolent ethical climate exhibited an indirect negative relationship with turnover intentions (standardized indirect effect = -.197), while principled ethical climate also demonstrated a smaller indirect negative relationship (standardized indirect effect = -.111). Psychological safety exhibited a substantial total relationship with turnover intentions (total effect = -.374), although its direct structural path was not significant once promotive and prohibitive voice were included in the model. This pattern suggests that part of the relationship between psychological safety and withdrawal cognitions may operate through employee voice behaviors.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how benevolent and principled ethical climates are related to psychological safety, promotive and prohibitive voice, and turnover intentions among B2B salespeople. The findings strongly support the upstream portion of the proposed model. Both ethical climate dimensions were positively associated with psychological safety, and psychological safety was positively associated with both forms of employee voice. The results involving turnover intentions were more selective. Psychological safety and promotive voice did not exhibit significant unique relationships with turnover intentions, whereas prohibitive voice was negatively related to turnover intentions. This pattern suggests that the organizational conditions associated with speaking up can be distinguished from the particular forms of voice associated with salesperson withdrawal.

This study contributes to sales research by clarifying how ethical context, psychological safety, employee voice, and withdrawal cognitions are related within B2B sales organizations. Although the proposed model includes several established relationships, the findings suggest that different forms of voice may have distinct implications for salesperson retention and that ethical climate helps create the conditions under which those behaviors emerge.

Theoretical Implications

The first contribution concerns the differentiated role of employee voice within B2B sales organizations. Although employee voice research has long distinguished between promotive and prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012), sales research has largely focused on whether salespeople speak up rather than whether different forms of voice produce different organizational consequences. As a result, voice has often been treated implicitly as a broadly constructive behavior that generates comparable outcomes regardless of its specific content or purpose.

The present findings challenge that assumption. Consistent with prior voice research, psychological safety was positively associated with both promotive and prohibitive voice, suggesting that psychologically safe environments encourage salespeople to communicate both improvement-oriented ideas and concerns about organizational problems. However, only prohibitive voice exhibited a significant unique relationship with turnover intentions. This pattern indicates that different forms of voice may not have equivalent implications for salesperson retention.

This finding extends both sales and employee voice research by suggesting that the content of employee communication matters. Promotive voice involves proposing new ideas, improvements, and opportunities, whereas prohibitive voice involves identifying risks, ineffective practices, and potentially harmful behaviors. Although both behaviors are intended to benefit the organization, the present results suggest that problem-focused communication may serve a distinct function within sales organizations.

Specifically, prohibitive voice may provide salespeople with a mechanism for confronting organizational concerns that might otherwise contribute to withdrawal cognitions.

More broadly, these findings suggest that future sales research should move beyond treating voice as a unitary construct. By demonstrating that promotive and prohibitive voice exhibit different relationships with turnover intentions, the study highlights the importance of examining how specific forms of salesperson communication influence employee attitudes and behaviors. This distinction may prove particularly important in sales settings, where employees frequently possess information about customer problems, service failures, ethical concerns, and competitive threats that organizations need but may be reluctant to hear.

The second contribution concerns the relationship between voice and withdrawal. Sales turnover research has traditionally emphasized the roles of stress, leadership, job attitudes, organizational commitment, compensation, and career opportunities in explaining salesperson retention (Jaramillo et al., 2006; Schwepker, 2001, 2015, 2017; Schwepker et al., 1997). The present findings suggest an additional perspective. When salespeople encounter problematic organizational conditions, they may respond in several ways. They can remain silent, communicate their concerns, or psychologically withdraw from the organization. The significant relationship between prohibitive voice and turnover intentions is consistent with the possibility that problem-focused communication represents an alternative response to organizational dissatisfaction.

For salespeople confronting customer complaints, operational failures, unrealistic organizational expectations, or ethically troubling practices, prohibitive voice may provide a mechanism through which concerns can be addressed rather than simply endured. Raising concerns allows employees to attempt to influence problematic conditions instead of responding exclusively through withdrawal cognitions. Although the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal conclusions, the findings suggest that voice and withdrawal may be more closely connected than they have typically been treated within the sales literature. Future research should further investigate whether prohibitive voice functions as a mechanism through which salespeople attempt to resolve dissatisfaction before contemplating exit.

The absence of significant relationships for psychological safety and promotive voice provides additional insight into this process. Psychological safety was negatively correlated with turnover intentions at the bivariate level but did not exhibit a significant unique effect once voice behaviors were included in the structural model. Similarly, promotive voice was negatively correlated with turnover intentions but did not remain significant when modeled alongside prohibitive voice. These findings suggest that creating opportunities for interpersonal expression may not, by itself, reduce withdrawal cognitions. Rather, the specific type of communication in which salespeople engage may matter. In particular, communication directed toward

identifying and addressing organizational problems appears to be more closely associated with retention than communication directed toward organizational improvement and innovation.

The effects decomposition provides additional insight into this relationship. Although psychological safety did not exhibit a significant direct path to turnover intentions, it demonstrated a substantial total effect on turnover intentions. This pattern suggests that psychological safety may influence withdrawal cognitions less through a direct attitudinal process and more through the communicative behaviors that psychological safety enables. Salespeople who feel safe expressing concerns are more likely to engage in voice behaviors, and those behaviors may partially explain why psychologically safe environments are associated with lower withdrawal cognitions.

The third contribution concerns ethical climate and psychological safety. Prior sales research has demonstrated that ethical climate influences a variety of important outcomes, including ethical judgments, role stress, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and performance (Jaramillo et al., 2006; Schwepker, 2001, 2015, 2017). The present study extends that literature by identifying psychological safety as an important mechanism linking ethical context to salesperson communication.

Both benevolent and principled ethical climates exhibited significant positive relationships with psychological safety. These findings suggest that ethical climate may influence not only how salespeople evaluate ethical situations but also how they assess the interpersonal consequences of expressing concerns. A benevolent climate communicates concern for organizational members and may provide reassurance that raising difficult issues will not harm interpersonal relationships. A principled climate emphasizes consistency, standards, and procedural fairness, potentially reducing uncertainty regarding how employee conduct will be evaluated. Although these underlying mechanisms were not directly measured, the results are consistent with the proposition that both relational reassurance and normative predictability contribute to perceptions of psychological safety.

This finding is particularly relevant in B2B sales environments because salespeople frequently possess customer and market information that managers cannot directly observe. Communicating such information often involves interpersonal risks, particularly when concerns challenge existing practices or reveal organizational shortcomings. Ethical climate may therefore matter not only because it guides ethical behavior but also because it shapes whether salespeople feel sufficiently safe to communicate information that organizations need but might otherwise never hear.

Collectively, the findings suggest that ethical climate contributes to psychological safety, psychological safety encourages both forms of voice, and differentiated forms of voice exhibit different relationships with withdrawal cognitions. By demonstrating that promotive and prohibitive voice are not

equally related to turnover intentions, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how salesperson communication influences the relationship between employees and their organizations.

Managerial Implications

The findings offer several implications for sales managers seeking to retain valuable employees and improve organizational learning. Most importantly, the results suggest that speaking up and withdrawing from the organization may be more closely connected than managers typically assume. Salespeople frequently encounter customer complaints, operational failures, unrealistic organizational expectations, and questionable practices before managers become aware of them. When these issues arise, salespeople can either attempt to address the problems through communication or disengage from the organization. The findings indicate that problem-focused voice is associated with lower turnover intentions, suggesting that opportunities to raise concerns may be an important part of retaining knowledgeable salespeople.

A second implication is that managers should distinguish between promotive and prohibitive voice rather than treating all voice behaviors as identical. Organizations often encourage employees to generate new ideas, recommend improvements, and contribute innovative suggestions. Although these activities remain valuable, the present findings suggest that voice directed toward identifying risks, problems, and harmful practices may be particularly important. Sales managers should therefore ensure that employees are not only encouraged to contribute ideas for improvement but are also comfortable communicating concerns about practices that could damage customer relationships, service quality, or organizational effectiveness.

Creating such an environment requires more than simply telling employees that their opinions matter. Managers should establish specific mechanisms through which concerns can be raised and discussed. Regular account reviews, customer debriefings, pipeline meetings, and cross-functional discussions can include dedicated opportunities for salespeople to identify emerging risks and organizational problems. Asking questions such as *"What obstacles are jeopardizing customer success?"* or *"What organizational practices are creating difficulties in the field?"* communicates that raising concerns is both expected and valued.

The findings also highlight the importance of ethical climate in creating the conditions necessary for voice. Both benevolent and principled ethical climates were associated with psychological safety. Accordingly, sales leaders should focus on developing environments that combine concern for employees with consistent standards and expectations. Benevolent climates can be reinforced by demonstrating respect for employees, showing concern for their well-being, and responding constructively to difficult issues. Principled climates can be strengthened by applying policies consistently, clarifying expectations, and ensuring that ethical standards are not compromised in pursuit of short-term performance goals. Salespeople may be

most willing to communicate concerns when they believe both that managers care about them and that organizational decisions are governed by fair and predictable standards.

Managers should pay particular attention to their reactions when employees engage in prohibitive voice. Raising concerns is often more personally sensitive than offering suggestions because it may imply that a current policy, decision, or practice is ineffective or potentially harmful. Defensive or dismissive reactions may discourage not only the individual who raised the concern but also other employees who observe the interaction. Instead, managers should acknowledge concerns, investigate them carefully, communicate what actions will be taken, and provide feedback regarding outcomes. Even when leaders cannot implement a suggested change, employees are more likely to continue speaking up when they believe their concerns were taken seriously.

An important caution follows from these findings. The results do not suggest that organizations can reduce turnover simply by creating reporting channels or encouraging communication. Voice systems that collect concerns without producing visible managerial responses may increase frustration rather than commitment. Effective voice management therefore involves not only encouraging employees to speak but also ensuring that concerns are fairly evaluated and appropriately addressed.

Finally, managers should recognize that psychological safety is not synonymous with lowering standards or avoiding accountability. Psychological safety concerns whether employees can communicate candidly without inappropriate interpersonal consequences. High-performance sales organizations can simultaneously maintain demanding goals, rigorous accountability, and open communication. Indeed, the findings suggest that organizations may be better positioned to identify and resolve emerging customer and operational problems when salespeople believe they can raise concerns without risking their standing within the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, this study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, the data are cross-sectional, limiting causal inferences. Although the proposed model is grounded in theory and the findings are consistent with prior research, future longitudinal studies could provide stronger evidence regarding the temporal relationships among ethical climate, psychological safety, employee voice, and turnover intentions.

Second, all focal constructs were measured using employee self-reports. While several procedural and statistical remedies were employed to address common method concerns, future studies could benefit from incorporating supervisor evaluations of voice behavior or objective organizational outcomes.

Third, the study examined turnover intentions rather than actual turnover behavior. The use of turnover intentions rather than actual turnover is somewhat controversial. Research has shown that turnover intentions and search behavior are significantly correlated with turnover (Griffeth et al.,

2000; Rubenstein et al., 2018), However, turnover intentions are not the same as turnover and researchers have encouraged the use of actual turnover instead of using turnover intentions or search behavior as surrogates of turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Collecting actual turnover is expensive, requires a longitudinal analysis, and therefore is not practical in some research studies. In addition, many studies involving salespeople have used turnover intentions as a surrogate for turnover (Badrinarayanan et al., 2021; Conde, 2026; Hancock et al., 2024; Kraft et al., 2019; Mallin et al., 2022; Mulki et al., 2015; Schwepker & Good, 2026; Zahn et al., 2023). Although turnover intentions are among the strongest predictors of employee turnover, future research should investigate whether promotive and prohibitive voice influence actual retention over time.

Finally, the present study focused on ethical climate as an antecedent of psychological safety. Future research could extend this work by examining how voice behaviors unfold within key account teams, cross-functional selling units, or digitally mediated B2B environments. Additional studies might explore how customer reactions, managerial responses, or organizational justice perceptions shape the consequences of voice in industrial markets. Investigating these dynamics across cultures, industries, and sales structures would further enrich understanding of how communication processes support value creation and relationship continuity in B2B exchanges.

Conclusion

B2B salespeople often possess information that organizations need but may find difficult to communicate. This study examined how two dimensions of ethical climate relate to the psychological and behavioral conditions surrounding that communication. Benevolent and principled ethical climates were positively associated with psychological safety, and psychological safety was positively associated with both promotive and prohibitive voice. These findings suggest that concern for organizational members and consistency in ethical standards both matter for salespeople's perceptions of interpersonal safety.

The relationships with turnover intentions were more selective. Psychological safety and promotive voice did not exhibit significant unique relationships with turnover intentions, whereas prohibitive voice was negatively related to withdrawal cognitions. The findings therefore do not support the assumption that all psychologically safe or constructive communication is associated with retention in the same way. Instead, they identify problem-focused voice as a potentially important feature of the salesperson–organization relationship. By distinguishing the conditions that enable salespeople to speak from the specific forms of voice associated with withdrawal, this study provides a more focused understanding of ethical climate, psychological safety, and communication within B2B salesforces.

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Appendix

Benevolent Ethical Work Climate

1. What is best for everyone in the company is the major consideration here.
2. The most important concern is always what best for the other person.
3. In this company, people look out for each other's good.
4. The most important concern is the good for all the people in the company as a whole.
5. In this company, it is expected that you will always do what is right for the customers and public.
6. People in this company view team spirit as important.

Principled Ethical Work Climate

1. People are expected to comply with the law and professional standards over and above their own consideration.
2. In this company, the law or ethical code of their profession is the major consideration.
3. In this company, people are expected to strictly follow legal or professional standards.
4. In this company, the first consideration is whether a decision violates any law.
5. People in this company strictly obey the company policies.
6. It is very important to follow the company rules and practices.

Psychological Safety

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you (reverse-scored).
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different (reverse-scored).
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.

5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help (reverse-scored).
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Turnover Intentions

1. I am seriously considering quitting my job.
2. I intend to quit my job within the next six months.
3. I am looking for another job.

Promotive voice

1. People proactively develop and make suggestions for issues that may influence the unit.
2. People proactively suggest new projects which are beneficial to the work unit.
3. People raise suggestions to improve the unit's working procedure.
4. People proactively voice out constructive suggestions that help the unit reach its goals.
5. People make constructive suggestions to improve the unit's operation.

Prohibitive voice

1. People advise other colleagues against undesirable behaviors that would hamper job performance.
2. People speak up honestly with problems that might cause serious loss to the work unit, even when/though dissenting opinions exist.
3. People dare to voice out opinions on things that might affect efficiency in the work unit, even if that would embarrass others.
4. People dare to point out problems when they appear in the unit, even if that would hamper relationships with other colleagues

5. People proactively report coordination problems in the workplace to the management.