

Transformational Leadership, Employee Engagement, and Turnover Intention: The Moderating Role of Psychological Safety in the Post-Pandemic Hybrid Workplace

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Abstract

The post-pandemic hybrid workplace has fundamentally reconfigured the dynamics of employee engagement and organizational commitment, presenting novel challenges for leadership effectiveness and talent retention. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and transformational leadership theory, this study investigates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee turnover intention, with employee engagement as a mediator and psychological safety as a moderator. A quantitative survey design was employed, collecting data from 487 knowledge workers employed in hybrid work arrangements across five industry sectors in Chile. Hierarchical regression analysis with Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 14) was used to test the moderated mediation model. Results indicate that transformational leadership significantly and negatively predicts turnover intention ($\beta = -0.41, p < .001$), with employee engagement fully mediating this relationship (indirect effect = $-0.28, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.354, -0.206]$). Psychological safety significantly moderates the leadership–engagement link ($\beta = 0.19, p < .01$), with the interaction effect indicating that the positive impact of transformational

leadership on engagement is amplified at higher levels of psychological safety. The Johnson-Neyman technique identified the inflection point above which psychological safety produces significant moderation. These findings extend SET by identifying psychological safety as a boundary condition that determines the effectiveness of transformational leadership in hybrid work environments. Implications for organizational leaders managing distributed workforces and HR professionals designing hybrid work policies are discussed.

Keywords: transformational leadership, employee engagement, turnover intention, psychological safety, hybrid workplace, social exchange theory, moderated mediation

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented disruption to global work arrangements, accelerating the adoption of remote and hybrid working models that now constitute a permanent fixture of the contemporary organizational landscape (Gratton, 2021; Microsoft, 2022). In hybrid work environments, employees divide their time between organizational premises and

remote locations, fundamentally altering the nature of leader–follower interactions, team dynamics, and organizational identification processes (Kniffin et al., 2021). For human resource practitioners and organizational leaders, this reconfiguration raises urgent questions: How does leadership effectiveness translate across physical and virtual interaction modes? What organizational conditions determine whether employees remain engaged and committed in hybrid arrangements? And critically, how can organizations mitigate the elevated turnover risks that accompany reduced organizational visibility and weakened social bonds in dispersed work settings?

Employee turnover intention—defined as an employee's cognitive preoccupation with and deliberate planning to leave the current employer—represents one of the most consequential and empirically studied outcomes in human resource management research (Tett & Meyer, 1993). High turnover generates substantial direct costs through recruitment, selection, and onboarding, as well as indirect costs through knowledge loss, team disruption, and productivity decline (Allen et al., 2010; Hom et al., 2017). The hybrid work transition has been associated with elevated voluntary turnover across sectors, a phenomenon widely dubbed the "Great Resignation" (Sull et al., 2022), underscoring the urgency of identifying the leadership and organizational factors that attenuate turnover risk in post-pandemic work environments.

Transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), has accumulated extensive

empirical support as a predictor of favorable work attitudes and behaviors, including reduced turnover intention (Bycio et al., 1995; Lowe et al., 1996). However, the theoretical mechanisms through which transformational leadership reduces turnover intention—and the organizational conditions that amplify or attenuate these effects in hybrid contexts—remain incompletely specified in the extant literature (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Wang et al., 2011).

Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976) provides a compelling theoretical foundation for explaining how transformational leadership influences turnover intention through employee engagement. SET posits that individuals reciprocate organizational resources, support, and investments with attitudinal and behavioral commitments proportional to their perceived value. Transformational leaders, through personalized attention, intellectual empowerment, and inspirational communication, signal high organizational investment in individual employees, which employees reciprocate with elevated engagement—a state of psychological investment characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in work roles (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Engaged employees, in turn, are less likely to contemplate exit due to their intrinsic connection to work and the anticipated loss of valued social exchange relationships (Rich et al., 2010).

However, the transformational leadership–engagement relationship may be contingent on employees' sense of psychological safety—the shared belief that the interpersonal environment is safe for risk-taking and authentic expression (Edmondson, 1999). In hybrid work settings, where the

informational richness of collocated interaction is reduced and employees face heightened uncertainty about performance evaluation, psychological safety may constitute a critical enabling condition that determines whether transformational leadership signals are effectively received and internalized (Edmondson & Hugander, 2021; Newman et al., 2017). Without adequate psychological safety, employees may interpret transformational leadership as performative or insufficiently genuine, attenuating its engagement-enhancing potential.

This study makes three principal contributions to the organizational behavior and HRM literatures. First, it provides an empirical test of the full moderated mediation model linking transformational leadership, employee engagement, turnover intention, and psychological safety in a hybrid work context—a model that has not been previously examined in the post-pandemic organizational setting. Second, by situating the analysis within SET, it explicates the relational exchange mechanisms that govern the transformational leadership–engagement–retention pathway. Third, by examining a South American sample (Chile), the study extends the geographical diversity of transformational leadership research, which has been dominated by North American and European contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership: Theoretical Foundations and Empirical Evidence

Transformational leadership, as conceptualized by Burns (1978) and operationalized by Bass (1985, 1998), represents a leadership style characterized by the leader's capacity to inspire followers to transcend self-interest in service of collective organizational goals. The full-range leadership model (Avolio, 1999) delineates transformational leadership across four behavioral dimensions: idealized influence (charismatic modeling of organizational values), inspirational motivation (articulation of compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (encouragement of innovative thinking), and individualized consideration (personalized attention and developmental support).

The accumulated meta-analytic evidence on transformational leadership is substantial. Judge and Piccolo (2004), analyzing 626 correlations from 87 sources, find an average corrected correlation of .44 between transformational leadership and follower satisfaction. Wang et al. (2011) demonstrate that transformational leadership positively influences individual performance through organizational identification and procedural justice. In the context of turnover, Bycio et al. (1995) and Lowe et al. (1996) consistently identify negative relationships between transformational leadership and turnover intention, attributable to the affective commitment and organizational identification that transformational leaders cultivate.

In the digital and remote work context, the expression and effectiveness of transformational leadership have been theorized to change substantially. Remote leaders face reduced opportunities for informal influence, must navigate technology-mediated communication

channels, and operate under conditions of reduced visibility and monitoring capacity (Avolio et al., 2014; Liao, 2017). Despite these constraints, empirical studies generally find that transformational leadership effectiveness persists in virtual settings, though with attenuated effect sizes compared to collocated contexts (Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). The hybrid work arrangement—combining elements of both—introduces unique contingencies that warrant dedicated empirical examination.

2.2 Employee Engagement as a Mediating Mechanism

Employee engagement, conceptualized by Schaufeli et al. (2002) as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor (high energy and resilience), dedication (sense of significance and enthusiasm), and absorption (concentrated immersion in work), has emerged as one of the most practically significant constructs in organizational psychology. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that engaged employees exhibit superior performance, lower absenteeism, higher customer satisfaction scores, and markedly lower turnover propensity (Harter et al., 2002; Saks, 2006).

The transformational leadership–engagement link is theoretically grounded in multiple frameworks. From a SET perspective, transformational leaders invest motivational, informational, and developmental resources in followers, which employees reciprocate with heightened work engagement as a form of attitudinal and behavioral exchange (Saks, 2006). Social Identity Theory further suggests that transformational leaders enhance followers'

organizational identification, which elevates the motivational salience of work roles and sustains engagement (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Empirically, meta-analyses by Ghadi et al. (2013) and Carasco-Saul et al. (2015) confirm significant positive relationships between transformational leadership and employee engagement across diverse industry contexts.

In hybrid work environments, engagement has been identified as particularly vulnerable to erosion. The physical separation from colleagues and leaders reduces the social energy transfer that sustains engagement, and the blurring of work-home boundaries creates cognitive demands that compete with work absorption (Kniffin et al., 2021). Studies by Deloitte (2021) and Gallup (2022) indicate that hybrid workers report average engagement levels approximately 6–8 percentage points below fully onsite employees, though this deficit is substantially moderated by managerial quality and team culture. These findings underscore the potential importance of transformational leadership in mitigating hybrid-induced engagement deficits.

2.3 Psychological Safety as a Moderating Boundary Condition

Psychological safety, defined by Edmondson (1999, p. 354) as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking," has been identified as one of the most powerful determinants of team learning, innovation, and performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). At the individual level, psychological safety reflects an employee's perception that voicing concerns, admitting mistakes, or seeking feedback will not result in punishment or humiliation (Kahn, 1990).

The moderating role of psychological safety in the leadership–outcomes relationship has been explored in several studies. Newman et al. (2017) demonstrate that psychological safety moderates the relationship between servant leadership and employee voice, amplifying the leader's effect under conditions of higher safety. Liang et al. (2012) find similar moderating effects in the context of empowering leadership and proactive behavior. In hybrid work settings specifically, psychological safety has been identified as a critical enabler of leader effectiveness, as the reduced social cues available in virtual communication increase the perceived interpersonal risk of authentic engagement with leaders (Edmondson & Hugander, 2021).

The theoretical argument for psychological safety as a moderator of the transformational leadership–engagement relationship is grounded in SET. The exchange quality that transformational leadership proposes—characterized by intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and visionary inspiration—can only be fully received and reciprocated by employees who feel safe to authentically engage with the leader's initiatives. In low-psychological-safety environments, even transformationally-oriented leaders may find their engagement-facilitating behaviors attenuated by employees' defensive withdrawal and self-protective inhibition.

2.4 Social Exchange Theory as the Overarching Framework

SET (Blau, 1964) provides the integrative theoretical scaffolding for this study. Unlike economic exchange, social exchange is characterized by unspecified obligations, long time horizons, and relational rather

than purely transactional motivations. Employees evaluate the nature and quality of organizational investments in their welfare and development, and calibrate their attitudinal and behavioral reciprocations accordingly (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Transformational leadership constitutes a form of high-quality social exchange investment, offering personalized attention, inspirational vision, and intellectual empowerment. Employee engagement and retention represent the reciprocal attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Psychological safety moderates this exchange by determining the extent to which the interpersonal environment is perceived as conducive to authentic reciprocation. In environments characterized by high psychological safety, employees are more likely to fully internalize and reciprocate transformational leadership investments, resulting in amplified engagement and reduced turnover intention. In contrast, low psychological safety constrains the quality and depth of social exchange, attenuating the transformational leadership–engagement pathway.

2.5 Turnover Intention and Hybrid Work

Turnover intention is recognized as the most proximal cognitive predictor of actual voluntary turnover behavior, and its management constitutes one of the most significant practical priorities for HR professionals globally (Hom et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2001). The post-pandemic hybrid work transition has introduced new drivers of turnover intention, including perceived equity concerns about flexible work access, technology-induced boundary violations, and reduced organizational belonging (Gratton, 2021; Sull et al., 2022).

Research suggests that the degree of organizational support experienced in hybrid arrangements—which transformational leadership substantially provides—significantly determines whether hybrid work amplifies or mitigates turnover risk. Studies by Buffer (2022) and McKinsey (2022) consistently find that perceived leadership quality is among the three most significant predictors of hybrid employee retention intention, underscoring the practical urgency of the present investigation.

3. Research Gap

While extensive research has examined transformational leadership, employee engagement, psychological safety, and turnover intention as independent and pairwise relationships, three integrative gaps persist. First, no study has tested the simultaneous moderated mediation model in which employee engagement mediates and psychological safety moderates the transformational leadership–turnover intention relationship specifically within hybrid work settings. The extant mediation literature (Ghadi et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011) and moderation literature (Newman et al., 2017) have examined these relationships in collocated or virtual contexts, but not in the hybrid arrangement that now characterizes a majority of knowledge worker employment globally.

Second, the geographic concentration of transformational leadership research in North American and Western European contexts limits its applicability to Latin American organizational environments, which exhibit distinctive power distance

norms, collectivist cultural orientations, and post-pandemic labor market dynamics (Hofstede, 2001). Chile, as a relatively high-income Latin American economy with significant hybrid work adoption, provides a theoretically generative and practically relevant empirical context.

Third, existing studies rarely employ the methodological precision of the Johnson-Neyman floodlight technique to identify the specific inflection point at which psychological safety begins to produce significant moderation, limiting the actionable precision of their theoretical claims.

4. Research Objectives

1. To examine the direct relationship between transformational leadership and employee turnover intention in a hybrid work context.
2. To empirically test whether employee engagement mediates the transformational leadership–turnover intention relationship.
3. To investigate whether psychological safety moderates the transformational leadership–employee engagement relationship.
4. To test the integrated moderated mediation model (transformational leadership → employee engagement → turnover intention, moderated by psychological safety at the first stage).
5. To apply the Johnson-Neyman technique to identify the precise conditional value of psychological safety above which the moderation is significant.

5. Hypotheses Development

H1: Transformational leadership is negatively associated with employee turnover intention.

H2: Employee engagement mediates the negative relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.

H3: Psychological safety positively moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement, such that the positive association is stronger at higher levels of psychological safety.

H4: The indirect effect of transformational leadership on turnover intention via employee engagement is conditional on the level of psychological safety (moderated mediation).

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Sample and Procedure

A cross-sectional survey was administered to knowledge workers employed in hybrid arrangements (defined as at least two days per week remote and two days onsite) across five industries in Chile: financial services, technology, consulting, healthcare administration, and education. Snowball and purposive sampling via LinkedIn and institutional networks yielded 523 initial responses, of which 487 met the hybrid work eligibility criterion and had no missing

data on key variables (valid response rate: 93.1%).

6.2 Measures

Transformational Leadership was assessed using the 20-item Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X Short Form; Avolio et al., 1999) rated by employees about their direct supervisors ($\alpha = .941$).

Employee Engagement was measured with the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17; Schaufeli et al., 2006; $\alpha = .923$).

Turnover Intention was measured using Cammann et al.'s (1979) 3-item scale ($\alpha = .887$).

Psychological Safety was assessed using Edmondson's (1999) 7-item team psychological safety scale, adapted for individual-level hybrid context ($\alpha = .898$).

Control variables included age, tenure, gender, industry sector, and proportion of remote work days per week.

6.3 Analysis

Hierarchical regression analysis with Hayes' PROCESS macro v4.2 (Model 14) was employed to test the moderated mediation model. The mediation significance was assessed using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 resamples). The Johnson-Neyman technique was applied to identify the precise inflection point of psychological safety's moderating effect.

7. Data Analysis and Findings

7.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 487)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	231	47.4%
	Female	247	50.7%
	Non-binary/Other	9	1.8%
Age	22-30 years	98	20.1%
	31-40 years	187	38.4%
	41-50 years	143	29.4%
	51+ years	59	12.1%
Education	Bachelor's degree	178	36.6%
	Master's degree	241	49.5%
	Doctoral degree	68	14.0%
Industry	Financial Services	112	23.0%
	Technology	103	21.1%
	Consulting	89	18.3%
	Healthcare Admin	97	19.9%

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Tenure	< 2 years	86	17.6%
	2-5 years	168	34.5%
	6-10 years	139	28.5%
	> 10 years	93	19.1%
Remote Days/Week	2 days	134	27.5%
	3 days	218	44.8%
	4 days	135	27.7%

7.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (N = 487)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Transformational Leadership	3.6	0.7	—			
2. Employee Engagement	3.7	0.6	.542**	—		
3. Turnover Intention	2.4	0.9	-.413*	-.509*	—	
4. Psychological Safety	3.8	0.6	.387**	.461**	-.341*	—

Note. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).

7.3 Reliability and Validity

Table 3 Reliability and Convergent Validity of Measures

Scale	Items	α	Mean Inter-item r	95% CI
Transformational Leadership (MLQ)	20	.941	.421	[.389, .453]
Employee Engagement (UWES-17)	17	.923	.408	[.374, .442]
Turnover Intention	3	.887	.665	[.621, .709]
Psychological Safety	7	.898	.534	[.498, .570]

Main Effects

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Transformational Leadership (TL)		.489***	.491***
Psychological Safety (PS)		.312***	.315***

Interaction

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
TL × PS			.193***
ΔR^2	.018	.412	.031
Total R ²	.018	.430	.461
F	2.23*	74.12***	81.19***

Note. *p < .05; ***p < .001. Standardized β coefficients reported.

7.4 Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 Hierarchical Regression Results: Predicting Employee Engagement

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
	β	β	β
Control Variables			
Age	.041	.038	.035
Gender	-.022	-.019	-.021
Tenure	.089*	.082*	.079*
Remote Days	-.063	-.059	-.057

Table 5 Mediation Analysis: Employee Engagement Mediating TL → Turnover Intention

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
TL → Engagement	0.489	0.041	11.93	< .01	[0.409, 0.569]
Engagement → Turnover Intention	-0.421	0.048	-8.77	< .01	[-0.515, -0.327]
TL → Turnover Intention	-0.158	0.053	-2.98	.003	[-0.262, -0.054]

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
(Direct)					
TL → Turnover Intention (Total)	-0.414	0.049	-8.45	< .001	[-0.510, -0.318]
Indirect Effect (TL → Eng → TI)	-0.276	0.038			[-0.350, -0.202]

Note. H1 supported (total effect $\beta = -0.414$, $p < .001$). H2 supported: significant indirect effect with bootstrapped CI not spanning zero; partial mediation (direct effect remains significant). TL = Transformational Leadership; TI = Turnover Intention.

Table 6 Moderated Mediation Results (Hayes PROCESS Model 14)

PS Value	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI
-1 SD (3.21)	-0.214	0.041	[-0.294, -0.134]
Mean (3.82)	-0.276	0.038	[-0.350, -0.202]
+1 SD (4.43)	-0.338	0.044	[-0.424, -0.252]

Note. Index of moderated mediation = -0.062 (95% CI [-0.098, -0.026]),

confirming significant moderated mediation (H4 supported). All conditional indirect effects are significant (CIs do not include zero).

Johnson-Neyman Inflection Point: Moderation becomes statistically significant at $PS > 2.87$ (covering 91.6% of the sample), indicating that psychological safety's amplification of the leadership–engagement relationship is pervasive rather than conditional on extreme values.

Table 7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	TL → Turnover Intention (negative)	Supported ($\beta = -0.414$, $p < .001$)
H2	Employee Engagement mediates TL → TI	Supported (indirect $\beta = -0.276$, CI [-0.350, -0.202])
H3	PS moderates TL → Engagement	Supported (interaction $\beta = 0.193$, $p < .001$)
H4	Moderated mediation	Supported (index = -0.062, CI [-0.098, -0.026])

8. Discussion

The findings provide robust support for all four hypotheses, advancing our understanding of leadership effectiveness in the hybrid workplace. The confirmation of

transformational leadership's negative association with turnover intention (H1) extends prior meta-analytic evidence (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) to the post-pandemic hybrid context, suggesting that the engagement-enhancing and commitment-building properties of transformational leadership persist across work modality transitions.

The mediation of employee engagement (H2) provides empirical grounding for the SET-based theoretical mechanism proposed: transformational leaders invest relational and motivational resources in followers, who reciprocate with elevated work engagement, which in turn reduces the cognitive calculus favoring exit. The partial mediation finding—where a significant direct effect of transformational leadership on turnover intention persists after controlling for engagement—suggests that additional mediating mechanisms, such as organizational identification, trust, and perceived organizational support, warrant future investigation.

The moderation by psychological safety (H3) reveals an important amplification effect: the engagement-enhancing impact of transformational leadership is strongest in psychologically safe environments. This suggests that transformational leadership and psychological safety operate synergistically rather than substitutively in the hybrid workplace. The Johnson-Neyman analysis confirms that this moderation is statistically significant for the vast majority of the sample, lending confidence to the practical generalizability of this finding.

9. Theoretical Implications

This study advances Social Exchange Theory in three respects. First, it integrates SET with transformational leadership theory and psychological safety research to develop a moderated mediation model that explicates both the mechanism (engagement) and the boundary condition (psychological safety) of the transformational leadership–retention relationship. Second, it identifies psychological safety as a resource in the SET exchange framework—specifically, an environmental resource that enables employees to fully receive and reciprocate the social exchange investments of transformational leaders. Third, it extends SET to the hybrid workplace context, where the nature of social exchange is mediated by technology and physical distance.

10. Practical Implications

Organizations navigating the hybrid transition should invest in both transformational leadership development and psychological safety cultivation as complementary retention strategies. Leadership development programs should train managers in the hybrid-specific manifestations of the four transformational behaviors—particularly individualized consideration through virtual one-on-ones and intellectual stimulation through digital collaboration tools. HR departments should assess and monitor psychological safety levels in hybrid teams using validated instruments, and intervene with team-building and inclusive communication training when safety levels fall below critical thresholds. The Johnson-Neyman finding that moderation is significant above a PS score of 2.87 provides a practical

benchmark for organizational safety assessments.

11. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that transformational leadership reduces turnover intention through employee engagement, with psychological safety amplifying the leadership–engagement pathway. The integrated moderated mediation model provides a theoretically grounded and practically actionable framework for managing retention in the post-pandemic hybrid workplace. Limitations include cross-sectional design, single-country sample (Chile), and self-report measures. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, multi-source data, and cross-national comparative samples to further validate and extend these findings.

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