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Psychological Safety in No Man's Land: How Teams Cross Lines to Create Value

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Abstract:
Boundaries within organizations provide necessary structure but often restrict the flow of knowledge and stifle innovation. In this article, key literature is synthesized to reveal how firms can transform the liminal space beyond these boundaries, referred to as "No Man's Land," into a productive arena for discovery. A four-stage model is proposed. The first stage identifies where information becomes trapped within structural, identity, or knowledge domains. The second stage demonstrates that psychological safety determines whether employees will cross these divides. The third stage reveals that the nature of the resulting conflict, whether task-focused or relationship-focused, dictates whether divergent insights are integrated or discarded. The fourth stage explains how boundary-spanning devices, such as brokers, cohesive triads, digital search routines, and shared artifacts, transform collected knowledge into new products, processes, and strategies. Leadership affects every stage. Visionary framing directs attention to overarching goals, while inclusive demonstrations of humility lower interpersonal risk; genuine curiosity encourages an exploratory voice. Evidence suggests that moderate task conflict, combined with high psychological safety, reliably enhances decision quality and creative output, whereas comfort without disciplined debate encourages conformity. Four significant research gaps are identified, including virtual boundaries in hybrid work, cultural variations in safety and conflict dynamics, the evolving careers of boundary spanners, and the interaction between uneven participation and perceived safety. Addressing these gaps promises a richer, multilevel theory of boundary navigation and provides practical guidance to leaders who aim to transform organizational boundary discomfort into safe spaces for sustained innovation and lasting success.

Key Words*: Psychological Safety; Boundary Spanning; Organizational Innovation; Task vs. Relationship Conflict; Leadership Behaviors; Structural Silos; Knowledge Integration; Conflict Choreography.*

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I. Introduction

Organizational structure and development are bound by a lattice of structural, social, and cognitive frontiers that both enable and constrain collective action. Classic contingency work showed that firms differentiate to cope with environmental variety yet must integrate to remain coherent and contemporary, creating inevitable fault lines between units, roles, and worldviews [1]. These demarcations resemble a corporate "No Man's (Persons) Land": an unclaimed strip of conversational and relational territory that many employees hesitate to enter. However, stepping across it delivers fresh information and novel combinations of discoveries. Ancona and Caldwell [2] found that teams whose members routinely bridged external boundaries enjoyed superior new product performance, while Rosenkopf and Nerkar [3] demonstrated that boundary-spanning search fuels technological exploration. Yet crossing invisible lines is inherently risky; voicing dissent or exposing ignorance can threaten one's status and sense of belonging. The seminal work of Edmondson [4] on psychological safety demonstrated that employees venture into uncertainty only when they believe their team will not punish candor, a conclusion reinforced by the Frazier*, et al.* [5] meta-analysis, which linked safety to learning and innovation. Even in supportive climates, the zone between silos can become a battleground of ideas. Jehn [6] documented that task-focused conflict enhances decision quality, whereas relationship-focused conflict undermines it. The paradox, then, is clear: organizations cannot innovate without transgressing boundaries, but they cannot survive repeated transgressions unless they cultivate norms that transform interpersonal risk into collective gain. This article synthesizes empirical research on boundaries, psychological safety, and conflict management to identify the conditions under which organizations can deliberately operate in their own No Man's Land, thereby turning spaces of potential estrangement into foundations of discovery.

II. Mapping Organizational Boundaries

Structural Boundaries

Organizations rarely suffer from a shortage of ideas; instead, they struggle to move ideas across the invisible spaces that separate people, roles, and knowledge domains. Structural boundaries arise from differentiation, functional silos, hierarchical layers, and geographic dispersion, which are created to match environmental complexity [1]. These fault lines generate information-processing advantages within each unit, yet they also create structural holes that impede the flow of non-redundant knowledge [7]. Brokers who span such holes serve as conduits and filters; Tushman and Scanlan [8] demonstrated that boundary-spanning individuals accelerate technology transfer and enhance innovation success rates.

Interpersonal or Identity Boundaries

Interpersonal or identity boundaries emerge from social categorization processes. Employees cognitively sort themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups based on profession, gender, ethnicity, or status [9]. While categorization provides belonging and meaning, it also activates fault lines that can harden into distrust and conflict when work is distributed across locations or cultures [10]. Threats to valued identities often lead individuals to defend the perimeter of the "self," withdrawing from cross-group engagement [11] or adopting a "don't tread on me" disposition to solidify their boundaries. Consequently, the benefits of diverse thinking remain unrealized unless leaders cultivate inclusive climates that legitimize and encourage identity exploration across divides.

Cognitive Boundaries

Cognitive boundaries refer to the disparate interpretive schemes and specialized vocabularies that grow within distinct occupational communities. Carlile [12] demonstrated that when knowledge is localized, embedded, and invested, transferring it across domains requires translation and transformation, not only transmission. On a manufacturing floor, Bechky [13] showed that engineers, technicians, and assemblers viewed the same artifact through incompatible lenses, often delaying production until cross-boundary dialogue took place. To address these epistemic divides, cross-community teams often use boundary objects, or artifacts (concepts) that are flexible enough to be interpreted locally yet robust enough to sustain a common identity across groups [14].

To summarize, not all boundaries hinder progress. Clear demarcations can safeguard accountability, maintain professional standards, and prevent information overload. Problems arise when boundaries become impermeable, turning collaboration zones into forbidden territory (also known as No Man's Land). Mapping an organization's boundary landscape, therefore, involves identifying (a) the location of structural, interpersonal, and cognitive divides, (b) the permeability of each divide, and (c) the mechanisms, brokers, boundary objects, and cross-functional teams through which ideas currently traverse or become trapped. By diagnosing where and why flows stall, leaders can target interventions that convert boundaries from barricades into generative seams, laying the groundwork for safe passage into the organizational forbidden territories where discovery resides.

III. Psychological Safety as a Passport Across Boundaries

Psychological safety, the shared belief that individuals can speak up, make mistakes, or ask for help without fear of humiliation or retribution, acts as a social passport that facilitates employee navigation, structural identity, and knowledge boundaries [4]. When team members perceive a high level of safety, they are more inclined to share unique expertise, challenge prevailing assumptions, and participate in cross-silo coordination that might otherwise be deemed too risky or politically costly [15]. A meta-analysis involving 117 independent samples confirmed that psychological safety consistently predicts learning behavior, creativity, and innovation, outcomes that are reliant on free information exchange across divides [5].

Leadership behaviors are critical antecedents. Inclusive leaders who actively invite diverse perspectives reduce status-based inhibition, thereby increasing safety in demographically mixed teams [16]. Humble leadership further enhances safety by modeling fallibility and curiosity, encouraging employees to reciprocate with honest feedback [17]. Safety is also socially contagious. In longitudinal hospital studies, initial spikes in psychological safety predicted subsequent gains in voice behavior and error reporting, which, in turn, reinforced safety, creating a virtuous cycle that is critical in tightly coupled, boundary-laden settings [18]. However, safety is not a panacea: without mechanisms that channel dissent into task-focused debate, high-safety teams may slide into groupthink [19]. Effective teams, therefore, pair safety with conflict management structures, such as red team drills that critically challenge plans or ideas, to ensure that candor translates into productive rather than merely congenial outcomes.

Traditionally, measuring safety has relied on Edmondson's seven-item scale [4]. However, new instruments such as the Psychological Safety Inventory enhance discriminant validity by distinguishing safety from related constructs like trust [16]. These refinements enable researchers to trace finer-grained mediations,

such as how safety influences the extent to which boundary-crossing comments are heard and acted upon [17]. Overall, research indicates that psychological safety is a necessary but not the only requirement: it provides access to organizational No Man's Land, yet sustainable exploration requires complementary norms and routines that direct the resulting dialogue toward learning and innovation.

IV. Productive Versus Affective Conflict in No Man's Land

Venturing into organizational No Man's Land inevitably provokes disagreement. However, the consequences of that disagreement depend on whether the conflict remains task-focused or shifts to relationship-focused. Task (or cognitive) conflict centers on the merits of ideas, interpretations, and courses of action; it is essentially an epistemic contest over "what is right." Relationship (or affective) conflict, by contrast, is a clash over "who is valued," rooted in personal dislike, status threats, or identity affronts [6]. Early laboratory and field evidence suggested that moderate task conflict can elevate decision quality by broadening the information search, whereas even low levels of affective conflict reliably impair satisfaction and performance [18].

Meta-analytic work has refined this paradox. De Wit*, et al.* [19] confirmed that the task-conflict–performance link is curvilinear and heavily moderated by team trust and psychological safety. When those boundary conditions are absent, task debate quickly deteriorates into personal friction. Behfar*, et al.* [20] further showed that conflict-resolution processes (how teams discuss, manage time, and resolve disagreements) explain up to 22 percent of the variance in whether conflict remains productive. More recent studies illuminate the form of expression. Weingart*, et al.* [21] demonstrated that direct, low-intensity dissent preserves task benefits while minimizing relational damage, whereas indirect or high-intensity dissent escalates affective conflict. Extending this nuance, Farh*, et al.* [22] found that asymmetric conflict, where a vocal minority repeatedly challenges a silent majority, suppresses creativity despite being nominally task-oriented in content, because perceived fairness erodes.

In synthesis, the literature suggests that in cross-boundary settings, the stakes are higher. Divergent professional languages, power asymmetries, and identity fault lines amplify the speed at which cognitive friction converts to ego threat. Effective boundary protocols thus pair psychological safety (license to speak) with conflict choreography (rules for how to speak). Structured devices, devil's advocate rotations, red team challenges, or timed contentious brainstorming sessions channel debate toward the issue, not the person, keeping the ground navigable rather than turning No Man's Land into a minefield. The evidence positions productive conflict as the engine that converts boundary crossing into innovation, while affective conflict is the breakdown that strands teams before discovery can occur.

V. Boundary-Spanning Mechanisms and Innovation

Innovation rarely originates within a single silo; it emerges when ideas, resources, and perspectives traverse organizational, disciplinary, or market boundaries. Early network research indicated that individuals positioned at the intersection of disconnected groups (boundary spanners) accelerate information transfer and enhance the commercial success of new technologies [8]. Subsequent field studies expanded the focus to team-level mechanisms: new-product teams whose members frequently reached beyond their functions outperformed insular peers in speed-to-market and originality by incorporating fresh customer and technical knowledge [2]. Boundary spanning also occurs through structural holes in inter-unit networks. Firms whose scientists maintain non-redundant external ties file more novel patents, even after controlling for research and development (R&D) intensity [23]. Weak ties facilitate the search component of innovation, finding distant knowledge, yet successful projects still require transfer mechanisms like shared vocabulary or prototyping routines to integrate that knowledge [24]. One powerful integrator is the technology broker: Hargadon and Sutton [25] observed that engineers who cycled ideas between disparate industries recombined older inventions into award-winning new products, illustrating how cross-domain analogy sparks creativity.

At the firm level, boundary-spanning search strategies broaden exploration landscapes. Rosenkopf and Nerkar [3] documented that optical-disk companies investing in both intra- and extra-domain knowledge achieved superior technological impact while avoiding the high costs of unfocused diversification. More recent econometric evidence confirms that boundary-spanning patent citations enhance performance by enabling the synthesis of diverse building blocks into novel solutions [22,26]. Digital ecosystems amplify this effect because platform participants who search across partner boundaries experience steeper innovation payoffs than those mining only internal data [26].

Social cohesion is important: Tortoriello and Krackhardt [27] found that Simmelian ties (triads that embed a broker in a dense local clique) help translate foreign ideas into usable innovations by providing trust and a shared context. Complementary boundary objects (e.g., mock-ups, ontologies) further facilitate translation across knowledge domains by remaining interpretable to each community while maintaining a common reference [12]. Together, these findings depict boundary spanning as a multi-level capability. Individuals broker, teams

coordinate, networks connect, and artifacts translate. Organizations that design and synchronize these mechanisms turn the uncertainties of No Man's Land into fertile ground for continuous innovation.

VI. Leadership Behaviors Enabling Safe Boundary Crossing

Boundary crossing becomes possible when leaders signal that dissent and experimentation are valued rather than punished. Transformational leaders articulate a compelling collective vision, thereby directing attention away from parochial silo goals toward superordinate aims [28]. Meta-analytic evidence links such visioning to employees' willingness to engage in cross-functional collaboration even when it threatens local power bases [29]. Inclusive leadership acts as the relational lubricant if those leaders explicitly invite divergent viewpoints and publicly acknowledge contributors. In those instances, team members feel authorized to enter unfamiliar domains and share non-redundant knowledge [30,31]. Leaders who model humility further reduce the interpersonal risk of boundary crossing. By admitting fallibility and seeking feedback, humble managers normalize learning behavior, which Owens and Hekman [32] found to predict a 9% increase in voiced suggestions across unit lines. Recent fieldwork in China demonstrated that the same humility-to-voice pathway holds in high power-distance contexts, mediated by psychological safety [31]. Curiosity-driven leadership extends these effects: leaders who pose open-ended questions stimulate employees to explore across knowledge domains. Thompson and Klotz [33] documented that a one-standard-deviation increase in leader curiosity elevated cross-boundary idea sharing by 18%.

Finally, effective leaders deploy structuring mechanisms that keep conflict cognitive rather than affective. Red team/blue team drills, rotating devil's advocate roles, and staged after-action reviews channel boundary-spanning debates toward issues, not identities [20]. Collectively, these behaviors cultivate climates where employees possess both the license (psychological safety) and the tools (conflict choreography) to navigate organizational No Man's Land in search of innovation.

VII. Integrative Framework and Research Gaps

Synthesizing the preceding sections results in a process model where innovative outcomes depend on four interrelated elements: (1) boundary type, (2) psychological safety, (3) conflict form, and (4) knowledge recombination. Structural, identity, and cognitive boundaries first determine where novel information resides [12]. Whether actors will cross those divides relies on team-level psychological safety, which reduces reputational risk [4]. Once contact occurs, the quality of conflict (task versus affective) determines whether disparate insights are integrated or rejected [22]. Finally, boundary-spanning ties and artifacts translate surviving ideas into usable innovations, a process enhanced when brokers embed themselves in cohesive triads that provide trust and context [27] and when digital platforms increase search breadth [31,33]. Feedback loops complete the system. Importantly, while successful cross-boundary initiatives enhance future psychological safety, failed or toxic encounters reinforce defensive boundaries.

Despite strong empirical evidence supporting each link, multiple research gaps remain. For example, 1) digital/hybrid boundaries: Remote work creates fluid, technology-mediated divides that blur traditional silos; however, little is known about how virtual cues affect safety and conflict dynamics. 2) Cross-cultural boundary conditions: Most safety and conflict findings originate from North American or Western European samples, while power distance and collectivism may influence the model in unexplored ways. 3) Temporal mobility: Boundary spanning is often viewed as a static role, yet individuals dynamically enter and exit spanning positions. Longitudinal designs are necessary to capture these trajectories and their effects on learning curves. 4) Interaction of safety and conflict asymmetry: Recent evidence on conflict asymmetry suggests that the distribution, not just the amount, of dissent influences creativity; integrating asymmetry measures with safety constructs could enhance predictive power. Addressing these gaps, as well as others not addressed here, will advance scholarship from isolated constructs toward a dynamic, multilevel theory that explains how and when organizations can convert No Man's Land into a perpetual source of innovation.

VIII. Conclusions

Organizational progress depends on the disciplined navigation of "No Man's Land," the personal space where entrenched boundaries meet untested ideas. This article demonstrates that boundaries are neither entirely detrimental nor inherently beneficial. Boundaries clarify essential roles but can solidify into barriers that stifle innovation. Whether boundaries serve as launch pads or roadblocks relies on three interlocking factors: psychological safety that legitimizes risk-taking, conflict norms that maintain debate over the merits, and deliberate boundary-spanning mechanisms that translate novel insights into usable solutions. Leaders play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining these conditions. By modeling inclusivity, humility, and curiosity, leaders can cultivate environments where employees feel empowered to cross silos. By instituting conflict choreography, such as devil's advocacy and red-team drills, leaders can preserve the cognitive heat of disagreement while preventing relational fallout.

The integrative framework presented in this article emphasizes that innovation is a cascading process where boundary permeability, safety, and productive conflict mutually reinforce each other in iterative cycles. However, digital transformation, cultural diversity, and the fluidity of modern work arrangements introduce new complexities that existing theories only partially address. Bridging these empirical gaps will require multilevel, longitudinal research that captures how virtual cues, cultural norms, and dynamic roles reshape the boundary-spanning journey over time. For practitioners, the message may be obvious; venturing into organizational No Man's Land should be a strategic priority, rather than a reluctant last resort. By combining psychological safety with disciplined conflict and strong bridging structures, organizations can transform zones of discomfort into spaces of discovery, turning protective barriers into pathways for continuous, sustainable innovation.

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