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**Moderators that Accelerate
Competency Development from
Challenging Work Experiences**



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Abstract

Leaders learn and grow from work experience. Scholars have claimed that at least 70% of learning and leadership development comes from work experience, particularly challenging experiences. This research examines the relationship between challenging work experiences and competency development, and moderators of the relationship.

The relationship between challenging work experience and competency development varies across different situations and contexts: not all individuals learn and grow equally and uniformly from the same experiences. The relationship can be accelerated or attenuated by various factors: individual characteristics such as cognitive abilities and personal propensities or situational factors such as psychological safety and relationships with supervisors. This research identifies the factors that accelerate competency development from challenging work experiences.

The data used for this research consist of 494 Japanese participants who occupy the position of manager or higher. Participants were randomly recruited from an online panel in 2017.

The results showed that challenging work experiences and competency development were significantly correlated, indicating competencies are developed from challenging work experiences. As previous research has shown for non-Japanese samples, this

research confirmed that individual factors—self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, and work engagement—moderate the relationship. When individuals have higher levels of these individual traits, they develop competency from challenging work experiences more effectively.

This research found that psychological safety moderates the relationship in that it accelerates competency development when individuals face and learn from challenging work experiences. Competency development is positive when individuals feel high psychological safety and nonsignificant when the perceived psychological safety is low. The moderation effect of psychological safety was significantly larger than those of self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, and work engagement.

Having trusting relationships with supervisors contributes to creating psychological safety. Incremental effects that trusting relationships with supervisors have on psychological safety and its moderation of the relationship between challenging work experiences and competency development were also examined and found to be significant.

Moreover, the results indicate that the positive effect of psychological safety is only active when individuals believe they have a trusting relationship with their supervisor. When this trust is lacking, the positive effect of psychological safety is attenuated, if not nullified.

This research makes an empirical contribution to understanding the roles of psychological safety and trusting relationships with supervisors as well as the mechanisms by which they moderate how individuals develop competencies from challenging experiences in their work. This research elucidates the contributions of situational factors which are of equal or greater importance than individual factors in optimizing competency development from challenging work experiences.

To accelerate and optimize competency development from challenging work experiences, organizations and supervisors need to not only identify those with suitable individual characteristics, but to also provide psychologically safe environments and build trusting relationships with their subordinates.