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Frontline leadership in a distal employment relationship: a qualitative psychological contract perspective

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ABSTRACT

Frontline leadership is crucial to framing the psychological contract (PC), which governs implicit expectations and obligations between workers and their employers. Much of PC research focuses on white-collar and professional occupations, including in managing recent shifts between workplace and home-based working, and the dynamics of distal relationships in jobs such as driving are much less explored. This study explores the employment relationship, and in particular the supervisory role, in bus driving through the PC's lens. Given the inherently subjective and relational nature of the PC and the dynamic context of Covid and industrial disputes in which the research was conducted, a qualitative approach was employed to understand how distal employment relationships influence the formation and fulfilment of PC. The findings highlighted structural challenges relating to privatisation and driver shortages, though it also underscored five distinct and relevant aspects of workplace support: trust, psychological safety, supervisor-bus driver exchange, co-worker relationships and relational leadership. Notably, drivers perceived under-delivery in these attributes were linked to inadequate perceived organisational support (POS) and PC breaches. These insights have implications for the broader literature on frontline leadership, POS, and PC while offering practical suggestions for improving employee relations and human resource management (HRM) in the industry.

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Introduction

Supervisors, as representatives of the organisation, play a pivotal role in shaping the employment relationship. However, they face challenges in maintaining employee well-being and addressing gaps in organisational support where direct interaction is limited (Knies et al. 2018; Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). In contrast to teleworking remote workers, where virtual connectivity maintains a supervisory presence and availability, occupations such as bus drivers have much more limited contact with their immediate manager. This 'distal' relationship is characterised by work conducted independently with minimal face-to-face interaction with supervisors and colleagues. Such a setting makes frontline supervisory relationships potentially problematic, and it can also complicate the implementation of HR practices which

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aim to mitigate job stress and foster engagement. These initiatives are important to address ongoing problems such as industrial disputes and labour turnover in the passenger transport sector, and in particular respond to employee well-being needs which were intensified in the pandemic. The experience of Covid emphasised the importance of supervisors to provide consistent support and build relationships based on fairness and trust (Udod et al. 2024).

The privatisation of the New Zealand (NZ) bus sector, as in other countries, intensified competitive pressures and shifted the focus of employers to cost reduction and profitability over fair working conditions (MacManus 2021). This heightened emphasis on short-term financial outcomes may serve to undermine employees' perceived organisational support (POS) and challenge the established psychological contract (PC), defined by D. Rousseau (1995) as the unwritten and implicit set of expectations and obligations between employees and their organisations. Increased transactionality in the employment relationship compromises its relational foundations yet may at the same time raise expectations of the supervisory role. In conventional work settings, frontline leadership is crucial to establishing trust and reciprocity, managing expectations and worker well-being. Notwithstanding their distal work context and prompted by the challenges of privatisation and the pandemic, bus drivers' may increasingly turn to supervisors to address their psychological needs for equity, safety, recognition and trust. How this unfolded is the focus of the present study. The research explores workers' needs and the supervisor response in the context of the pandemic, focusing on how the PC evolved within the constraints of a distal employment relationship and with heightened well-being demands. Unusually in PC research, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to capture richer insights in a rapidly changing and challenging workplace context. The main research question guiding our study is, 'How do supervisors in distal work contexts address employees' psychological needs for equity, safety, recognition, and trust, and what are the implications for the overall maintenance of the relational PC?'

Fundamentally, the PC is predominantly shaped by POS, with supervisors serving as representatives of the organisation (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003). Supervisors, through their behaviours, directly influence how employees interpret the organisation's commitment to its obligations, which in turn impacts the outcome of PC. Supportive leadership behaviour, such as recognising employee efforts and addressing concerns, reinforces POS and strengthens the perception of PC (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003; Rousseau 1995). However, in a more distal employment relationship setting, factors such as frequency and quality of communication, trust, workplace relationships and sources of perceived support within the workplace mediate the influence of supervisors on PC formation (Kraak et al. 2024). This underscores the complexity of maintaining POS in contexts where direct supervisory influence is constrained, especially where the work itself may be demanding. The paper explores these issues beginning with a literature review then followed by the methodological approach, thematic results, and a discussion that links the findings to the PC framework. It concludes with implications for the organisations, study limitation and future research directions.

Literature review

Urban bus driving is known to be a demanding profession, characterised by strict schedules and long working hours, low wages, isolation at work, and, at times, stressful

interaction with customers. Job demands may be conflicting, such as balancing professional customer service requirements while keeping tight time schedules and compliance with safety requirements (Meijman and Kompier, 1998). Research has consistently identified stress and poor well-being among bus drivers (Glasø et al., 2011; Kompier et al., 2000; Tse et al., 2005), with high rates of sickness, mortality, absenteeism and turnover (Batool et al., 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2020). A comprehensive analysis of five decades of literature on the well-being of bus drivers confirmed it as a high-risk occupation (Tse et al., 2005).

In the NZ bus sector, these challenges are exacerbated by structural issues related to privatisation and the Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM) policy introduced by the government in 2016 (MacManus 2021). This introduced full commercialisation of the public bus services, which are co-funded by local councils and Waka Kotahi (the NZ Transport Authority) but contracted to various operators, almost always from the private sector. The model sought to reduce costs and provide better value for funders through competitive tendering. However, this led to concerns about low pay, split shifts, and unpaid breaks that exacerbated stress and dissatisfaction among drivers (George 2019; MacManus 2021). Although the regulations mandate paid rest breaks and limits working hours, a gap in enforcement contributes to ongoing issues in the sector. For example, Lock (2019) noted drivers being overworked and exploited, which caused fatigue and affected their personal lives. These work demands, coupled with the increased cost of living especially in cities like Auckland, places a significant strain on bus drivers (Lock 2019). This contributed to severe bus driver shortages and industrial disputes which threaten the reliability of the public transport system (Todd 2022), as well as undermining public policy goals of improving accessibility and reducing carbon emissions. Such features of privatisation are also observed in countries such as the UK and elsewhere in the OECD (ITF (2008); Savage 1993).

Risks to bus drivers increased dramatically under the Covid pandemic as most continued to work given their essential frontline status. Essential workers, including bus drivers, faced heightened exposure to the COVID-19 virus as a result (Garfin et al., 2022). Globally, the toll on transport workers was severe, with reports of fatalities among drivers in London and New York (The Lancet, 2020). In NZ, it was reported that over 190 transport workers, including bus drivers, became infected with the virus (WSWS 2022). The pandemic also intensified existing employment challenges as drivers reported feeling unsupported and undervalued as work pressures and stress increased (Peters 2021).

This study explores these dynamics drawing on the concepts of the PC and perceived organisational and supervisory support. The PC refers to 'an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party' (D. Rousseau 1995, 123). These perceived mutual obligations may differ from the formal written contract and are influenced by implicit promises, obligations and commitments which have a significant effect on well-being, trust and work behaviour (D. Rousseau 1995; D. M. Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni 1994). Conventionally, PC research focuses on direct, dyadic relationships that emphasise individual perceptions of reciprocity. However, the distal context of bus driving, and systemic constraints introduced by privatisation, mediate these relationships and introduces a degree of complexity that may dilute the clarity of employees' expectations as well as employers' ability to meet those expectations. In this environment, supervisors, as the immediate point of contact, continue to play a key role in interpreting and fulfilling the PC (Kraak

et al. 2024). However, systematic barriers, including power constraints and limited resources, may hinder their ability to meet bus drivers' expectations of adequate support.

We explore this problem by also drawing on the concept of POS which, in the work psychology literature, refers to employees' beliefs regarding the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Studies consistently demonstrate that high POS is associated with job satisfaction, commitment, and employee well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). However, in contexts where cost-cutting measures and profitability assume precedence, in particular following a 'shock' such as privatisation, initiatives that foster POS (e.g. employee recognition and training programs) are deprioritized, with negative effects (Kaufman 2015; Shore et al. 1995). For example, Bach and Givan's (2010) study of privatised hospital networks revealed that lower wages and unfavourable working conditions contributed to diminished POS among healthcare workers.

The concepts of POS and PC are related in that they focus on reciprocal relationships as shaping employee perceptions of trust and therefore their commitment (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003). The two key types of PC – transactional and relational – further clarify the dynamics of POS. Transactional PC pertains to employees' beliefs regarding the economic and tangible elements of the employment relationship, which may include specific expectations about compensation, job security, working hours and the work environment (Cullinane and Dundon 2006; D. M. Rousseau 2004). If employees feel that such basic needs are not being adequately met, this undermines their faith in the organisation and reduces their perceptions of organisational value and care. Relational PC emphasises the importance of longer-term, non-economic exchanges that build trust, loyalty, and emotional support (O'Donohue et al., 2014). Relational PC is particularly pivotal in enhancing discretionary work behaviours, often driven by employees' sense of obligation and commitment to their employer (Chakraborty et al. 2023). Research also indicates that insufficient POS and/or breach of PC are associated with numerous negative outcomes, including employee disengagement and turnover (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Suazo and Stone-Romero 2011).

Perceived supervisor support serves as a key component of POS and reflects employees' perceptions of the extent to which their immediate managers value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 2002). Supervisors act as the immediate representatives of organisations, providing a tangible face to organisational support. Through their actions and interaction, they influence the strength and quality of relational PCs by fostering trust, recognition and a sense of care, which are integral to maintaining employee engagement and commitment in the context of organisational relationships. Research shows that supervisor support directly influences employees' work attitudes and behaviours and mediates the relationship between POS and employee outcomes (Kurtessis et al. 2017). However, in a cost-focused and distal context supervisors face constraints that could limit their capacity to provide adequate support. Variability in leadership styles and competencies can also lead to inconsistent and poor relational skills (Avolio et al. 2009; Wang et al. 2005; Yukl et al. 2011). These constraints may inadvertently communicate a lack of support, even when organisational intentions are otherwise. All of which can reduce the efficacy of perceived supervisor support as a compensatory mechanism for low POS. In the bus driver setting, limited contact may mean that managers are instead perceived as merely enforcers of organisational directives rather

than advocates for employee needs, which may, in turn, reinforce the problem of low perceived support. In this study, we investigate the nature of the driver-supervisor relationship and how this impacts on perceptions of the organisation and the job itself. We also explore how far interactions among co-workers may be crafted to foster a sense of belonging and offer emotional support, which may be especially important in a dispersed work context (Joiner 2007; Norling and Chopik 2020).

Method

We adopted a critical realist ontology within the PC framework for this study. This approach recognises that while organisational practices objectively influence employee expectations, subjective experiences and interpretation are central to how relational expectations, such as trust, fairness and mutual support, are perceived. An attention on relational PC places the focus firmly on the role of supervisors and enables the exploration of how any unmet expectations and perceived inequities in the employment relationship may influence the well-being and engagement of drivers. This ontological stance informed a qualitative methodology to provide in-depth insights into the complex dynamic of these perceptions and relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 62 participants drawn from urban bus operators in the Auckland and Hamilton conurbations. These were recruited through two routes: direct recruitment and organisational recruitment. Under the former method, drivers were approached directly at bus stations and layover points and a snowball method was also employed. In the latter, bus operators were approached to facilitate participant recruitment, which one company permitted. Trade union representatives were also invited to participate to obtain their views of work and employment relations in light of industrial disputes recurring in the sector. Interviews explored the experience of bus drivers' work, the nature of the driver-supervisor relationship, and wider contextual issues such as organisational provision of support, training and development, and industrial relations. Interviewees comprised 33 drivers (male = 26, female = 7), 20 supervisors (male = 14, female = 6) and 9 representatives and officers from two trade unions (male = 6, female = 3). Typically for the sector, around four in five drivers and supervisors were immigrants, mainly from Asian, Indian and Pacific Island backgrounds, and all but six were aged over forty. Ethics approval was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee for this study.

The semi-structured interview format allows for flexibility and better participant ease (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021; Galletta 2013). Each interview took an average of 30 minutes and occurred in private places to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, then manually analysed. This approach allows for full immersion to help contextualise and interpret the data more effectively (Braun and Clarke 2006). Maher et al. (2018) asserted that this 'encourages a slower and more meaningful interaction with the data [and] great freedom in terms of constant comparison, trialling arrangements, viewing perspectives, reflection and ultimately developing interpretative insights' (P. 11). The data analysis was subject to an abductive approach. Unlike deductive reasoning, which tests predefined hypotheses, or inductive reasoning which develops generalisation directly from the qualitative data, abductive reasoning seeks to bridge the gap between theory and observation through exploration of 'best-fit' explanations of emerging patterns (Thompson, 2022; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). In the context of bus

drivers, the abductive approach was designed to go beyond descriptive analysis of challenges to propose explanatory frameworks integrating structural and individual perspectives in a dynamic context. The data analysis proceeded through the six-stage thematic coding steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involves familiarisation with the data; we read and re-read the transcripts to immerse ourselves in the content. In the second stage, we generated initial codes based on the repeated codes to identify meaningful segments of the data. In the third stage, we grouped the repeated codes into overarching themes, and in the fourth stage, we ensured that the resulting themes emerged directly from what participants shared in their interviews. In the fifth stage, we defined and named themes to align with the key concepts. In the final stage, we integrated the themes to address our research aim. A review of the coding and thematic analysis was undertaken, including member-checking, and iterative coding and theme refinement, at the end of the thematic process to ensure that the themes aligned with the data extracted. This process was designed to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

Results

The interviews explored the challenges faced by bus drivers, with a particular focus on employee relationships and support. Table 1 summarises the overall thematic findings that emerged, highlighting the range of drivers' issues and concerns which include working hours and schedules, disruption of work-life balance, and low pay relative to high cost of living. These findings support extant literature that establish bus driving as a high-risk occupation with deleterious well-being outcomes (Batool et al., 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2020; Kompier et al., 2000; Tse et al., 2006). These risks were exacerbated by the pandemic-induced factors such as the heightened anxiety of COVID-19

Table 1. Thematic findings of the study.

Themes	Aspects
Work hours and schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sleep and meal routine disruption. ● Lack of recovery time. ● Work-life balance and social life.
Work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tight schedules, including impeding use of toilet. ● Inadequate rest/nap space at the depot. ● Limited public toilet facilities on bus routes. ● Congested traffic conditions.
Pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low pay and high cost of living.
Anxiety of Covid infection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work environment hazard associated with exposure to the public. ● Individual vulnerability (e.g. age and underlying health condition). ● Fear of bringing Covid home and infecting family.
Passenger related anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Belligerent and misbehaving passengers. ● Lack of support in situation of abuse/attack. ● Lack of enforcement of Covid guidelines.
Work disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sometimes empty buses introduce feelings of loneliness and ennui. ● Changes to shifts and financial strain. ● Job insecurity.
Supervisor-driver exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distant and minimal interactions ● Relationship reactive than proactive. ● Drivers lack trust and confidence in the supervisor and management.
Supervisor performance style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Performance-oriented and sometimes punitive leadership style.
Co-worker support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Camaraderie – felt heard, comfortable, and supported among peers

contagion, job insecurity, work disruption and increased threats and verbal abuse from passengers as well as their lack of compliance to Covid safety measures on the bus. Here, we specify our focus onto the peculiarities of the driver-supervisor relationship and the implications this has for driver welfare. The five key themes from these results relate to *supervisor-driver exchange*, *trust*, *psychological safety*, *task-oriented leadership style* and *co-worker support*. In the discussion of these issues that follows, quotes are labelled as driver (D), supervisors (S), or union representative (U), followed by participant number.

Fundamental to shaping the supervisor-driver relationship is the physical disconnection and short temporal span of interactions, usually conducted at the front desk or over the radio, and some drivers said they had no personal encounters with their superiors at all. For example, a bus driver described their relations:

Our interaction is minimal, and it's normally over the radio or phone. They use the radio to communicate or phone us, so that's about it really. (D01)

A union representative reinforced this view, highlighting inadequate communication channels:

The biggest challenge is the communication between drivers, dispatch, and management, being able to communicate with them and go to them when you've got problems. Communicating isn't really there. (U01)

Even during critical events such as a change of ownership of the bus company, a lack of communication and consultation was reported as routine, which some drivers said they were not informed:

The company changes, but nobody bothered to tell us about all those changes. We were just expected to go along with it without any explanation. It makes us we feel unimportant. (D02)

The findings not only underscore the communication challenges associated with the remote nature of the supervisor-drivers' relationship, but also suggest that this limited interaction, typically confined to disembodied exchanges over the radio and phone, was perceived as transactional. For example, a union representative described supervisors' role as controlling and even punitive:

The supervisors are all about performance management, timekeeping and disciplining drivers who fail to meet the expectations, which is another reason why a lot of drivers left the industry because they have had enough. (U02)

Within the broader concept of leadership, the findings indicated a task-oriented rather than relational leadership style. For example, a driver highlighted how the PTOM and its focus on costs has constrained supervisor capacity to develop interpersonal relations, which aligns with participant U02 as reported above:

So, they used to be actively involved in the day-to-day life of every driver. And that is necessary if we want to add support. It's not like that now, so they maintain the company intent. They want to professionalise the service. So, they want to have automated operations and control. Because all of that saves money, but it also costs a great deal of human anxiety . . . There was no support now. It has gone. And the only thing that has remained is discipline as it relates to possibly fines from the company. This has developed total hostility from a driver's point of view . . .(D09)

Other remarks reflected that time constraints and efficiency demands made it difficult for supervisors to understand and address the problems drivers face, or develop an empathic approach:

... But there's no time for understanding the problems. I've worked many years as a teacher, so I understand about allowing the learner to learn but guiding. So, there you go. Now it's really shocking ... It comes across as an emotional response, but the emotion is based on the experience of undergoing these changes. (D11)

Drivers emphasised that the effective withdrawal of supervisory support activities meant that they were exposed only to the disciplinary face of supervision, and were lacking in voice or advocacy:

... but the point I'm making is that the supervisor did not act on our behalf. They never act on our behalf. They act on behalf of the company ... We used to have supervisors who were there to enforce regulations and to guide us and support us as drivers and reprimand us if necessary. All of this support has disappeared ... (D10)

Extending these remarks, many drivers were reluctant to share their personal issues or concerns with their supervisor, based on the perception that they do not care about their well-being. This sense of neglect was also influenced by a perception that some supervisors lack appropriate interpersonal skills or personalities;

I don't think supervisors care, so talking to them about our personal problems is difficult. Some supervisors are good, but others have personalities you do not want to approach ... I can tell you, many drivers have many personal issues, but I don't think the management knows about this ... (D12)

Interviewees also acknowledged that excessive workload hinders supervisors' ability to engage with their drivers. A bus driver pointed out how this arose as a systematic issue under the PTOM, which contributed to resource constraints:

And they still, but there are just too few of them. So, if you used to have a team of 50 drivers, that was hard enough, but you can't do your job if you now have a team of 200. So, they're not sustained. They're being paid to do a job that cannot be done because they used to be, for example, in a depot with 200 drivers, there were four duty supervisors, each with a team of 50 drivers. All of those supervisory positions ... They no longer exist. There is now one depot supervisor, and there is none of the personal interaction that they used to be; many more terrible things have happened. (D03)

Likewise, a supervisor described their own role as excessively demanding:

It's very challenging because we are under stress the whole time. It's not one supervisor, one driver. It's like one supervisor to 50 or 100 drivers, depending on how many supervisors and drivers we've got on a particular day and all the problems and schools. I'm in charge of schools and Charters, so I got to manage that the school runs are covered, that comes first, and the charters are covered. And then the Northern Express and the local runs and stuff like that. Then we get quotes and phone calls from drivers and the public and sell bus tickets for the school runs. Yeah, it's a multitude of tasks. (S01)

All of which means that there is little scope to develop trust relations in this context. Drivers often experience a sense of detachment from management, feeling that their personal challenges are less understood and valued, and that they may even be used

against them if expressed to their superiors. This perceived lack of trust reinforces barriers to open communication, leaving drivers hesitant to share concerns:

We are less likely to share our problems with the supervisor or manager because then we are judged . . . people have lost that human. . . It's hard to speak with them and to make them see people who are low-income earners and understand them. I'm not good at describing things, but it's really difficult to get in touch with the management to discuss my personal problems. (D04)

Another driver made a similar observation, highlighting the significant stress and emotional burdens drivers face yet an underlying reluctance to express their issues due to fear of adverse consequences as well as personal reticence:

Drivers are too good at hiding things. Drivers are there for their job, and we hide from the feeling stressed or anything. Some of us don't, I don't mind telling them if I'm under stress. Yeah. Like, some of us will tell them that we are under stress, and a lot of drivers will hide it, because they're too scared. And I'm being honest about that they're too scared, scared that they're going to lose their duties, too scared that they will be put off.. (D05)

Similarly, another driver said that despite the desire to voice concerns, a sense of discomfort and anxiety prevented them.

I don't speak with the management often. Sometimes I want to speak to them about my issues, but I just don't feel comfortable . . . (D11)

Such responses indicate a lack of perceived psychological safety, though positive relations were reported among peers:

Our relationship [with co-workers] is better. We sort of freer to speak about our problems. This is not the same with management; we try to be mindful of the bosses, but between each other . . . (D06)

The findings consistently highlighted positive relationships among co-workers despite their also being physically distant during work:

. . . But I always remembered what I enjoyed about it. And the most important thing was being part of a workforce where we all face the same challenges. So, we had to have command of our own vehicle, and our own timetables, and all of that, but everybody was in the same situation. So, there was great camaraderie amongst the colleagues. This was really important. In fact, that's where most of the positive input for achieving the job came from; it came from your colleagues . . . And just being amongst your colleagues was great knowing they were out on the road today. (D07)

These co-worker bonds were enhanced under the stressors of the pandemic;

The relationship between ourselves was very helpful and that was important during the pandemic. We always look out for each other and try to be supportive for one another. (D08)

Discussion

The results from our qualitative study underscored a complex interplay of expectations and support in the dispersed workplace. In this context, the minimal interactions, insufficient trust, and transactional nature of frontline leadership revealed a misalignment with employee expectations of a fair and supportive work environment. A central tenet of the

PC is the expectation of meaningful communication. The findings demonstrated a systemic failure to fulfil this expectation, as illustrated by the limited interpersonal interactions between supervisors and drivers, with minimal face-to-face engagement. Given the limited direct contact on the job, organisations need to try other ways to build recognition and meaningful interactions between employees and their managers (Guest 2004). This is also more important in demanding jobs to signal empathy and strengthen employees' emotional connection to their work (Eisenberger et al. 2001; Holt and Marques 2011). In contrast, the lack of consultation even during critical organisational events, such as a change in company ownership, further undermines the sense of value of employees and highlights a violation of expectations of inclusion and worth. A lack of transparency and relational commitment undermines trust in the organisation, job satisfaction and engagement (Bal et al. 2013).

Extending and related to the discussion of lack of communication, these insights reveal how employees' fear of judgement and job security hinder them from engaging in open dialogue with management, particularly when faced with personal problems or job stress. This highlights a deep-rooted issue of trust. The reluctance to share reflects a vulnerability and fear that individuals may expose themselves to potential harm (Mayer et al. 1995). McAllister's (1995) conceptualisation of trust indicates it is built on the perception that the other has a concern for their interests and an intent to take action based on the words, actions, and decisions of another person. From this perspective, when employees conceal their stress or personal challenges, it signals a fundamental breakdown in trust relations. This breakdown occurs because employees no longer feel confident that their concerns will be understood and addressed in a way that respects their needs or protects their interests. The failure to communicate openly, therefore, is not just about the avoidance of vulnerability; it reflects deeper, systematic issues where the trust that underpins effective interpersonal and organisational relationships, including the PC, has been compromised.

Trust is cultivated through consistent and effective communications, fairness in decision-making and genuine support, all of which signal an organisation's commitment to its workforce (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Supervisors who treat drivers with empathy and respect reinforce driver's trust in both themselves and the organisation (Bal et al. 2013). Trust not only buffers against perceived leadership and organisational shortcomings but also strengthens the relational PC (Atkinson 2007; Bal and Vink 2011). In contrast, deficiency in trust may diminish satisfaction and engagement, further straining employment relationships. Our findings indicate that trust reduced over time, pointing out that trust is not a static attribute but a dynamic outcome of sustained positive supervisor-driver interactions. These interactions are often impeded by physically distant relationships but also inadequate leadership and ineffective communication beyond the distal connection. These gaps suggest that supervisors may lack the training, skills or resources needed to cultivate and sustain a strong relational bond, and that organisational demands and cost-cutting inhibit their time to invest in relations off the job but in the depot. This leaves some drivers feeling unsupported and disconnected.

Trust and psychological safety co-exist to create an environment where employees feel safe and assured in articulating their opinions without fear of judgement and repercussions (Morrison 2011). Studies show that trust creates an environment where team members feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, concerns, and ideas (Krause et al. 2017; Mikkelsen et al. 2015). However, our findings demonstrate that many drivers

perceive their relationship with their managers as emotionally as well as physically distant, attributing it to a lack of trust. This is a particularly acute problem for migrant workers, who constitute most of the study participants and a large proportion of the overall workforce given driver shortages and preferential visa conditions. Migrant workers often encounter challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, and exploitation, which amplify their vulnerabilities in the workplace. They may be less likely to report problems due to fear of reprisal or deportation (Hendricks 2024; Moyce and Schenker 2018). In addition, migrant workers may lack access to essential support services like legal representation and advocacy, which exacerbates their sense of isolation and vulnerability (Shelley 2013). Without a safe space to express themselves, their concerns remain unheard, further eroding trust in management and organisation.

This insight of a 'vicious circle' of poor communication and trust aligns with the views of Detert and Burris (2007) who stressed that when trust is established between employees and their leaders, employees will perceive a safe space and will be more inclined to engage in open conversation, which in turn cultivates a collaborative and participatory work environment. In contrast, a lack of trust can suppress employee voice, as individuals may fear adverse consequences, and this itself reduces job satisfaction and promotes exit (Searle et al. 2011). Leadership and trust form the bedrock of the PC in organisations (D. Rousseau 1995). Emerging research focusing on the impact of supportive leadership behaviours highlights characteristics such as inclusiveness, support, trustworthiness, openness, and behavioural integrity as significant in influencing employees' perceptions in the PC (Oorschot et al. 2021). These leadership traits, in turn, influence key employee outcomes, including voice behaviours, job performance and engagement. However, employees that perceive a lack of psychological safety and trust may avoid communicating openly and engaging in constructive work-related conversations (Shore and Barksdale 1998), undermining the development of a positive relational PC.

Leadership is a central feature of the relational PC (McDermott et al. 2013). Our findings demonstrate a widespread perception of disconnection between supervisors and drivers, suggesting that leadership practices do not adequately address employees' relational needs. This was attributed not just to physical distance but because the overall frontline leadership approach was seen to be embedded within a transactional PC (De Meuse et al. 2001). This in turn is linked not just to leadership skills but supervisory job pressures and under-resourcing related to the cost cutting that PTOM served to promote. Bass (1985) observed that the use of rewards and punishments as mechanisms for motivating and managing employees may deliver task completion and short-term operational efficiency, but often overlooks individual needs, which leads to strained leader-employee relationships, turnover and under-performance. Without investment in people skills and efforts to build supportive relations, supervisory trust and employee relations are eroded (Arici 2018; Uhl-Bien 2006), even more so in jobs that are already demanding and physically distant. Instead, the transactional dynamic impedes the development of meaningful relationships that fulfil the relational aspects of PC (Conway & Briner, 2006; Rousseau 1995). This reduces employee engagement and satisfaction while increasing labour turnover.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that the direction and impact of such a transactional and impersonal leadership style is compounded by systemic resource constraints imposed under the PTOM. This has stretched supervisors thin, leaving them unable to

fulfill relational obligations. As one supervisor described, managing up to 200 drivers with limited support rendered meaningful interaction virtually impossible. These findings align with Roczniewska et al. (2022), who found that excessive work demands reduce the capacity of supervisors to provide adequate guidance and support in meeting the needs of employees. The limited number of supervisors, often required to juggle multiple and urgent tasks, increases the span of control and inhibits meaningful communication. This echoes the findings of Conway and Briner (2006), who emphasise that resource scarcity can exacerbate breaches in PCs by hindering the organisation's ability to recognise or meet employee expectations.

In contrast to the limited interactions and trust issues noted between drivers and supervisors, strong peer support networks were evident in the findings. Co-worker relationships served as a vital source of emotional and practical assistance, especially in circumstances where supervisors fail to meet perceived relational and support needs. Existing research supports this insight, indicating that stronger peer support networks act as informal mechanisms to buffer against stress and leadership inadequacies (Chiaburu and Harrison 2008; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2012). For bus drivers facing challenges such as passengers' hostility, and other Covid-related stress, the perception of supportive co-workers fosters a sense of mutual aid. These co-worker-driven dynamics contribute to fulfilling some of the relational elements of PC, even in the absence of robust managerial engagement (D. Rousseau 1995), and evidence that physical dispersal by itself does not impede positive relationship building.

Implications, limitations and further research

Our findings show that bus driving is a distal and demanding occupation and that this can make the employee-supervisor relationship ambiguous and fragile, especially in a cost-focused business context and under unique challenges such as Covid. The analysis also indicates that utilising the PC concept can provide a useful framework for understanding (in)effective employment relationships in terms of how the interplay between trust, psychological safety, co-worker support and relational leadership shape the employee experience. For example, employee voice in this atomised context emerges as reliant on trust, which enables employees to feel psychologically safe to openly express their concerns. Trust not only governs employees' expectations about the organisation's commitment to fulfilling its promises but also reinforces positive co-worker and managerial interactions, aligning with the relational dimension of the PC (Atkinson 2007; D. Rousseau 1995). Perceived lack of psychological safety hinders drivers from approaching supervisors (Edmondson 1999), contrary to the dynamics among drivers themselves, and the heavy work demands imposed on supervisors restricts any proactive behaviours. More generally, the PC was undermined by an organisational failure to prioritise supervisory skills and relationship building in a context of heightened uncertainty and stress. Further research is needed to operationalise the PC concept including through qualitative research in different settings.

Our study suggests that a lack of frontline leadership interpersonal connections leads to diminished trust and psychological safety, making the PC more fragile. This was exposed in the pandemic context but already had contributed to deteriorating employment relationships following the PTOM reforms. On a practical level, organisations need to make efforts to

develop relational frontline leadership to build trust and psychological safety. Our findings underscore the importance of proactively building capacity for frontline leaders to support their staff. Challenges such as lack of managerial training, heightened workloads, and limited resources undermine their ability to fulfil this critical role effectively, which not only impedes the development of positive employment relationships, but also undermines the relational PC that they are uniquely positioned to reinforce (D. Rousseau 1995). As indicated in similar distal occupations such as postal delivery, the HRM function can be crucial to developing and piloting relevant interventions (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013). These include better administrative support, training in coaching skills, peer support and recognition schemes to ensure managers are competent and feel valued and empowered (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Improving the PC and well-being of employees means attending to the PC and well-being of their frontline leaders (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2005; Kurtessis et al. 2017).

Whether this is likely without structural reform of the compulsory tendering contractual framework remains moot in this case. The shift to privatised services introduced competitive pressures and resource constraints that restrict frontline leaders' ability to foster relational leadership effectively. Frontline leaders face competing demands, driven by cost control and operational efficiency, which detract from their capacity to build supportive relationships with workers. Distant and transactional relations undermine individual and mutual relationship building between supervisors and employees. However, the camaraderie of peers demonstrates that the distal nature of the relationship is no necessary barrier to building networks of support. The role of peer support in mitigating a transactional PC also merits further investigation. For instance, drivers may enjoy aspects of their job, such as the independence it provides and the camaraderie of colleagues, while perceiving their employer primarily in transactional terms.

Notwithstanding these insights, we acknowledge the limitations of our study and suggest how these may be addressed in future work. A key limitation lies in the scope of our sample. While multiple perspectives from drivers, supervisors and trade union representatives offered a range of perspectives, this may not capture the diversity of leadership practices across the sector. In addition, our reliance on qualitative methods, while providing rich, contextualised data, inherently limits the generalisability of our findings. Future research could adopt a comparative or mixed methods approach, and extend to other contexts that have similar distal settings, such as delivery logistics.

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