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EXPLORING TRUST BUILDING AND ORGANIZATIONAL EMPATHY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE PROGRAM IN STARTUP COMPANIES

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Abstract

Startup companies operate under adaptive pressures, uncertainty, and cross-functional coordination demands that may shape interpersonal trust and employees' capacity to understand their colleagues' perspectives. Wilderness experience programs provide learning opportunities beyond organizational routines through shared challenges, mutual dependence, and structured reflection. This study aims to explore how organizational trust and empathy may develop through outdoor wilderness experiences among startup team members in Indonesia. It is designed as an exploratory qualitative investigation using a multiple-case study strategy. Data are intended to be collected through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, reflective journals, and program documents, with purposively selected participants, facilitators, and team leaders as key informants. Reflexive thematic analysis will examine shared vulnerability, coordination, perspective-taking, and the transfer of learning into everyday work. Previous scholarship indicates that outdoor adventure training may support team cohesion and teamwork-related confidence, although effects on formal workplace performance are not consistently observed. Accordingly, the study does not presume that trust and empathy necessarily improve after participation; instead, it investigates the conditions that facilitate or constrain these processes. Its anticipated contribution is a process-oriented account of social learning in wilderness settings and practical guidance for designing safe, reflective, and context-sensitive development programs for startup teams.

Keywords: *Wilderness Experience, Organizational Trust, Organizational Empathy, Startups, Experiential Learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Startup companies rely on quick coordination, repetitive experimentation, and the ability of team members to respond to market changes. These conditions make the quality of interpersonal relationships a strategic issue, not just a matter of social harmony. When operational needs change suddenly, team members must be willing to acknowledge limitations, ask for help, and entrust decisions to others. Kakatkar et al. (2024) show that narratives in entrepreneurial teams are related to the formation of founders' cognitive trust in team members. These findings show that team trust is not only built through job structure, but also through shared interpretations of work experience and group identity.

van Zoonen, W., Sivunen, A. E., & Blomqvist, K. (2024). Out of sight – Out of trust? An analysis of the mediating role of communication frequency and quality in the relationship between workplace isolation and trust. European Management Journal, 42(4), 515–526. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2023.04.006

Organizational trust can be understood as a willingness to accept vulnerability to the actions of others based on the expectation that they will act competently and reliably. In this study, the focus is on trust between colleagues and trust in team leaders, not trust between institutions. Reynolds and Lander (2024) show that trust is dynamic and can be formed, maintained, or eroded during organizational change. Edmondson and Bransby (2023) emphasize the importance of psychological safety when team members take interpersonal risks such as speaking openly or admitting mistakes. The two concepts are related, but not identical: feeling safe to speak does not necessarily mean trusting a colleague's capacity to get the job done.

Organizational empathy in this article is interpreted as the capacity of organizational members to recognize experiences, consider viewpoints, and respond appropriately to the needs of colleagues. This concept needs to be separated from momentary sympathy and agreement on all colleagues' decisions. In startup work, empathy can be seen when team members understand the pressures of other workloads, adjust coordination, and do not directly blame collaboration failures. Malviya and Gupta (2022) provide an indication that empathy is related to the quality of work culture in hybrid settings. However, to understand how empathy is formed, research requires attention to concrete interactions and interpretations of actors, not just post-training perception scores.

The wilderness experience program uses the natural environment and directed challenges as a learning medium. Activities can include group navigation, field problem solving, limited travel, and reflection on shared decisions. Tyne et al. (2024) explored the experiences of nine workers in a five-day wilderness adventure program and demonstrated the program's potential for participants' psychological and experiential conditions. Hutson et al.'s (2024) study places nature adventure education as a forum for leadership development and learning that is connected to the broader context of life. However, the character of the environment, facilitation design, and different needs of participants can result in non-uniform experiences.

The uniqueness of wilderness experiences lies in the conditions when team members encounter less familiar situations so that mutual dependence becomes more visible. When determining routes, dividing resources, or adjusting group tempos, participants can see patterns of communication and leadership outside of the usual work hierarchy. Tyne et al. (2025) found indications of increased confidence in teamwork after the outdoor adventure program, but found no meaningful impact on some other indicators of work outcomes. This evidence is important to avoid claims that outdoor activities automatically improve all

aspects of the organization. Challenging activities can open up spaces for learning, while relational change still requires appropriate facilitation and follow-up.

Nature-based activities also have potential social and physical risks. Participants with limited outdoor experience may feel left out if the activity is too competitive, while differences in health conditions and mobility abilities can lead to participation inequality. Therefore, facilitators need to design inclusive activity choices, clear participant consent, and safe activity termination mechanisms. Reflection after a challenge should not force the disclosure of sensitive personal experiences. The psychological safety perspective of Edmondson and Bransby (2023) helps to position shared vulnerability as an experience that requires protection, rather than material for emotional exploitation.

From a research perspective, outdoor training studies generally evaluate psychological changes or program success with instruments before and after activities. This approach is useful for measuring the direction of change, but it lacks the moment of interaction that participants consider decisive. Tyne et al. (2024) and Tyne et al. (2025) show the value of an approach that includes qualitative experience to understand the training results and their limitations. On the other hand, Kakatkar et al.'s (2024) research emphasizes the formation of trust in entrepreneurial teams through the process of giving social meaning. The merging of the two literature streams opens up opportunities for in-depth studies of the process, not just the rate of change in scores.

An important gap lies in how the experience of dealing with shared uncertainty can turn into trust and empathy relevant to startup coordination. Not all successful completion of field tasks will translate into trust at work, especially if day-to-day conflicts are triggered by the sharing of authority or organizational incentives. Conversely, failure to solve challenges can be a learning experience if participants are given space to review decisions without blaming each other. Reynolds and Lander (2024) show the changing nature of trust, while Edmondson and Bransby (2023) underscore the conditions that allow for interpersonal openness. Therefore, the process of transfer from outdoor activities to work practices should be a core part of the investigation.

Research on startup teams in Indonesia is also important because the day-to-day work process can be influenced by relatively flat structures, informal relationships, and limited resources. These are contextual assumptions that need to be examined in the participating companies, not traits that are considered applicable to all startups. Case study techniques allow researchers to examine differences in organizational structure and culture without reducing them to a single picture. The perspectives of participants, facilitators, and team leaders are needed to compare interpretations of the same event. This kind of understanding can also show the difference between positive impressions immediately after activities and work practices that remain changing a few weeks later.

Based on this description, this article proposes an exploration of the mechanisms of building trust and organizational empathy through wilderness experience in startup companies. The research focus includes the experience of mutual dependence, the interpretation of peer behavior, the role of facilitator reflection, and the constraints of learning transfer to the work environment. The research is designed to generate an understanding of the process, rather than testing causal hypotheses or assuming the universal improvement of interpersonal relationships. By considering both positive and negative experiences, the study is expected to expand the discussion of organizational development and experiential learning. The final findings will depend on field evidence collected from selected cases.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Wilderness Experience as Social Learning

Experiential learning places hands-on experience as a material for reflection and the formation of knowledge that can be applied to new situations. In wilderness experience, physical and social challenges are not the end goal, but rather an opportunity to observe how team decisions are formed under uncertainty. The studies of Tyne et al. (2024) and Hutson et al. (2024) provide the basis that outdoor experiences have the potential to facilitate learning, but the quality of their transfer requires a process of reflection. Therefore, the design aspects studied include collaborative tasks, the level of choice of participants, the rhythm of activities, and the quality of debriefing.

2.2 Trust, Empathy, and Psychological Security

Trust is an expectation regarding the reliability and goodwill of the other party when an action involves interpersonal risk. Empathy is an understanding of a colleague's perspective and emotional state that can be reflected in work responses. Psychological safety describes a situation that allows team members to voice their views or concerns without feeling threatened interpersonally (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). All three concepts need to be separated during coding: participants who claim to be close to a colleague do not necessarily show trust when it comes to delegating tasks, and those who understand colleagues' difficulties do not necessarily feel safe expressing dissent.

2.3 Initial Analytical Propositions

The analysis will be sensitive to four possible processes: (1) shared challenges open up opportunities to observe peer competence and reliability; (2) support when participants struggle to bring up perspective taking; (3) debriefing helps transform field events into shared meaning; and (4) work norms and follow-up determine whether those meanings are reapplied in the office. This proposition serves as a sensitizing concept, not a final category

imposed on the data. Opposing evidence, such as new conflicts, exclusionary experiences, or loss of impact after returning to work, will be actively sought.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Approach and Design

The research was designed using an exploratory qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. Each case consists of one startup company and a series of wilderness experiences that can be followed observationally, including preparation, implementation, and follow-up sessions. This design selection allows for the comparison of patterns of meaning-formation between teams without ignoring the specific organizational context.

3.2 Loci and Informants

The research locus is a startup company that operates in Indonesia and organizes wilderness experience programs for team development. The geographical location, number of companies, and number of informants have not been determined because no access or field data has been provided. Case selection is planned to take into account variations in company age, team size, work patterns, and program forms. Informants are selected purposively from cross-functional participants, facilitators, and leaders or HR managers. Recruitment can be developed gradually based on the adequacy of depth of information and variety of perspectives, rather than sample numbers written in advance.

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data was planned through semi-structured interviews before and after the activity, observation of approved activities, and voluntary reflection journals. Supporting data included program agendas, safety guidelines, and organizational follow-up documents. Follow-up interviews a few weeks after the activity were required to distinguish immediate impressions from the implementation of learning. The entire process was conducted only with conscious consent, protection of anonymity, and affirmation that research participation did not affect work assessment.

3.4 Interview Guide

Focus	Examples of open-ended questions
Trust	Tell us about a time when you had to rely on your peer's decisions during an activity. What changed in your assessment of him?
Empathy	Was there a moment when you understood the peer difficulties differently? Describe the situation.
Reflection	Which discussion section after the activity is most relevant to work, and why?

Transfer	What do you really do differently when you go back to work?
Negative cases	Are there events that actually cause distrust, discomfort, or social distancing?

Source: *Proceed Data, 2026*

3.5 Analysis and Validity

Data are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis through repeated reading, initial coding, temporary theme preparation, theme review of the entire corpus, and interpretation writing. The researcher will compare participant narratives, observations, and documents, as well as compile a reflective memo regarding the researcher's assumptions and position. Negative case examination is used to assess counter-explanations. Informant citations can only be included after data collection and permission to use the citation is obtained. The trail audit will record the decision to code and revise the theme transparently.

3.6 Ethics and Risk Management

Outdoor activities require safety checks by competent organizers, activity adjustments for participants with different needs, and the right to refuse assignments without sanction. Research should not require participants to disclose sensitive experiences in front of their superiors or team. Interview data is pseudonymous, stored with limited access, and reported without information that easily identifies individuals or companies. Power relations between participants and leaders need to be anticipated in the hiring and interview processes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There is no field data yet that allows the presentation of empirical findings. Therefore, this section presents a structure of results that must be filled in after the interview, observation, and analysis are completed. The topic title below is only an analytical candidate, not a result that has already been found.

Search area	Evidence to look for	Possible counter-evidence
Vulnerability and dependency	Delegation events, assistance provision, and assessment of peer competencies	Participants feel depressed or insecure
Perspective taking	Narrative understands the limitations and needs of colleagues	Misunderstandings persist
Reflection together	Notes changes in how to explain conflict or coordination	Debriefing is considered a formality
Transfer to the workplace	Examples of new actions in meetings, assignments, or feedback	Behavior reverts to previous patterns

Source: *Proceed Data, 2026*

Final reporting needs to include a summary of the characteristics of the case, the chronology of the program, the substantive themes that actually emerged, anonymous verbatim citations, variations between cases, and an analysis of events that did not meet expectations. There is no code frequency or percentage of participants that can be listed before the data is collected.

Literature-Based Discussion and Interpretation Direction

Trust Through the Experience of Dependence

When field tasks require role sharing and mutual assistance, participants gain social information that is not always seen in routine work. The research perspective of Kakatkar et al. (2024) shows that group narratives are one of the sources of assessment of trust in entrepreneurial teams. However, helping actions in a recreational setting may not continue in business decisions that contain different risks. Therefore, empirical discussions will need to explore whether trust is built on competency observations, emotional support experiences, or simply temporary enthusiasm.

Empathy as a Change in the Way Colleagues Read

Empathy changes may arise when participants discover peer abilities, barriers, or personal pressures that were not previously apparent in the formal division of labor. This process can help reduce negative attribution to team mistakes or delays, but it does not guarantee that organizational responses will be more equitable. Malviya and Gupta (2022) show that empathy and trust are relevant to work cultures in hybrid environments. Field research needs to test whether understanding such perspectives actually changes the way participants provide help, deliver criticism, or divide the workload.

The Role of Learning Facilitation and Transfer

The study of Tyne et al. (2025) found certain benefits in beliefs related to teamwork, while the impact on some formal work outcomes was meaningless. This is a reminder that the success of a program experience cannot be equated with organizational change. The analysis needs to place reflection, commitment to action, leadership support, and opportunities to practice learning as conditions that can connect the two arenas. Without follow-up, even an emotional experience may remain a shared recreational memory.

Negative Cases and Power Dynamics

Competitive pressures, grueling activities, and differences in physical abilities have the potential to accentuate inequality. Participants who feel unprotected can reduce their trust in colleagues or leaders. Reynolds and Lander (2024) show that trust can be eroded through organizational processes, while Edmondson and Bransby (2023) show the relevance of psychological safety to interpersonal risk. Therefore, the results of the study must give space to narratives of rejection, disappointment, and discomfort, not just looking for positive transformation stories.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The expected theoretical contribution is an explanation of the process of when shared experiences turn into social interpretations that support trust and empathy, and when these processes are hampered. For startups, practical benefits can be in the form of guidelines for selecting activities based on development goals, the preparation of meaningful debriefings, and follow-up on concrete coordination practices. Program managers need to assess success through traceable behavior changes, not just participant satisfaction after the activity. All substantive recommendations should later be calibrated based on field data, case character, and informant differences in views.

5. CONCLUSION

This article proposes a qualitative exploration design on the formation of trust and organizational empathy through wilderness experience in startup companies in Indonesia. The literature reviewed shows that outdoor adventure activities have the potential to enrich social experiences and cohesion, while trust in entrepreneurial teams develops through interpretation and shared practice. However, the available evidence also confirms that improvements in psychological aspects do not necessarily result in formal performance changes, so the effectiveness of the program cannot be automatically assumed. The planned field study needs to trace vulnerability and support events, the quality of reflection, inhibiting factors, and the transfer of learning to work practice. Since there is no empirical data for this study, conclusions regarding changes in trust or empathy in specific startups cannot be drawn. The contribution of the current manuscript is in the form of a research framework that can be qualitatively tested and directed at the development of inclusive, safe, and evidence-based organizations.

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