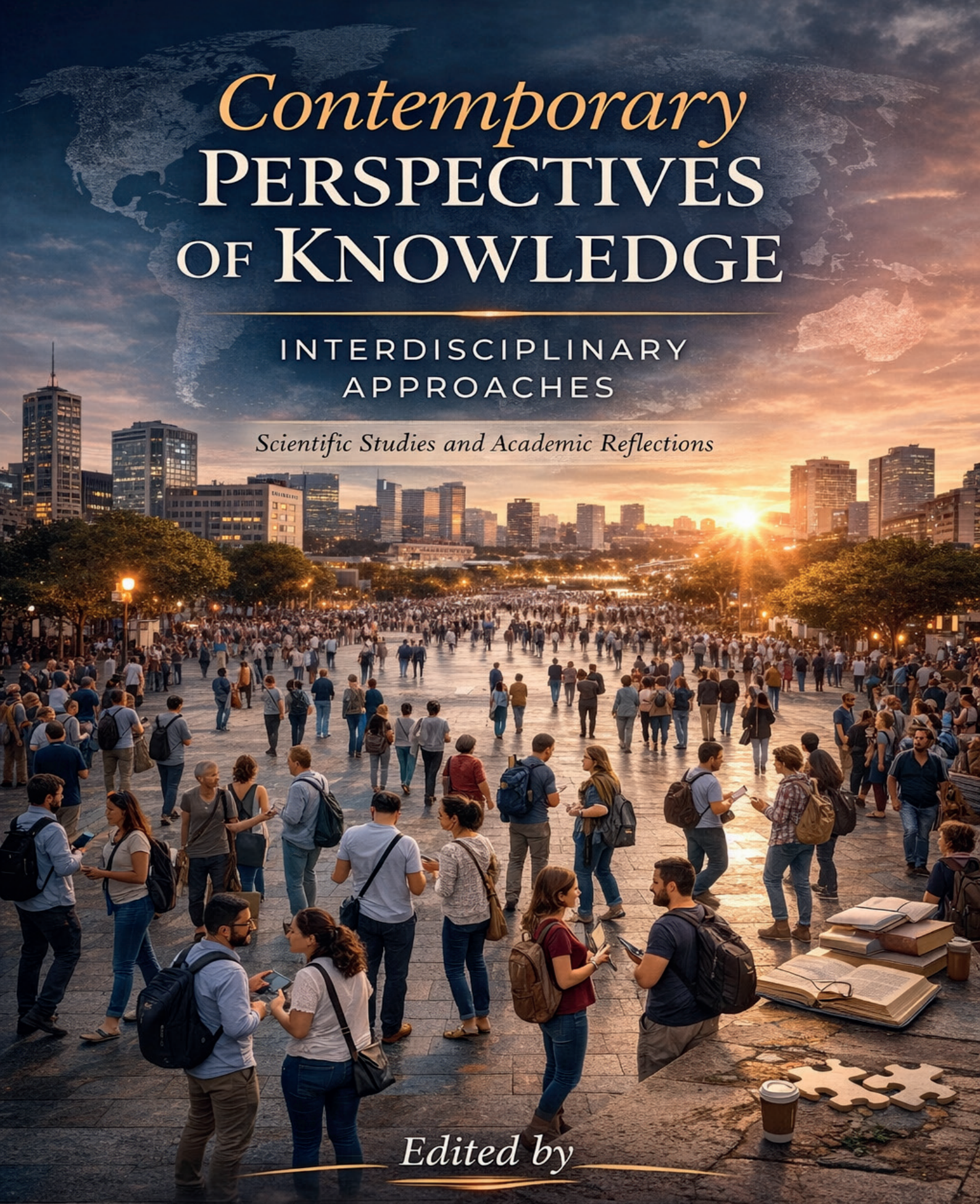
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INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Chapter

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POSITIVE DISCIPLINE IN CORPORATE WELLNESS PROGRAMS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW CONNECTING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORKS TO THE BILLION-DOLLAR CORPORATE TRAINING MARKET



POSITIVE DISCIPLINE IN CORPORATE WELLNESS PROGRAMS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW CONNECTING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORKS TO THE BILLION-DOLLAR CORPORATE TRAINING MARKET

Thayse Sopper Boti Cei[1]

Abstract: Introduction: The sharp rise in mental health–related sick leave, combined with the continued expansion of the global corporate wellness market, has put pressure on organizations and Human Resources departments to adopt interventions grounded in scientific evidence rather than management fads. Positive Discipline, an Adlerian-based methodology extensively validated in parenting and school settings, puts forward a set of principles — being kind and firm at the same time, a sense of belonging and significance, encouragement, and collaborative problem-solving — that map closely onto core constructs of contemporary organizational psychology, such as psychological safety, self-determination, and positive leadership. Objective: To synthesize the scientific evidence from the past five years that supports transferring these principles to the workplace, and to assess their potential business case within the billion-dollar corporate training and organizational wellness market. Method: An umbrella review was conducted, integrating systematic reviews, meta-analyses, institutional guidelines, and industry reports published mostly between 2020 and 2026. Sources were retrieved from databases including Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed/PsycINFO, SciELO, ScienceDirect, Frontiers, and BMC, as well as institutional repositories (World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, Gallup, Deloitte, Grand View Research), following principles adapted from the PRISMA protocol. Results: The evidence converges on five psychological mechanisms that indirectly support the

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organizational applicability of Positive Discipline: psychological safety; satisfaction of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the absence of abusive supervision and incivility; positive and servant leadership; and social-emotional skills training. According to Deloitte data, the return on investment in workplace mental health ranges from 4:1 to 6.3:1, while the global corporate wellness market is estimated at USD 55–88 billion in 2024–2025, with continued growth projected. In Brazil, the update to Regulatory Standard No. 1 (NR-1), which now requires employers to assess psychosocial risks, adds regulatory urgency to the issue. Conclusion: Although no controlled trials to date have directly tested the Positive Discipline protocol in corporate settings, the strong theoretical and empirical convergence between its principles and evidence-based organizational constructs makes for a plausible, scientifically informed business case — and points to a promising, high-priority research agenda for the years ahead.

Keywords: Positive Discipline; corporate wellness; workplace mental health; evidence-based leadership; corporate training; systematic review.

INTRODUCTION

Today's workplace is under pressure from two directions. On one side, indicators of work-related mental illness keep climbing; on the other, organizations are expected to justify every wellness dollar with measurable results. In Brazil, data from the Ministry of Social Security, obtained from the National Social Security Institute (INSS), show that temporary disability benefits tied to mental and behavioral disorders jumped from roughly 201,000 in 2022 to more than 472,000 in 2024 — a 134% increase in just two years (BRASIL, 2025a). Anxiety is the single leading cause of these leaves, and burnout-related claims grew by 493% between 2021 and 2024 (ASSOCIAÇÃO NACIONAL DE MEDICINA DO TRABALHO, 2026). In response, Brazil's Ministry of Labor and Employment updated Regulatory Standard No. 1 (NR-1), making it mandatory, as of May 2026, for employers to identify and manage psychosocial risks — such as work overload, abusive performance targets, and workplace

bullying — as part of their Risk Management Program (BRASIL, 2024).

At the same time, the global corporate wellness market has established itself as one of the fastest-growing segments of the service economy. Recent estimates put its value at USD 55–88 billion in 2024–2025, with projections reaching USD 118–236 billion by the mid-2030s, depending on each research firm's methodology (FORTUNE BUSINESS INSIGHTS, 2026; GRAND VIEW RESEARCH, 2025). Much of this growth is driven by demand for mental health programs, as the field shifts away from its historical focus on fitness and nutrition toward integrated approaches to psychological well-being, leadership, and organizational culture.

Against this backdrop, corporate training offerings built on methodologies of widely varying origins are multiplying — and they are not always backed by solid empirical evidence. Positive Discipline, developed by Jane Nelsen from Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology and Rudolf Dreikurs's democratic approach, is a particularly interesting case for this discussion. It is a methodology with decades of application and validation in parenting and school settings, built around principles such as being kind and firm at the same time, identifying the belief behind the behavior, effective communication, solution-focused problem-solving, and strengthening a sense of belonging and significance (DREIKURS; GRUNWALD; PEPPER, 1998; POSITIVE DISCIPLINE ASSOCIATION, 2024). Although direct empirical research on its systematic use in corporate settings is still in its infancy, its core principles align remarkably well with constructs that are widely validated in contemporary organizational psychology.

This article starts from the premise that a sound business case for adopting methodologies such as Positive Discipline in corporate wellness programs should not rest on intuitive analogies between parenting and leadership. Instead, it should rest on a rigorous convergence between the methodology's underlying psychological mechanisms and the peer-reviewed scientific literature on people management, occupational mental health, and organizational performance. Accordingly, the overall goal of this study is to conduct a systematic review of the past five years of literature in order to: (a) map the core psychological mechanisms of Positive Discipline; (b) identify the constructs in the

evidence-based organizational literature that operationalize those same mechanisms; (c) analyze the economic and regulatory landscape of the corporate wellness and executive training market; and (d) critically discuss the gaps and research opportunities for formally applying this methodology in the workplace — with executives, managers, and Human Resources professionals as the intended audience.

METHOD

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject — which spans developmental psychology, organizational psychology, occupational health, labor law, and market intelligence — an umbrella review design was chosen. This methodology synthesizes previously published systematic reviews and meta-analyses and, in this case, was supplemented by institutional and regulatory reports from recognized primary sources. This design is especially well suited to integrating mature bodies of evidence from distinct subfields without attempting to reanalyze individual primary studies.

DATABASES AND SOURCES

The search was conducted between June and August 2026 using Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed/PsycINFO, SciELO, ScienceDirect, Frontiers, BMC, and PubMed Central, along with primary institutional repositories: the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), Gallup, Deloitte Insights, Grand View Research, Fortune Business Insights, Brazil's Ministry of Labor and Employment, Brazil's Ministry of Social Security, and the Brazilian National Association of Occupational Medicine (ANAMT).

SEARCH STRATEGY AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Search terms were used in both Portuguese and English: "positive discipline," "disciplina positiva," "corporate wellness," "bem-estar corporativo," "workplace mental

health," "saúde mental no trabalho," "psychological safety," "segurança psicológica," "self-determination theory," "abusive supervision," "servant leadership," "emotional intelligence training," and "positive leadership," combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR). Eligible sources included systematic reviews, meta-analyses, institutional guidelines, and industry reports published primarily between 2020 and 2026, written in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, with an abstract and full text available for analysis. Excluded were sources lacking peer review or institutional validation; publications prior to 2015 (except for foundational theoretical works explicitly cited as historical and conceptual milestones, such as the original writings of Alfred Adler, Rudolf Dreikurs, and Jane Nelsen); and promotional material with no empirical basis.

SYNTHESIS AND ORGANIZATION

Findings were organized thematically into five clusters of psychological mechanisms (psychological safety; self-determination; absence of abusive supervision; positive and servant leadership; social-emotional skills), which were then linked to the market landscape and the Brazilian regulatory environment. This thematic structure — rather than a chronological or database-by-database one — was chosen because it makes the business case easier to follow for executives, the stated target audience of this article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM POSITIVE DISCIPLINE TO EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

ADLERIAN ROOTS AND CORE PRINCIPLES

Positive Discipline is rooted in Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology and in Rudolf Dreikurs's practical application of that theory. As early as 1920s Vienna, Dreikurs developed behavior management techniques grounded in democratic relationships between adults and children, as an alternative both to punitive authoritarianism and to permissiveness without structure (DREIKURS; GRUNWALD; PEPPER, 1998). Decades later, Jane Nelsen

systematized these principles into a replicable model, now disseminated worldwide by the Positive Discipline Association in more than seventy countries, with thousands of certified facilitators (POSITIVE DISCIPLINE ASSOCIATION, 2024).

The model is built on a few core premises: (a) mutual respect — firmness and kindness exercised at the same time, never one at the expense of the other; (b) identifying the belief underlying a behavior, not just the behavior itself; (c) effective communication and collaborative problem-solving, as opposed to punishment and rewards; and (d) the fundamental Adlerian assumption that human behavior is driven by the search for belonging and significance within a social group (POSITIVE DISCIPLINE ASSOCIATION, 2024). This last point is especially relevant to the present argument: decades before organizational psychology established constructs such as psychological safety and basic needs satisfaction, the Adlerian tradition already held that cooperation, intrinsic motivation, and prosocial behavior depend fundamentally on feeling that one belongs to — and matters to — the group.

KIND AND FIRM: PARALLELS WITH EVIDENCE-BASED LEADERSHIP STYLES

The principle of being "kind and firm at the same time" — which rejects both coercive authoritarianism and a lack of boundaries — has direct counterparts in two robust lines of recent organizational research. On the one hand, studies of abusive supervision consistently show that coercive, hostile leadership leads to emotional exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, more counterproductive work behavior, and higher turnover (HAN et al., 2022). On the other hand, research on servant and positive leadership shows that leadership styles centered on care, empowerment, and employee development — without lowering clear performance standards — are associated with greater psychological safety, engagement, creativity, and well-being (JONKER et al., 2025). The theoretical convergence is striking: what the organizational evidence identifies as a consistent predictor of sustainable performance is neither unstructured permissiveness nor punitive coercion, but clear standards combined with relational support — the very balance Positive Discipline has advocated since its original formulation.

BELONGING AND SIGNIFICANCE: FROM THE FAMILY TO THE ORGANIZATION

Meeting the need to belong is not a metaphor arbitrarily borrowed from family life and applied to the workplace; it is a cross-cutting psychological mechanism that has been studied extensively — and independently — in the organizational behavior literature. Recent research on workplace belonging links higher levels of this construct to fewer dysfunctional behaviors witnessed or experienced on the job, lower absenteeism, and stronger organizational commitment. Industry surveys confirm this relationship at scale: Ipsos (2022) found that 88% of employees surveyed associate a sense of belonging with higher productivity, estimating annual savings of more than USD 52 million for a 10,000-employee organization that makes belonging a strategic priority. This is precisely the psychological mechanism Positive Discipline seeks to cultivate through practices such as collaborative problem-solving meetings, encouragement focused on effort and contribution — rather than generic praise — and the active involvement of group members in building solutions and rules.

THE GLOBAL CORPORATE WELLNESS AND EXECUTIVE TRAINING MARKET ECONOMIC SIZE OF THE INDUSTRY

Market estimates vary with each research firm's methodology, but they converge on a trajectory of strong, sustained growth. Grand View Research (2025) valued the global corporate wellness market at USD 55.1 billion in 2025, projecting it to reach USD 70.1 billion by 2033. Fortune Business Insights (2026) offered a broader estimate of USD 68.41 billion in 2025, projecting USD 118.21 billion by 2034. Other firms, such as Market Research Future, project the market as high as USD 236.66 billion by 2035, reflecting methodological differences in the scope of services included (fitness programs, health risk assessments, employee assistance, and digital wellness platforms, among others). Whatever the

methodology, the sources agree that the mental health and stress management segment is growing especially fast within this market, fueled by the rising prevalence of work-related anxiety and depression in the post-pandemic period.

In the United States — historically the dominant market, with roughly 37% to 39% of global revenue — the segment was valued at USD 20.54 billion in 2024, with a projected compound annual growth rate of 4.8% to 10% through 2033 (SKYQUEST, 2025; TECHNAVIO, 2025). This growth is accompanied by an important qualitative shift: the consolidation of platforms that bring multiple point-solution vendors together into a single corporate wellness offering, with increasing emphasis on the depth of mental health services. The expansion of Wellhub illustrates this trend; the platform evolved from a fitness-centered model into a holistic wellness offering serving about 15,000 corporate clients in 2024 (PRECEDENCE RESEARCH, 2026).

INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES ON MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

In September 2022, the World Health Organization published its first global guidelines on mental health at work, developed jointly with the International Labour Organization. The document opens with a stark assessment: an estimated 15% of working-age adults are living with a mental disorder at any given time, and depression and anxiety cost the global economy about USD 1 trillion a year, mostly in lost productivity (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2022). The guidelines recommend organizational interventions, training for managers and workers, individual interventions, and return-to-work measures, classified into three levels of reach: universal (the entire workforce), selective (at-risk workers), and indicated (workers already experiencing psychological distress). The companion policy brief, produced with the ILO, stresses that primary responsibility for promoting mental health at work lies with organizational design and leadership style — not solely with the individual worker's resilience (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION; INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, 2022).

This shift in emphasis — from the individual to the organizational system — is

consistent with the core proposition of Positive Discipline, which from its inception has rejected approaches focused solely on correcting individual behavior, proposing instead to analyze and change the relational environment in which that behavior occurs.

THE BRAZILIAN REGULATORY LANDSCAPE: NR-1 AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

In Brazil, MTE Ordinance No. 1,419 of August 27, 2024, updated Regulatory Standard No. 1 (NR-1), explicitly requiring — for the first time — that all employers governed by the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT), regardless of size, identify, assess, and control work-related psychosocial risks, such as work overload, abusive performance targets, workplace bullying, and toxic work environments, within their Risk Management Program (PGR) (BRASIL, 2024). Given the complexity of compliance, the Ministry of Labor and Employment, through MTE Ordinance No. 765/2025, granted an educational grace period until May 26, 2026, after which enforcement carries penalties (BRASIL, 2025b).

This regulatory change elevates psychosocial risk management from corporate rhetoric to a legal obligation, with direct implications for labor compliance and for potential litigation arising from work-related mental illness. For legal, compliance, and Human Resources departments, the standard sets a new benchmark of due diligence against which employer liability may be measured in lawsuits involving occupational psychological harm. In this regulatory context, structured behavioral and relational management methodologies — able to demonstrate consistency with an evidence-based standard of firmness without coercion — are no longer merely a reputational differentiator; they become part of a strategy to mitigate legal and financial risk.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS LINKING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE TO ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety — defined as the shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, such as admitting mistakes, disagreeing, or asking for help — is now one of the most widely studied constructs in organizational psychology. The landmark meta-analysis by Frazier et al. (2017), published in Personnel Psychology, already showed a consistent association between psychological safety and both individual and team performance. More recent reviews reinforce and extend this finding: Edmondson and Bransby (2023), in a review published in the Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, synthesize two decades of research showing that psychological safety is strongly associated with organizational learning, innovation, engagement, and well-being, and that it is shaped primarily by leadership behavior and job design.

At its core, psychological safety is an organizational operationalization of the Adlerian principle of belonging without fear of punishment — the same mechanism Positive Discipline seeks to establish by explicitly separating the correction of behavior from the preservation of dignity and the relationship.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan and systematized for the organizational context by Deci, Olafsen and Ryan (2017) in a review published in the Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, posits that autonomous motivation and well-being depend on satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Recent reviews have shown that satisfying these needs — especially when fostered by autonomy-supportive rather than controlling leaders — is consistently associated with higher engagement, greater job satisfaction, and lower levels of stress and burnout, whereas frustrating these needs, typically the result of coercive

management, is associated with adverse organizational outcomes.

The convergence with Positive Discipline is direct. Its three central pillars — autonomy (through collaborative problem-solving rather than imposed solutions), competence (through encouragement focused on effort and ability rather than generic praise), and belonging (through active inclusion in group decisions) — map almost one-to-one onto the three basic needs described by SDT, even though the two bodies of literature developed independently and in different disciplines.

THE COSTS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

If Positive Discipline, by definition, calls for the absence of punitive coercion, it is worth examining what the organizational literature documents about the effects when coercion is present. The meta-analysis by Han et al. (2022), published in the Journal of Organizational Behavior and integrating twenty years of research on workplace incivility, shows consistent associations between hostile behavior — even at moderate intensity — and negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, and declining performance. Broader reviews of abusive supervision corroborate this pattern, showing robust correlations between perceived abuse by leaders and lower job satisfaction, greater emotional exhaustion, and more counterproductive work behavior.

These findings provide, in effect, empirical validation for the negative end of the continuum described by Positive Discipline: just as the methodology rejects permissiveness without structure, it equally rejects — on the basis of strong evidence — any form of punitive coercion as a behavior management strategy, whether at home or at work.

POSITIVE LEADERSHIP AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The scoping review by Jonker et al. (2025), published in the SA Journal of Human Resource Management, synthesizes evidence that servant leadership — characterized by caring, empowering, emotionally healing, and prioritizing followers' growth — is associated

with positive outcomes at multiple levels (individual, team, and organizational), including stronger affective commitment, engagement, and psychological well-being. These findings speak directly to Positive Discipline's principle of being kind and firm at the same time, since servant leadership does not abandon clear standards and expectations but sustains them through genuine relational support rather than coercive control.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS TRAINING

One of the most relevant findings for the business case presented here is the evidence that emotional competencies can be effectively developed through structured workplace training. The systematic review and meta-analysis by Mehler et al. (2024), published in BMC Psychology, analyzed fifty studies on emotional competency training in the workplace and found moderate, consistent effect sizes both in pre–post comparisons (d = 0.44) and in comparisons between intervention and control groups (d = 0.46), with effects lasting more than three months after training ended, regardless of participants' occupations. Complementing this, the systematic review by Powell et al. (2024), published in Frontiers in Psychology, supports the effectiveness of emotional intelligence training programs for the healthcare workforce.

These findings are especially important because they dismantle a common objection to the business case for relational-skills programs: the idea that such skills are fixed personality traits rather than trainable abilities. Recent evidence shows the opposite — emotional and relational competencies respond to structured training. This provides a scientific foundation for corporate programs based on methodologies such as Positive Discipline, whose format is, by design, experiential and focused on building practical skills in communication, emotional regulation, and problem-solving.

WELL-BEING, ENGAGEMENT, AND PRODUCTIVITY AT GLOBAL SCALE

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2024 report, drawing on data from more than

128,000 workers in 160 countries, found that only 23% of employees worldwide are engaged at work, while 58% report struggling in both their personal and professional lives (GALLUP, 2024). The report estimates that low engagement costs the global economy about USD 8.9 trillion, or 9% of global GDP. Among its most relevant findings is the central role of direct supervisors: according to Gallup, the immediate manager accounts for up to 70% of the variance in team engagement — reinforcing that corporate wellness interventions focused solely on the individual, without changing leadership behavior, tend to have limited impact.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT: THE BUSINESS CASE

From a strictly financial standpoint, the fourth report in Deloitte's "Mental health and employers: the case for investment" series, published in 2024 and based on a review of 26 studies published since 2011, estimates that employers gain an average return of £4.70 for every £1 invested in workplace mental health interventions — and as much as £6.30 when investment focuses on universal interventions addressing organizational culture and awareness, as opposed to indicated interventions aimed only at workers already in distress (DELOITTE, 2024). The same report puts the annual cost of poor mental health to UK employers at £51 billion, of which £24 billion is attributable to presenteeism alone — employees who show up for work but are less productive because of untreated psychological distress.

This pattern of higher returns from universal, culture-focused interventions — as opposed to one-off, reactive ones — is particularly relevant to the business case for structured relational and behavioral management methodologies such as Positive Discipline, whose aim is precisely to transform the day-to-day relational patterns between leaders and their teams, rather than to offer a standalone perk disconnected from the prevailing management culture.

DISCUSSION: GAPS, LIMITATIONS, AND RESEARCH AGENDA

In the interest of scientific candor, the main limitation of this body of evidence must

be stated up front: as of this review, no randomized controlled trials have been identified that directly test the formal Positive Discipline protocol — as developed by Jane Nelsen and certified by the Positive Discipline Association — in corporate settings. The empirical literature on the methodology is concentrated mainly in parenting and school contexts. The business case presented here is therefore indirect and theory-driven: it builds on the convergence between the psychological mechanisms posited by Positive Discipline and organizational constructs independently validated by recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews — psychological safety, self-determination, the absence of abusive supervision, servant leadership, and the trainability of social-emotional skills.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EXECUTIVES AND HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

For executive leaders and HR professionals, the findings of this review point to four practical takeaways. First, corporate wellness programs deliver a higher return on investment when they are structured as universal culture and leadership interventions, rather than as one-off, reactive benefits offered only to workers already in visible distress (DELOITTE, 2024). Second, developing emotional and relational competencies in leaders is an investment with strong evidence of effectiveness and durability over time, which justifies prioritizing it in the budget over interventions without comparable empirical support (MEHLER et al., 2024). Third, replacing coercive supervisory practices with leadership styles that combine clear performance standards with genuine relational support — the heart of the kind-and-firm principle — is not only the ethical choice but also delivers measurable financial results in terms of reduced turnover, absenteeism, and labor litigation, especially in light of the new NR-1 regulatory requirement (BRASIL, 2024).

Fourth and finally, given the absence of direct trials of Positive Discipline in corporate settings, organizations that formally adopt it in institutional programs should pair it with systematic outcome evaluation — using indicators such as perceived psychological safety, engagement, absenteeism, and turnover. That way, each adopting organization

contributes its own data to the still-emerging body of empirical evidence on the topic, while also validating (or not) the investment it has made.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review set out to build a scientifically informed business case for applying Positive Discipline principles in corporate wellness programs, situating the discussion within a global market worth tens of billions of dollars and a Brazilian regulatory environment that makes psychosocial risk management a legal obligation rather than a discretionary choice. Although the literature still lacks studies that directly test the methodology's formal protocol in the workplace, the convergence between its core mechanisms — kindness with firmness, belonging and significance, encouragement, and collaborative problem-solving — and robustly validated organizational constructs such as psychological safety, self-determination, and servant leadership provides a solid, coherent theoretical foundation for its experimental, well-evaluated adoption in corporate settings.

The business case for evidence-based discipline, then, does not rest on promises of effectiveness that have yet to be directly tested. It rests on a conviction — supported by contemporary organizational science — that psychologically safe, relationally firm, and genuinely respectful workplaces are at once the ethically right path and the most financially sound strategy for organizations that want to thrive in a labor market increasingly aware of the value of mental health.

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