

# How can organizational tolerance towards frontline employees' errors help service recovery?

**Julien CUSIN**

PR, IAE – Univ. Bordeaux, IRGO

**Michaël FLACANDJI**

MCF, IAE – Univ. Bordeaux, IRGO

## **Abstract:**

While work on service failures has recently begun to investigate aspects of service recovery systems from an organizational perspective, little attention has been paid to the specific practice of organizational error tolerance in the service marketing literature. One important gap is the lack of an integrated perspective of the outcomes of such a policy on service recovery. The literature also ignores the differences in internal and external perspectives of service failure and their impact on openly communicating the policy. To address this issue, we examined how and under what conditions organizational error tolerance can help improve the experience of customers who encounter service failure caused by frontline employees. We opted for a multilevel qualitative approach in the retail sector, leading to four propositions. After identifying the mechanisms through which an error tolerance policy can generate positive outcomes – within certain limits – for customers in cases of service failure, we argue that such organizational error tolerance conflicts with the demanding attitude of today's customers, and their negative representation of individual errors. This tension makes it difficult for service providers to reveal their error tolerance policy, giving rise to what we refer to as an “informational blind spot”.

**Keywords:** service failure, service recovery, error tolerance, employee experience, customer experience.

## **Introduction**

Even in companies with high performance standards, service failures are inevitable and regularly occur (Harrison-Walker, 2019; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019), especially those attributable to sales staff (Morris, LaForge, and Allen, 1994). In such cases, companies must launch service recovery procedures to prevent customers from switching their allegiance (Harun et al., 2018). However, service failures linked to human errors are often severely judged by customers, making them more difficult to recover from (Widmier and Jackson, 2002).

Service recovery has traditionally been examined from the customer's perspective. In contrast, service recovery research recently began to investigate aspects of service recovery systems from an organizational perspective. Studying the consequences of what goes on in the back office of firms with respect to the perception and behavior of customers helps us to understand which organizational practices can enhance service recovery performance (Guchait et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016). Among such strategies, implementing an error management culture appears to play a crucial role.

An error management culture regards errors as inevitable and therefore acceptable if they are seen as learning opportunities. Consequently, organizations seek to encourage early error detection, open communication, transparent analysis of the causes and rapid corrective measures (Dimitrova et al., 2017; Van Dyck et al., 2005). Error tolerance is logically a cardinal value of the error management culture (Frese and Keith, 2015; Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020), with more and more companies embracing error tolerance as part of their policy statement. Indeed, the literature on service recovery has shown its virtues in terms of helping behaviors (Guchait, Paşamehmetoğlu, and Lanza-Abbott, 2015), learning behaviors and error reporting (Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020), customer engagement behaviors (Wei et al., 2017), consumer attitude, word-of-mouth and revisit intention (Wei, Zhang, and Hua, 2019), and service recovery performance (Guchait et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, gaps remain in this emerging literature. First, positive behavioral outcomes due to error tolerance (see above) are generally considered in isolation. This is surprising since only an integrated perspective of the outcomes of organizational error tolerance on service recovery can help us to understand their potential benefits in terms of service recovery. Furthermore, it remains unclear if acknowledged error tolerance virtues in the organizational behavior literature like problem-solving (Edmondson and Lei, 2014) or initiative taking (Weinzimmer and Esken, 2017) also apply in the specific context of service marketing.

Second, it appears that open communication, usually presented as a key aspect of an error management culture, only applies in partial fashion. In fact, in existing research, error tolerance policies are never displayed to customers. Given the highly demanding nature of the latter (Stock and Bednarek, 2014), we wonder how they would react if they had access to such information. Would they consider this organizational practice to be in line with the service excellence expected, or, on the contrary, would they feel that it encouraged error occurrence through laxity? Indeed, demonstrating tolerance towards employees found to be at fault may seem at odds with a customer-centric business philosophy (Pacheco, Geuens, and Pizzutti, 2018). In fact, to date, the literature has failed to address internal (the service provider and its employees) and external (customers) viewpoints regarding error tolerance, with the two perspectives generally being dealt with separately (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). However, this separation seems artificial in a service failure situation as service recovery is largely a matter of interaction between employees and managers, on the one hand, and customers, on the other. Ignoring their different error tolerance perspectives is surprising since the latter can reveal significant tensions or even contradictions that service providers need to manage. In other words, can a company reassure its employees about their mistakes (better psychological safety) without worrying customers unduly (lower service quality)? Given that an error tolerance policy

must be handled with care, our study seeks to highlight the boundary conditions for organizational tolerance of individual error in service recovery.

The current paper thus aims to answer the following research question (RQ): How and under what conditions can an organizational policy of error tolerance help improve the experience of customers who encounter a service failure? More specifically, the issue raises three further questions:

RQ1: What are the expected behavioral outcomes for service providers under conditions of organizational error tolerance?

RQ2: How does organizational error tolerance influence the customer experience following a service failure?

RQ3: How can service providers handle their organizational tolerance policy to reassure frontline employees without diminishing the perceived quality of service among customers?

To answer these questions, we opted for a multilevel qualitative approach. For Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher (2016, 337), “*multilevel research involves research that addresses how phenomena that occur at the firm level (i.e., parts of the service recovery system) affect perceptions that exist at the individual employee and/or customer level.*” We focused on the retail sector since, to our knowledge, all research on the link between error tolerance and service recovery to date concerns the hospitality management literature and has been conducted in the tourism industry (e.g.: restaurants, hotels, casinos). We believe it would be useful to extend the topic to other contexts in the service marketing literature. Moreover, the quantitative approaches adopted in previous studies generated a form of abstraction (e.g.: unspecified errors and/or fictitious organizations), whereas a qualitative approach would allow us to embody what respondents say through concrete examples of service failures and faulty companies. This methodology also provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study, which is currently lacking in the literature linking error tolerance policy and service recovery.

In this regard, we present an analysis based on a cross-comparison of 22 interviews with marketing and human resource (HR) professionals and 18 customer testimonies.

Adopting the methodology proposed by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013), we formulated four propositions (Ps) to enhance our understanding of the link between error tolerance and service recovery, highlighting the numerous and specific mechanisms (*e.g.*: individual behavioral changes and organizational credibility feedback) through which an error tolerance policy can generate positive outcomes – within certain limits – for customers in cases of service failure (P1, P3 and P4). We also show that such error tolerance contradicts the demanding attitude of customers and their negative representation of individual errors. This tension makes it difficult for companies to reveal their error tolerance policy, giving rise to what we refer to as an “informational blind spot” (P2).

## **Literature review**

### ***Service failures due to human error and customers' attitude toward such failures***

The extant service marketing literature distinguishes between two main types of service failure (Weun, Beatty, and Jones, 2004): outcome failures (what is delivered) and process failures (how it was delivered). In the former scenario, the service itself is the problem (*e.g.*: faulty service), while in the latter, it is the manner in which the service is delivered which is at fault (*e.g.*: inappropriate behavior by a salesperson) (Chen et al., 2018; Smith et al., 1999). Service failures may thus be beyond the control of frontline employees or else attributed to their personal mistakes (Baker, Meyer, and Johnson, 2008; Widmier and Jackson, 2002). Individual errors may be defined as accidental and potentially avoidable deviations from the organization's stated objectives or practices (Van Dyck et al., 2005).

Whatever the service failure, the conditions are unlikely to foster customer tolerance (Piercy, 2009). The “*dark side*” of clients (Grandey, Dickter, and Sin, 2004, 398) is often all

too obvious (e.g.: insults, aggressive behavior), with customers becoming increasingly demanding (Stock and Bednarek, 2014). For example, a single error can lead to a negative evaluation of their customer experience overall (Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020). More generally, they often consider the idea that “*the customer is always right*” as an article of faith (Pacheco, Geuens, and Pizzutti, 2018, 60). Despite this context, a tolerance zone may still exist among customers. This is defined as the gap in expectations between what they consider to be an adequate service and the service they would ideally like to see (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1993).

### ***Service recovery and the service recovery system***

Following a deviation from their initial expectations (Bitner, Booms, and Tetrault, 1990), customers are generally prepared to give companies a second chance (Harun et al., 2018) in the wake of a successful service recovery strategy (Harrison-Walker, 2019). Organizations have thus adopted a paradigm shift from zero defect to zero defection (DeTienne and Westwood, 2019).

Service recovery comprises two key dimensions: the result (*i.e.*, the technical side of the response, such as a refund or a discount) and the process (*i.e.*, how service recovery is handled on a functional level). Both these dimensions have an influence on the way customers perceive service recovery (Bagherzadeh et al., 2020). Given their interactions with customers, frontline employees’ behavior primarily affects the second of these dimensions. Positive behavior (e.g.: demonstrating empathy, attentive listening, apologizing) is thus considered a crucial aspect of service recovery strategies (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011). In other words, sales staff must come across as attentive and credible to attenuate the negative impact of service failure and regain their customers’ trust (Inyang, 2015). Ultimately, if customers feel that their interpersonal interactions have resulted in a fair solution to the problem, they will return to their

initial level of satisfaction (Chen et al., 2018), or potentially enjoy an even higher level of satisfaction than before the service failure (McCollough, Berry, and Yadav, 2000).

Attention has recently been devoted to internal organizational factors liable to affect the employees' performance when dealing with service recovery (Guchait et al., 2015, 2019), *i.e.*, the service recovery system (Smith et al., 2019; Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016). By implementing “*advanced HR practices*” (Albus and Ro, 2017: 41), companies can influence their frontline employees' behavior (Guchait et al., 2015, 2019), especially in the immediate phase of a service recovery response (Miller, Craighead, and Karwan, 2000). Empowering frontline employees in service recovery situations appears crucial in this respect (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Autonomy allows them to craft their problem resolution effort or their response to customers' needs without the need for their managers' approval (Smith et al., 2019).

### ***Organizational error tolerance and service recovery performance***

Organizational error handling has recently emerged as a key aspect of the service recovery system (see the work of Guchait and co-authors). The literature on organizational behavior and organizational psychology distinguishes between companies, depending on whether they frame individual errors positively or negatively (Maurer, Hartnell, and Lippstreu, 2017).

In an error prevention culture, mistakes are unacceptable – especially as they affect the company's reputation with its customers – and are punished accordingly. The resulting psychological unsafety<sup>1</sup> (Ogilvie et al., 2017) means that employees take fewer risks and hide their mistakes for fear of being blamed. An error management culture, on the other hand, regards errors as inevitable and as learning opportunities. Consequently, organizations seek to

---

<sup>1</sup> Error tolerance is usually understood as a contextual predictor of psychological safety (Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020), a theoretical construct closely related to that of a forgiveness climate (Guchait et al., 2016).

encourage early error detection, open communication, systemic analysis, and rapid corrective actions to minimize their negative impact and/or to prevent similar mistakes in the future (Dimitrova et al., 2017; Frese and Keith, 2015; Van Dyck et al., 2005). Error tolerance is at the heart of this type of error management culture as the shift in mindset is a prerequisite of behavioral changes (Frese and Keith, 2015; Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020).

An error management culture has a significant positive influence on employees' helping behavior (Guchait, Paşamehmetoğlu, and Lanza-Abbott, 2015), learning behavior, error reporting (Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu, 2020), service recovery performance (Guchait et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020), customer trust, customer engagement behavior, consumer attitude, word-of-mouth, and revisit intention (Wei et al., 2017, 2019) (see Table 1). It is of little surprise that studies crossing error tolerance and service recovery conclude that the quality of customer-employee interactions (here, through the service recovery process) rely on a symmetrical relationship with the quality of manager-employee interactions (here, through error tolerance). In this respect, the “employee-first” philosophy highlights the importance of transforming the culture of organizations with a constant focus on improving individuals' psychological well-being at work *via* changes in managerial behavior (Itam and Ghosh, 2020; Nayar, 2010).

Although the internal perspective adopted by Guchait et al. (2015, 2019) and Wang, Guchait, and Paşamehmetoğlu (2020) that focuses on employees and managers, and the external customer-oriented perspective used by Wei et al. (2017, 2019) provide useful additions to the literature, they fail to grasp the whole picture of error management culture and service recovery. Indeed, internal and external perspectives appear potentially conflicting. While a manager's error tolerance can be reassuring for employees, it could send consumers an image of laxity (if the HR policy is openly communicated – a point traditionally ignored in the literature). We therefore need to conduct a multilevel analysis (Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016) that



examines both the relations between managers and employees (internal), and between employees and customers (external).

This need is all the greater in that the quantitative approach generally adopted in the literature does not cover the exact mechanisms through which an error management culture can have a positive effect on service recovery (Guchait et al., 2019). Further qualitative work (*e.g.*: in-depth interviews) could provide service recovery research with more comprehensive insights (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). One challenge is to obtain an integrated perspective of all the positive behavioral outcomes for service recovery made possible by error tolerance, rather than consider them separately. The transposability of certain positive virtues of error tolerance also need to be verified. These have frequently been identified in the literature on organizational behavior and organizational psychology (*e.g.*: initiative taking, problem solving) (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Weinzimmer and Esken, 2017), but have not been explored with respect to service recovery to date (see Table 1).

[Table 1 near here – Overview of the theoretical gaps identified]

In the present study, we attempt to ascertain how and why organizational tolerance of errors made by sales staff affects the experience of customers following a service failure. We also explore the boundary conditions surrounding its implementation. Our research reveals underlying tensions in the way customers perceive the handling of individual errors they experience. On the one hand, they are increasingly attentive to the socially responsible policies adopted by companies from which they decide to purchase goods and services (Albus and Ro, 2017), supporting the idea that they would acknowledge the value of a forgiveness climate. On the other hand, customers have become increasingly demanding and unwilling to put up with any problems (Piercy, 2009; Stock and Bednarek, 2014). In this context, an organizational error

tolerance policy does not guarantee what Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019) define as credibility feedback with customers. Punishing or reprimanding an employee responsible for a service failure can appease consumer anger toward the firm and may be seen as a signal that the organization is serious about avoiding similar issues in the future (Koppitsch et al., 2013; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). As Guchait et al. (2015, 61) noted, “*managers need to walk a fine line between taking errors seriously and emphasizing error tolerance.*” Our study attempts to define the equilibrium that organizations hope to achieve in concrete situations of service failure management.

## Methodology

### ***Data collection***

Between January and June 2020, we interviewed 22 retail professionals from the fields of marketing (2 retail directors, 1 retail coordinator, 1 customer experience manager, 2 customer relations directors and 1 innovation manager), sales (1 network coordinator, 2 managers handling multiple stores, 3 store managers, 3 sales assistants) and HR management (3 HR directors, 2 HR executives), as well as one chief executive officer (CEO). The sample thus includes both senior managers (who define the rules and the culture regarding mistakes) and frontliners (who make errors and deal with customers), several of whom work in the same company in France (Table 2). The diversity of respondents helped improve the external validity of our results. We also interviewed 18 customers (Table 3) in order to triangulate the internal data with external data.

[Table 2 near here – Professional sample descriptions]

[Table 3 near here – Customer sample descriptions]

Regarding the procedure, we initially contacted over 50 retailers. The self-selective nature of our respondents (*i.e.*, they chose to respond to our solicitation) may indicate a certain level of interest in the link between HR policies and customer satisfaction. Indeed, all the companies in our sample have adopted an error tolerance policy, and some of them have even formalized this approach in their internal HR procedures. The interviews lasted an average of one hour. They were divided into three sections: 1) service failure encountered by the company and associated service recovery, 2) actual company policy with regard to error tolerance, and 3) the relationship between error tolerance and customer experience. We stopped reaching out to companies once our empirical data began to show signs of saturation.

The average duration of the interviews with customers was 40 minutes. After checking that the selected customers were familiar with the retailers in our sample, the interviews were divided into three parts: 1) most recent unsatisfactory in-store experiences with the above-mentioned retailers, 2) general perception of service failure and recovery efforts, and 3) perception of error tolerance and its impact on the customer experience. An in-store scenario based on a real service failure was also described to give the respondents some concrete points of reference on which to base their responses. This is similar to the approach adopted by Bath and Bawa (2020) who used the critical incident technique to explore consumer forgiveness after a service failure caused by frontline employees.

### ***Data analysis***

Our multilevel interviews (headquarters/networks, managers/employees and internal/external) were first transcribed and then analyzed using NVivo 10 software. We adopted the methodology proposed by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013), an institutionalized template for interpretive qualitative research which clarifies the match between data segments and theoretical coding.

This guides the reader through the analytic pathway (Reay et al., 2019), reinforcing the rigor and transparency of the qualitative research (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2013).

An initial read-through of the 40 interviews allowed us to identify 221 separate ideas expressed by the respondents, which we grouped into 14 provisional categories. After discussing the findings and eliminating any items judged to be peripheral to the study, we arrived at a list of 55 1<sup>st</sup> level codes encapsulating the respondents' discourse, irrespective of the existing literature. A 2<sup>nd</sup> level of coding allowed us to aggregate these 1<sup>st</sup> level codes *via* two successive levels of data abstraction. At this stage, we drew upon the existing literature to define some of our 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes, particularly at the highest aggregated level (*e.g.*: organizational learning, customer attitude, employee experience, error management culture). Several new concepts emerged, including the notion of information blind spots. Table 4 illustrates the process used to condense the 55 1<sup>st</sup> level codes into 15 2<sup>nd</sup> level topics, and then 5 aggregated 2<sup>nd</sup> level dimensions.

[Table 4 near here – Data structure using the Gioia methodology]

Having established our “*data structure*” (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2013, 20), we proceeded to encode our empirical data. This process generated a conceptual model that builds on existing research into the connections between service failure, service recovery and the consequences for customers (Van Vaerenbergh, 2012), highlighting the impact of error tolerance on customer experience in instances of service failure (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here – The impact of an error management culture on customers' experience of service failures]

## Empirical results

The service failure – service recovery – customer response sequence (Van Vaerenbergh, 2012) presented in gray in Figure 1 has been widely studied in the service marketing literature. The originality of our research lies in the introduction of an HR dimension into our theoretical model, allowing us to appreciate how an organizational error tolerance policy can positively influence service recovery and its perception by customers. More specifically, our model provides insights into how an error management culture can convey a positive image through the handling of the incident (or at least avoid projecting a negative one). In addition, it reveals two other indirect effects. First, it emphasizes the key role of organizational error tolerance in changing frontline staff behavior in a way that favors service recovery. Second, this HR policy helps establish an organizational learning dynamic that sends customers a positive signal of a collective desire to improve. However, error tolerance appears to contradict the demanding attitude of customers and their negative representation of individual mistakes. This underlying tension makes it difficult for companies to publicize their error tolerance policy, giving rise to what we refer to as an “informational blind spot.”

### ***Customer attitude***

The professionals we interviewed imputed the rise in the level of customers’ expectations to greater access to information [1.1] and the high service standards set by companies such as Amazon and Apple, resulting in customers raising the bar of their “*benchmark*” for all businesses [1.2].

*“Our clients know more and more about our products [...] and they find it more and more difficult to accept that you can’t know it all [...] It’s made the relationship between our sales advisors and our clients more complicated [...] It can be really difficult to communicate with our consumers. People won’t put up with mistakes.”*  
(Pro 7)

This heightened level of expectation is matched by low tolerance for error. However, there is a serious disconnect between the way the situation is perceived by retailers and by customers. Customers often describe themselves as forgiving, while retailers complain of the latter's lack of indulgence. Of course, such phenomena largely depend on the individuals involved, with many potential reactions to any given situation [2.1]. Above and beyond the customer's personality, ideas of what is considered "*acceptable*" may vary in response to other parameters beyond the company's control, such as situational factors [2.2]. Furthermore, error tolerance is linked to the type of company involved in an incident [2.3]. Loyal customers also appear to be more understanding and are more likely to base their assessment of a retail outlet on their "*long-term*" experience [2.4].

Moreover, customers are not indulgent if the service failure has significant negative repercussions for them (*e.g.*: getting burned during a beauty procedure). There is, however, a "*scale of seriousness*" for errors committed, which may also be informed by the nature and price of the product/service purchased [2.5].

Customers are also unlikely to respond leniently if they have the feeling that the frontline employee is "*in denial*" about the error made. They expect sales staff to listen, to "*acknowledge their victim status,*" to apologize, and to take the necessary measures to satisfy them [2.6].

*"I think the worst thing is the failure to accept mistakes [...] If you make a mistake, but use bad faith or justification to deny it, that goes down very badly. Rather than say 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake' [...], room for error only applies if the person in question recognizes their mistake."* (Pro 5)

Conversely, two conditions seem conducive to leniency. First, customers are more willing to take incidents in their stride when dealing with frontline employees who are still in training. They accept that trainees might struggle (*e.g.*: take longer to deal with their request), or even make mistakes [2.7]. Second, some customers admit that it would be hypocritical to

expect tolerance in their own workplace while behaving intransigently with retail employees [2.8].

Knowing that a salesperson is in training also makes it easier to distinguish – in the event of an error – between the actions of individual employees and the general management of the company. In normal circumstances, customers may well hold the organization itself responsible for inconvenient incidents, losing trust in the whole firm [2.9].

In general, when faced with a service failure, a customer's priority is to get the salesperson to “*correct the mistake*” without any additional effort on their part [3.1] and as fast as possible [3.2]. Customers may expect some compensation for the inconvenience in the form of a “*goodwill gesture*.” If they feel that the service recovery effort meets their expectations, they are likely to take a more generous view of the incident [3.3]. Consumers do not forget service failures in a hurry either, even if, in some cases, they may “*reinforce customer loyalty*.” Customers are thus little inclined to accept multiple, consecutive mistakes.

*“When customers come to see us with a problem, they're often at the end of their tether because they're afraid of what's going to happen. They've lost confidence. [...] We train our managers so that when customers come in, the first thing they say is 'We're going to find a solution, Sir, and we're going to find it right away.' That's really the feeling we want our customers to have. To ease the tension. And when it goes the customer's way, when they get a refund or an exchange, generally the customer is saying thank you by the time they leave.” (Pro 11)*

### ***Error management culture***

Running contrary to the “*customer is king*” dogma, companies often demonstrate “*benevolence*” when frontline employees make mistakes. Indeed, all the retailers included in this study were keen to highlight the importance of a positive approach – neither punitive nor permissive – to handling errors [4.1].

Nevertheless, the level of maturity in such matters and the degree to which such policies are formalized may vary across retailers. In some cases, error tolerance is clearly proclaimed as one of the retailer's “*values*”. For example, it is one of the “*precepts*” established by IKEA

founder Ingvar Kamprad and is now listed on the company's website. The same is true of Leroy Merlin, where the principle has been assimilated into the company's HR tools. In 2019, 89% of the company's employees gave an affirmative answer to the question "*Do you have the right to make mistakes?*" in an anonymous internal survey. Similarly, tolerating error is one of the "*five principles of leadership*" put in place by KultiSeem in 2020, and also features among the "*fundamental cultural values*" defined by Bouygues Télécom [4.2]. In other companies, error tolerance is implicit in the practices in place at retail outlets.

*"Error tolerance is part of our company. You can make a mistake and there won't be a problem, no reprimands or ticking off or warnings [...] It's part of our culture, our customs, the way people work [...] Personally, I'm in touch with HR every day, and I rarely, if ever, get warning letters or redundancy notices [...] We always try to give people the benefit of the doubt, and to find solutions to make sure they don't make the same mistakes again."* (Pro 1)

It also appears that frontline employees in large companies often view their company culture exclusively through the lens of the store in which they work *via* the relationship they have with their manager [4.3]. As such, the sort of management values championed at company headquarters – and promoted in internal communication – are generally less well known in the field [4.4].

In practice, the implementation of error tolerance varies from one retail outlet to the next. This is particularly true of franchise networks. Since they are not employed by the parent company, managers are effectively free to apply (or abandon) such policies as they see fit. The parent company, meanwhile, cannot be seen to interfere in its franchise-holders' managerial practices. The retailer's core values may nonetheless be communicated *via* training programs, franchise contracts or commercial coordination teams working across the network [5.1].

*"Of our 700 stores, 500 are independent franchise-holders, which means they are their own bosses and have their own employees. [...] With the stores belonging entirely to the group, things are simpler as all decisions about recruitment, suspensions, punishments, redundancies, promotions, etc. go through HR, so we're always there to help coach the teams through these situations: 'Did you check this or that?' 'Before you start telling him off for whatever reason, was he trained properly?' 'Is the decision you want to take fair compared to decisions taken in*



*other cases?’ and so on [...]. With franchised stores it’s much more complicated. We really don’t have any control over them. So the only means at our disposal is communication via the network, the information we give, and the agreement we have.” (Pro 13)*

More often than not, it takes tangible evidence of tolerance in day-to-day situations to reassure employees of their right to make mistakes. The practical incarnation of error tolerance will depend on the degree to which this value has been taken on board by managers, as well as their capacity to “*embody*” the value through a sense of “*proximity*” to their teams, their level of tolerance, and the adoption of a “*coaching*” position in instances of service failure [5.2].

It is nonetheless worth noting that the expression “*error tolerance*” sits uneasily with some senior managers, who prefer to avoid it and focus their communication efforts on customer service “*excellence*”. Rather than give the impression that employees are “*absolved of all responsibility*”, they prefer to adopt qualitatively different notions such as audacity, risk-taking, spirit of initiative, etc. Error tolerance is thus reserved for employees engaged in innovation, and not for everyday slip-ups and lapses in attention [5.3]. At any rate, error tolerance feels more tangible to employees when senior managers themselves lead by example (*e.g.*: acknowledge their errors, take responsibility in the event of a problem) and “*embody*” the error tolerance they advocate [5.4].

Whatever policy they adopt, companies are careful to avoid naïve optimism. The precise scope of error tolerance is never officially defined, allowing managers to handle situations on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, our respondents generally agreed on the boundaries that should not be crossed. In their view, mistakes are acceptable if committed “*in good faith*”, in other words, “*accidentally*” (*e.g.*: inattention when taking an order). In other words, employees with “*bad intentions*” (*e.g.*: deliberately contravening important procedures or behavioral standards) cannot be said to have made a mistake; they are at fault and should be punished accordingly. The same goes for other situations in which managers may come down hard on

employees who have been specifically trained in the procedures to follow (e.g.: checking the temperature of equipment in beauty centers). In practice, error tolerance “*is not an all-purpose excuse.*” It only applies if employees are considered to have abided by the company’s “*core values*” (e.g.: behaving courteously and politely with customers) [6.1].

*“Error tolerance reaches its limit when you have team members whose attitude is not in keeping with our company’s core values. The rules are fairly simple: [...] basic rules of courtesy and politeness. So if we hear that a salesperson is being rude, confrontational or vulgar to customers, or even refusing to serve people, then obviously that’s a real problem. There’s a line you can’t cross. And then we say, ‘actually, this isn’t a mistake; it falls short of our identity - politeness, friendliness, expertise...’” (Pro 6)*

Furthermore, to be considered acceptable, mistakes must be reported to management by the person in question of their own free will [6.2]. Lastly, it is important that employees learn from such incidents and not repeat the same mistake or make other such slip-ups. In the management’s eyes, recurring errors indicate that the person is either unqualified or “*insufficiently motivated*” for the position [6.3].

More generally, a specific error needs to be measured against the employee’s overall record of behavior. If the employee in question is usually irreproachable, the manager is less likely to blame him or her for the incident. At risk of being unfair in some cases, managerial responses to errors are “*calibrated*” according to the past relationship with a salesperson [6.4].

Responses to mistakes also vary “*depending on the importance of the error*”. Serious mistakes – which could have major consequences for the customer and/or the company – are much less likely to be tolerated [6.5].

### ***The information blind spot***

While retailers may champion error tolerance to varying degrees, they are careful not to share this HR policy with their customers, creating what we might describe as an information blind spot [7.1]. Error tolerance is, however, a subject of internal communication in some companies,

with information displayed in offices [7.2] and even during recruitment drives with a view to improving their “*employer branding.*” [7.3]

*“Nowadays, the values are written on the walls. But only behind the scenes, not publicly. Externally, we focus on the brand’s Swedish origins, the Swedish image. But our values, the organizational error tolerance and some of our other company values, we keep them internal.”* (Pro 4)

In addition to the risk of being accused of “*social washing*”, [8.1] publicizing tolerance of errors made by employees is considered incompatible with the “*customer is king*” paradigm. Error tolerance is thus perceived as having “*negative connotations.*” [8.2]

*“In the retail context, which is a competitive one, we’re all trying to provide our customers with a 5-star experience [...]. Obviously, there’s no room for error in this context! So, when there are mistakes, it means there are problems in the customers’ experience and they’ll be dissatisfied. Nowadays, customers can easily find what they need elsewhere. Therefore, it’s problematic if there’s a mistake in the customer’s experience and if, in addition, it’s apparently not considered serious (in inverted commas) in the company’s eyes. I really think that in our context, mistakes are always seen in a negative light by the customer”* (Pro 19)

Tolerating mistakes is considered “*incomprehensible*” to customers, who are commonly regarded as “*schizophrenic*”. The paradox is that customers are presumed to be very keen on the notion of socially responsible businesses as “*citizens*” but are often highly intolerant when they find themselves on the receiving end of an error as “*customers.*” External communication on error tolerance would not alter the level of service expected by customers [8.3]. It could even make them jump to certain conclusions, such as assuming that allowing staff to make errors means that the company commits more than its fair share, and that it will use this argument in its defense. Customers could thus develop a certain *a priori* mistrust of the company. If an incident did occur, they might also feel frustrated, holding the HR policy responsible for the problem encountered [8.4].

*“When you’re providing a personal service, there shouldn’t be any mistakes. People are paying for the service. So I don’t think there should be a right to make mistakes. Of course, things happen. But it shouldn’t exist [...]. When they walk into a store, customers expect a certain service quality and, in a way, if error tolerance*

*is openly espoused, the idea is automatically out there that mistakes happen. Saying it openly means it could happen. So I think it detracts from the store's credibility."* (Customer 8)

Moreover, customers do not respond well to being reminded that *"it's only human to make mistakes."* Such excuses give the impression that the company is not taking the incident seriously, and that the customers' problems are less important than the company's HR policy. Most customers do not appreciate appeals to their generosity, or the impression that the firm is attempting to sway their perception of the incident [8.5].

Although customers' chief priority is always the quality of the product or service, they nonetheless declare that they are interested in the way companies treat their staff in HR terms (e.g.: the image conveyed by word-of-mouth or media depictions) [9.1].

*"I'm attentive to the way employees are treated. If I go into a store and notice that a manager isn't treating his staff properly, I tell myself that I won't go back there because it's unpleasant [...] In fact, I'd rather take my business to a company where I know that people are treated well, rather than one where I know the employees are treated badly."* (Customer 2)

According to the professionals we interviewed, the challenge is to ensure that customers *"feel"* the benefits of benevolent management *via* the in-store atmosphere and the fact that managers are supportive of their teams (e.g.: not contradicting a sales assistant in front of customers). In other words, treating employees with *"humanity"* is an integral part of the customer experience. At the same time, however, companies should not *"proclaim"* the virtues of their error tolerance policy to customers as if it were a *"marketing slogan."* [9.2]

Thus, while customers may not respond favorably to communication that focuses on error tolerance, nor are they keen to see an atmosphere of intransigence. Witnessing the admonishment of an employee is seen as symptomatic of a lack of team spirit, something which makes customers *"uncomfortable."* If a *"telling off"* is required, it should take place *"behind closed doors"* when the customer is out of earshot. Once their problem has been resolved, some

customers even seek assurance from managers that the salesperson at fault will not be reprimanded [9.3].

### ***Employee experience***

While error tolerance may have negative connotations when seen from the outside, its positive effect appears undeniable internally. In particular, such an HR policy strengthens employees' "attachment" to the company and their "pride" at working there [10.1]. Emphasizing error tolerance thus enables frontline staff to work in "confidence", safe in the knowledge that they have the "support" of the organizational hierarchy (and even its "protection" when faced with difficult customers). A psychologically "reassuring" workplace environment (e.g.: knowing that your job is not at risk if you make a mistake) [10.2] helps to ensure that employees remain happy at work [10.3].

*"Error tolerance [...] means you have a lot less pressure. So, ultimately, you're more relaxed and more efficient. That's my preferred style of management. You need to get things out in the open. You need to tell people what's good and what's not so good, but there's no point putting them under this huge pressure by being too directive. That doesn't make employees feel calm and confident when dealing with customers. There's no point in pushing employees, dangling the sword of Damocles over their head. It won't make them more efficient. Quite the opposite, in fact." (Pro 22)*

Additionally, by instilling an atmosphere of trust, error tolerance can help to improve workplace relations, making them more "frank" and "direct", as a non-punitive working environment reduces the sense of distance between employees and managers, allowing people to speak their minds and encouraging greater "transparency" when errors occur. This helps to ensure that problems are resolved rapidly [11.1]. Moreover, by reducing the pressure placed on employees, tolerating mistakes is conducive to greater benevolence and "mutual assistance" among colleagues [11.2].

*"As soon as a mistake occurs, my employees come and tell me about it. The other day a client was having an eyebrow treatment, and these little blood spots came up.*

*[...] The beautician came to talk to me. The three of us, including the client, discussed it and we added a note to her customer file saying that she has very sensitive skin, so she should only have wax treatments in the future. [...] So employees often come to me and say: 'I had a client just now and I'm not sure about her, I think we might have a dissatisfied customer. This is what happened...' And I say to them: 'OK. I'll call her first and calm down the situation.'*” (Pro 17)

Error tolerance is written into the customer relationship management philosophy of some companies that decide to prioritize the “*symmetry of care*”, an HR policy which considers that improving the employee experience will help to improve the customer experience. A “*virtuous circle*” is formed whereby sales staff who feel “*relaxed*” in their work will treat customers with the same attentive attitude shown by their managers (e.g.: good mood, listening, proximity) [12.1].

*“Error tolerance allows you to be natural and relaxed. Or at least to face disgruntled clients and stay positive. If you know that the system gives you the right to get it wrong, you're obviously going to be much more relaxed when dealing with an unhappy customer since you know that you're not personally in danger. So, in a sense, it takes a big load off you. If you're being defensive and aggressive, it's because you're not comfortable and you think that attack is the best defense, so you answer back. But when you're able to say “OK, I screwed up,” or “OK, listen madam, we're going to put this right”, you have a much more calming effect on the customers, reassuring them that you're going to sort out their problem [...] If you're relaxed when you have an unhappy client, because you know that your job isn't on the line and you're not going to have personal or professional problems, I think they can feel it.”* (Pro 13)

In this respect, customers report that they can feel the quality of relations between managers and their teams, or the spirit of cohesion between colleagues. A positive employee experience is reflected in the in-store atmosphere (e.g.: convivial, relaxed), a key aspect of the customer experience. Some retail managers acknowledge that in moments of stress, their own intransigence with their teams has a negative impact on their stores' customer satisfaction scores [12.2].

Furthermore, when given more “*room for maneuver*,” employees feel free “*to take the initiative*” and resolve any incidents themselves. Error tolerance goes hand-in-hand with a

certain degree of autonomy, when frontline staff are expected to display “*agility*.” The goal is to improve the “*fluency*” of the customer experience by removing obstacles and finding a faster and perhaps more “*original*” solution to the problem at hand compared to usual procedures [12.3].

Moreover, tolerating mistakes encourages frontline staff to reach out to customers and offer advice, without being restricted by fear of saying the wrong thing. Several of our respondents reported that promoting error tolerance helps to boost employee engagement and actually reduces the number of errors committed. In contrast, a less benevolent HR policy is liable to make employees “*hyper-vigilant*” [12.4]. Feeling “*under pressure*,” they are more likely to make mistakes.

### ***Organizational learning***

Service failures are inextricably linked to companies’ learning policies. Businesses devote particular attention to the results of satisfaction surveys as well as online reviews. These analyses help them to identify areas in need of improvement. In some cases, negative reviewers are contacted to get more detailed feedback [13.1].

*“When we get feedback, we pass on the information to employees about any slip-ups they might have made. [...] Every day, all of our employees have customer satisfaction surveys at their workstations from customers they handled over the past few days. So if a customer gives a bad review, the employee sees it. It’s totally transparent [...] And the employee in question will call the customer back to handle the matter personally. Like that, they solve their own problems. Error tolerance means that, for us, what matters is that the customer’s problem is resolved. [...] And we leave it entirely to the employees’ discretion to make sure that happens.” (Pro 3)*

At store level, customer feedback is often passed on to employees to ensure they are aware of the points to be monitored [13.2]. Regional network managers may also visit and lend their support to store managers to help teams learn the lessons from such feedback [13.3].

In this “*culture of progress*,” mistakes are often perceived as opportunities for learning on condition they are followed up with close analysis and self-evaluation [14.1]. If an incident arises, the “*manager-coach*” holds a “*debriefing*” session to discuss the incident with the salesperson, but only after the disgruntled customer has left (e.g.: listening to the employee’s side of the story, unpicking the situation, re-explaining the relevant processes, offering training if necessary). Some companies provide managers with training on how to give “*constructive feedback*.” The purpose is to ensure that sales staff feel “*accompanied*” and “*supported*”, not admonished [14.2].

Companies thus seek explanations for service failures for preventive purposes (i.e., to ensure they do not happen again) rather than because they are looking for someone to blame. Such exchanges also make it easier to detect organizational malfunctions and help to improve professional practices [14.3].

*“If something gets reported, of course we’re informed. But the first priority is always to understand why something happened, rather than find and blame the person responsible. Really, it’s more about trying to find solutions to avoid ending up in the same situation again. [...]. We don’t have a culture of ‘blame and punish.’ Our culture is really about improving, so the fact that we get reports from dissatisfied customers, we kind of take it as constructive feedback in that it allows us to put a plan of action in place to make things better.” (Pro 11)*

Some customers appreciate the effort made by companies to learn from experience in order to better serve them in the future, even if the benefits are not always immediately visible. However, it sends a positive message to customers [15.1].

*“The lady at the check-out was chucking my items. She was scanning them and then pretty much throwing them. So I called her up on it: “Can you be a bit more careful with the products, please? It’s food, not junk!” She didn’t say anything. There were little forms at the entrance where you could write down suggestions. So I did. They called me back three or four days later to find out what happened exactly. So I told them. [...] I think they just called to find out why I wrote the note. To find out what happened, but that was it [...] The lady on the phone said: ‘Thank you for passing on the information, we’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.’ Something like that. [...] I thought that was fine. At least they do actually take notice of your feedback. Afterwards, whether they actually do anything about it, whether she got told off or some training, I don’t know. I don’t know if they followed up on it.” (Customer 8)*



By the same token, some customers may be “*reassured*” by a manager taking the time, in their presence, to briefly explain to an employee how to avoid repeating the mistake in the future [15.2].

## Discussion

In 2005, Van Dyck et al. noted that few companies embraced an error tolerance policy. These authors believed that the potential for organizations to adopt an error management culture that would enhance their competitive edge had not been fully realized. Around 15 years on, our paper shows that the trend has shifted, even if the frontiers of error tolerance vary across companies. At first glance, a zero-tolerance approach would appear to be a more logical consequence of the dominant “customer is king” paradigm (Piercy, 2009). However, our findings indicate that there is no contradiction in advocating error tolerance for more successful service recovery outcomes and, more generally, providing the best possible service, regardless of any service failures. Using the ‘Gioia template’, the themes identified in our data structure gave rise to four Propositions (Ps) that suggest how and under what conditions an organization’s error tolerance policy can help to improve the experience of customers confronted with a service failure. The study does not advocate a naïve view of organizational error tolerance and should not be interpreted as a plea for overly permissive management. On the contrary, it identifies certain conditions that impose limitations on error tolerance, defining its scope with precision (see Table 5 for an overview of the boundary conditions).

[Table 5 near here – Propositions around the error management culture and service recovery]

### ***From a right to make mistakes to a right to make up for mistakes***

The literature studies the impact of an error management culture on service recovery exclusively from an external or internal perspective (see Table 1). Our multilevel approach shows that adopting an organizational error tolerance policy in no way prejudices the external perspective of customers who may or may not be tolerant of errors. In other words, changing the way errors are perceived in an organization does not necessarily change the way they are framed externally. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that under specific conditions, internal tolerance (that of the organization) of individual errors can lead to external tolerance (that of the customers) of such mistakes. In fact, instead of customers granting a right to make mistakes, we observe a right to service recovery, that is, a right to make up for mistakes. Customers will only accept outcomes that satisfy their expectations, which in turn help them to put the incident into perspective (accepting that it is only human to make mistakes, for instance). In fact, we find that they are much less forgiving than they imagine themselves to be. Increasingly demanding (Grandey, Dickter, and Sin, 2004; Stock and Bednarek, 2014), customers appear to have little patience with mistakes occurring in the context of the customer service relationship, especially if they have already experienced a similar incident in the past. Paradoxically, however, reflecting the rise of the CSR movement (Albus and Ro, 2017), they acknowledge the importance of benevolent management in firms, particularly when employees make mistakes. While this observation is consistent with the existing literature, we argue that customers are less forgiving if these errors have negative repercussions on their own experience. Their utilitarian perspective (all incidents are to be avoided) therefore seems to trump their sense of solidarity (accepting human fallibility) in cases of service failure. However, they are likely to become tolerant again if the service recovery is successful.

Whatever the situation, despite recent emphasis on organizational error tolerance, retailers also accept that some mistakes are unacceptable to customers and are therefore far less

tolerant of mistakes that could be likened to professional misconduct. In this respect, the organization's perspective is consistent with that of its customers. We thus suggest that the upper threshold for organizational tolerance of individual error – just like the company's fundamental values – is aligned with customer expectations.

In sum, we formulate the following proposition, which underscores the 'schizophrenic' responses of customers:

*P1: Customers grant a right to make up for mistakes, not a right to make mistakes; some mistakes are even intolerable in their eyes.*

### ***Organizational error tolerance: an information blind spot***

Open communication is traditionally considered a key feature of an error management culture (Dimitrova et al., 2017; Frese and Keith, 2015; Van Dyck et al., 2005). Our research provides some nuance, however. Indeed, while the extent to which retailers communicate internally about error tolerance varies, there is a clear consensus that this HR policy should not be publicized externally (at least in a commercial context). The way individual mistakes are handled by companies (*via* manager-employee relations) thus constitutes the invisible part of the service recovery system; only employee-customer relations are visible to customers. In this regard, our research is original in that it demonstrates that organizations' error management culture represents an information blind spot for customers. Beyond the extant work highlighting the positive role of organizational practices on service recovery performance (see Table 1), we thus show that these practices sometimes generate contradictions in customer relationship management.

In a completely different context to the one studied here – a nuclear power station – Journé (2003) warns of the pitfalls of external communication. In our case, by communicating openly about its error tolerance policy, the organization could leave customers with the

subjective impression that the quality of service has declined (despite objective improvements to the service recovery process). This disconnect between the subjective and objective dimensions is symptomatic of customers' partial judgment (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). They may implicitly associate error tolerance with the increased likelihood of mistakes being made and, consequently, poorer service quality (while expecting to receive impeccable service).

Our findings also suggest a lack of maturity among customers with regard to the link between HR practices and frontline employees' behavior (Albus and Ro, 2017; Guchait, Paşamehmetoğlu, and Lanza-Abbott, 2015), especially during the immediate service recovery response phase (Miller, Craighead, and Karwan, 2000). For all that, they do not necessarily want to see the guilty party punished (particularly in their presence). This finding partially undermines the idea that a reprimand would be a credibility feedback lever, as argued by Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2019).

In addition, customer trust is often presented as a key variable in building strong relations in a service failure context (Wei et al., 2017, 2019). Our study shows that publicizing error tolerance can shake the customers' trust in the organization, despite the actions associated with organizational error tolerance actually being designed to inspire greater trust (Inyang, 2015). For impression management purposes (Baker, Meyer, and Johnson, 2008), our research suggests that retailers try to keep customers unaware of what goes on in the back office so as not to confuse their public messaging focus on excellence.

Even if it is not publicized, the positive effects of organizational error tolerance are reflected in employee attitudes and the in-store working environment, both of which rub off on customers. As such, the priority for organizations is not to publicize their error tolerance, but instead to make it an internal reality (e.g., by implementing non-judgmental feedback procedures) and to ensure that its benefits are felt externally. It is crucial that directors and managers go beyond their declarations of intent by embodying this philosophy themselves. At

the same time, it must comply with everyday management practices to be considered legitimate by employees.

To summarize, we put forward the following proposition:

*P2: Error tolerance constitutes the invisible part of the service recovery system, and it must stay that way to preserve an image of excellence.*

### ***Error tolerance as a lever for the symmetry of care, a key to better service recovery***

In this study, we extend the existing debate surrounding symmetry of care (Nayar, 2010) to show that error tolerance is a crucial aspect of the employee experience, which then has a knock-on effect on the customer experience. First, employees become more engaged in their work and so tend to make fewer mistakes. Second, their attitude towards customers in the event of a mistake (*e.g.*: self-reflection, availability, willingness to listen) makes for a smoother customer experience.

To be more specific, this HR policy does not seek to change *ex-ante* the perception of error by customers and the corresponding representations of service failure. In other words, it is not an attempt to reframe errors (Maurer, Hartnell, and Lippstreu, 2017; Van Dyck et al., 2005). Rather, error tolerance aims to influence employees' behavior in the context of service recovery, so that customers accept a service failure more readily after the fact. The impact on customers is thus indirect as it emerges through employee effort (Guchait et al., 2019). More precisely, our paper enriches the literature on service recovery by showing that organizational error tolerance serves to align sales staff actions with customer needs, avoiding the adoption of defense mechanisms by employees (Argyris and Schön, 1978), already highlighted in other contexts. In line with Mjahed Hammami, Souiden, and Bennour (2020), our paper thus emphasizes the concrete mechanisms through which an error tolerance culture produces positive effects on frontline employee behavior during service recovery. No longer afraid of the

negative consequences of making mistakes, employees are free to focus on customers' expectations and the provision of rapid, tailored solutions (Guchait et al., 2019). By eliminating potential issues for frontline staff (Inyang, 2015; Stock and Bednarek, 2014; Widmier and Jackson, 2002), an error tolerance policy is conducive to a more customer-centric service. This is particularly interesting, since service recovery handled by frontline employees generates the most favorable recovery evaluations and behavioral intentions compared to service recovery attributed to the company or the customer (Swanson and Kelley, 2001).

However, we should keep in mind that national culture can also influence negative connotations associated with organizational error tolerance. In the context of France's culture of blame (Cusin and Goujon-Belghit, 2019), for example, the expression "*error tolerance*" is still regarded with suspicion by senior management in many organizations, who are far from unanimous that organizational error tolerance can be conducive to customer service excellence.

To sum up, P3 addresses these shortcomings below:

*P3: Error tolerance improves employees' experience, which in turn becomes more customer-centric, helping them to successfully manage service recovery.*

### ***Organizational learning as credibility feedback for durable service recovery***

Smith et al. (2019) mentioned the importance of organizational continuous improvement to meet customer expectations, without examining it in detail. In this regard, our findings confirm that error tolerance affects an organization's post-service failure credibility feedback (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). We go further, showing that the effect is all the more salient when customers perceive the service provider's commitment to learn from mistakes. Learning appears crucial for both parties if a new error is not to be viewed as a fault. Mistakes are only forgiven, however, if the individual at fault displays sufficient contrition and self-reflection, as well as a willingness to resolve the problem and prevent it from happening again. While service

recovery is often evaluated in the literature in the short term, our findings indicate that learning can be appreciated in the more or less long term, beyond a simple desire to learn. Sometimes, customers may notice the learning process well after their service failure has been resolved, perhaps during a new visit to the store, for instance. Whatever the temporality, we highlight the role of signal in the organization's post-failure learning capacity with respect to customers, which thus appears to be a concrete lever of impression management.

In fact, the psychological safety atmosphere induced by error tolerance has several virtues. In this respect, we show that some well-known findings in the organizational behavior and organizational psychology literature, like problem-solving or initiative taking (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Weinzimmer and Esken, 2017), can be transposed in a service recovery situation. Indeed, error tolerance allows frontline employees to express themselves, to learn from failure, to be more responsive and report problems more rapidly, to develop bespoke solutions by encouraging autonomy and initiative, and to foster a sense of mutual assistance between colleagues (Guchait et al., 2015, 2019; Ogilvie et al., 2017). Both organizations and customers thus seem beholden to the famous Latin motto "*errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum.*"

This results in the following proposal:

*P4: Error tolerance facilitates organizational learning, which in turn improves service recovery.*

## Conclusion

Our study examines how and under what conditions an organizational error tolerance policy can positively affect the customer experience in cases of service failure caused by employee error. The paper contributes to the literature by examining strong behavioral outcomes due to error tolerance from an integrated perspective. More specifically, we propose a multilevel analysis (Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016) of service recovery, combining internal (the

organization and its employees) and external (customers) perspectives, traditionally considered separately in the literature (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). This approach allows us to enrich the service marketing literature by merging organizational behavior and organizational psychology contributions (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Weinzimmer and Esken, 2017).

We thus suggest that an error management culture (Dimitrova et al., 2017; Frese and Keith, 2015; Van Dyck et al., 2005) can generate positive outcomes for customers in cases of service failure. Ultimately, organizational error tolerance is shown to be a crucial antecedent to service recovery. It is instrumental in empowering employees to interact more positively with customers. Identifying four propositions concerning the relationship between an error tolerance culture and service recovery, together with the associated boundary conditions, we gain clearer insights into ways retailers can enhance service recovery performance.

We first show that customers grant, at best, a right to make up for mistakes, not a right to make mistakes (P1). We also demonstrate that an error tolerance policy forms an invisible part of the service recovery system, and must remain behind the scenes in order to preserve the firm's image of excellence (P2). At the same time, customers can feel its impact since it improves employees' experience, in turn making the latter more customer-centric in their attempt to deliver a successful service recovery (P3), while simultaneously facilitating organizational learning (P4).

At managerial level, tolerating employees' errors is not a goal in and of itself for service providers. It should be understood more as a contributory factor to the customers' sense of interactional justice (Harun et al., 2018). More specifically, our paper shows internal error tolerance to be a key element in the symmetry of care (Nayar, 2010). As such, companies should understand that tolerating individual errors is not a contradiction in terms. Rather, they need to clearly define what is acceptable and what is not, while also striving to satisfy customers. By working in optimal psychological conditions, frontline employees are able to ensure service



recovery for customers affected by mistakes. In the current climate, however, communication about positive error management should be kept in-house, since customers have not yet come to terms with the idea that error tolerance is compatible with superior service quality. Finally, our work invites retailers to clearly define their error tolerance policy and to communicate it internally.

Naturally, this paper has limitations. In particular, social desirability bias leads to a disparity between the opinions expressed by professionals and customers when asked about the latter's attitude to mistakes and their actual behavior, since respondents are keen to present themselves as socially responsible. However, comparing internal and external perspectives, and the positions expressed by managers and their employees allows us to strengthen the internal validity of our results. For example, we show that not all companies follow the same policy when it comes to implementing error tolerance, even if they all agree that it is important.

There are several ways in which this research could be pursued further. Notably, our results reveal the presence of various moderating variables (*e.g.*: purchase context, customer personality, customers' past relationship with the retailer) which could account for different customer reactions and perceptions of a given service failure. It would therefore be interesting to test each of these variables empirically, using an experimental design. As an example, we might examine whether customers would respond differently to mistakes made by employees if the salesperson in question were wearing a "Trainee" badge.

## References

- Albus, Heidi, and Ro, Heejung. 2017. "Corporate Social Responsibility: The Effect of Green Practices in a Service Recovery." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* 41 (1): 41–65. doi: [10.1177/1096348013515915](https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348013515915).
- Argyris, Chris, and Schön, Donald A. 1978. "*Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*." Addison-Wesley, New York, NY.
- Bagherzadeh, Ramin, Rawal, Monika, Wei, Shuqin, and Torres, Jose Luis S. 2020. "The Journey from Customer Participation in Service Failure to Co-Creation in Service Recovery." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 54: 1–10. doi: [10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102058](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102058).
- Baker, Thomas L., Meyer, Tracy, and Johnson, James D. 2008. "Individual Differences in Perceptions of Service Failure and Recovery: The Role of Race and Discriminatory Bias." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 36 (4): 552–564. doi: [10.1007/s11747-008-0089-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-008-0089-x).
- Bath, Jatinderpreet K., and Bawa, Anupam. 2020. "Seeking Consumer Forgiveness: Face Management by Frontline Employees." *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 28 (1): 1–16. doi: [10.1080/10696679.2020.1769485](https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2020.1769485).
- Bitner, Mary Jo, Booms, Bernard H., and Tetreault, Mary S. 1990. "The Service Encounter: Unfavorable Incidents." *Journal of Marketing* 54: 71–84. doi: [10.2307/1252174](https://doi.org/10.2307/1252174).
- Chen, Tong, Ma, Ke, Bian, Xuemei, Zheng, Chundong, and Devlin, James. 2018. "Is High Recovery More Effective Than Expected Recovery in Addressing Service Failure? — A Moral Judgment Perspective." *Journal of Business Research* 82: 1–9. doi: [10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.08.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.08.025).

- Cusin, Julien, and Goujon-Belghit, Anne. 2019. "Error Reframing: Studying the Promotion of an Error Management Culture." *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 28 (4): 510–524. doi: [10.1080/1359432X.2019.1623786](https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1623786).
- DeTienne, Kristen B., and Westwood, Joan. 2019. "An Empirical Study of Service Recovery Quality and Customer Retention." *Journal of Management Research* 19 (4): 235–249. doi: [10.4172/1204-5357.1000130](https://doi.org/10.4172/1204-5357.1000130).
- Dimitrova, Nicoletta, Van Hooft, Edwin, Van Dyck, Cathy, and Groenewegen, Peter. 2017. "Behind the Wheel: What Drives the Effects of Error Handling?" *The Journal of Social Psychology* 157 (6): 658–672. doi: [10.1080/00224545.2016.1270891](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2016.1270891).
- Edmondson, Amy C., and Lei, Zhike. 2014. "Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct." *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1 (1): 23–43. doi: [10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305).
- Frese, Michael, and Keith, Nina. 2015. "Action Errors, Error Management and Learning in Organizations." *Annual Review of Psychology* 66 (1): 661–687. doi: [10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015205](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015205).
- Gelbrich, Katja., and Roschk, Holger. 2011. "A Meta-analysis of Organizational Complaint Handling and Customer Responses." *Journal of Service Research* 14 (1): 24–43. doi: [10.1177/1094670510387914](https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510387914).
- Gioia, Dennis, Corley, Kevin, and Hamilton, Aimee. 2013. "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology." *Organizational Research Methods* 16 (1): 15–31. doi: [10.1177/1094428112452151](https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151).
- Grandey, Alicia A., Dickter, David N., and Sin, Hock-Peng. 2004. "The Customer is not Always Right: Customer Aggression and Emotion Regulation of Service Employees." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 25 (3): 397–418. doi: [10.1002/job.252](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.252).

- Guchait, Priyanko, Paşamehmetoğlu, Ayşin, and Lanza-Abbott, Jeanna. 2015. "The Importance of Error Management Culture in Organizations: The Impact on Employee Helping Behaviors during Service Failures and Recoveries in Restaurants." *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality and Tourism* 14 (1): 45–67. doi: [10.1080/15332845.2014.904175](https://doi.org/10.1080/15332845.2014.904175).
- Guchait, Priyanko, Lanza-Abbott, Je'Anna, Madera, Juan M., and Dawson, Mary. 2016. "Should Organizations Be Forgiving or Unforgiving? A Two-Study Replication of How Forgiveness Climate in Hospitality Organizations Drives Employee Attitudes and Behaviors." *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 57 (4): 379–395. doi: [10.1177/1938965516633308](https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965516633308).
- Guchait, Priyanko, Abbott, Jeanna, Lee, Choong-Ki, Back, Ki-Joon, and Manoharan, Ashokkumar. 2019. "The Influence of Perceived Forgiveness Climate on Service Recovery Performance: The Mediating Effect of Psychological Safety and Organizational Fairness." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 40: 94–102. doi: [10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.06.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.06.007).
- Harrison-Walker, L. Jean. 2019. "The Critical Role of Customer Forgiveness in Successful Service Recovery." *Journal of Business Research* 95 (1): 376–391. doi: [10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.049](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.049).
- Harun, Ahasan, Rokonuzzaman, Md, Prybutok, Gayle, and Prybutok, Victor R. 2018. "Influencing Perception of Justice to Leverage Behavioral Outcome: A Perspective from Restaurant Service Failure Setting." *Quality Management Journal* 25 (3): 112–128. doi: [10.1080/10686967.2018.1474675](https://doi.org/10.1080/10686967.2018.1474675).
- Inyang, Aniefre E. 2015. "The buffering effects of salesperson service behaviors on customer loyalty after service failure and recovery." *Journal of Managerial Issues* 27 (1): 102–119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44113686>.

- Itam, Urmila, and Ghosh, Nitu. 2020. "Employee Experience Management: A New Paradigm Shift in HR Thinking". *International Journal of Human Capital and Information Technology Professionals* 11 (2): 39–49. doi: [10.4018/IJHCITP.2020040103](https://doi.org/10.4018/IJHCITP.2020040103).
- Journé, Benoît. 2003. "Les paradoxes de la gestion de la sûreté nucléaire". Perret V., and Josserand E. Ed.. *Le paradoxe : Penser et gérer autrement les organisations*, Ellipses, Paris, 223-252.
- Koppitsch, Steven, Folkes, Valerie S., MacInnis, Deborah, and Porath Christine. 2013. "The way a salesperson manages service providers influences customers' anger about problems." *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 33(1): 67–77. doi: [10.2753/PSS0885-3134330106](https://doi.org/10.2753/PSS0885-3134330106).
- Maurer, Todd J., Hartnell, Chad A., and Lippstreu, Michael. 2017. "A model of leadership motivations, error management culture, leadership capacity, and career success." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 90 (4): 481–507. doi: [10.1111/joop.12181](https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12181).
- McCollough, Michael A., Berry, Leonard, and Yadav, Manjit S. 2000. "An Empirical Investigation of Customer Satisfaction after Service Failure and Recovery." *Journal of Service Research* 3 (2): 121–137. doi: [10.1177/109467050032002](https://doi.org/10.1177/109467050032002).
- Miller, Janis L., Craighead, Christopher W., and Karwan, Kirk R. 2000. "Service Recovery: A Framework and Empirical Investigation." *Journal of Operations Management*. 18 (4): 387–400. doi: [10.1016/S0272-6963\(00\)00032-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-6963(00)00032-2).
- Mjahed Hammami, Samiha, Souiden, Nizar, and Bennour, Khaled. 2020. "Knowledge-Based Resources in Explaining Service Recovery Performance: A Multilevel Investigation." *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*. doi: [10.1080/10696679.2020.1812084](https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2020.1812084).
- Morris Michael H., LaForge Raymond W., and Allen Jeffrey A. 1994. "Salesperson Failure: Definition, Determinants, and Outcomes." *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 14 (1): 1–15. doi: [10.1080/08853134.1994.10753972](https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.1994.10753972).

- Nayar, Vineet. 2010. “*Employees first, Customers Second: Turning Conventional Management Upside Down.*” Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Mass.
- Ogilvie, Jessica, Bachrach, Daniel G., Mullins, Ryan, and Harvey Jaron. 2017. “Do Sales and Service Compete? The Impact of Multiple Psychological Climates on Frontline Employee Performance.” *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 37 (1): 11–26. doi: [10.1080/08853134.2016.1276398](https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.2016.1276398).
- Pacheco, Natalia A., Geuens, Magie, and Pizzutti Cristiane. 2018. “Whom Do Customers Blame for a Service Failure? Effects of Thought Speed on Causal Locus Attribution.” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 40: 60–65. doi: [10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.09.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.09.006).
- Piercy, Niall. 2009. “Positive Management of Marketing-Operations Relationships: The Case of an Internet Retail SME.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 25 (5-6): 551–570. doi: [10.1362/026725709X461858](https://doi.org/10.1362/026725709X461858).
- Reay, Trish, Zafar, Asma, Monteiro, Pedro, and Glaser, Vern. 2019. “Presenting Findings from Qualitative Research: One Size Does Not Fit All!” In *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, edited by Tammar B. Zilber, John M. Amis, Johanna Mair, 201–216, Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Santos-Vijande, Maria. L., Díaz-Martín, Ana. M., Suárez-Álvarez, Leiticia, and del Río-Lanza, Ana. B. 2013. “An Integrated Service Recovery System (ISRS): Influence on Knowledge-Intensive Business Services Performance.” *European Journal of Marketing* 47 (5/6): 934–963. doi: [10.1108/03090561311306994](https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561311306994).
- Smith, Amy K., Bolton, Ruth N., and Wagner, Janet. 1999. “A Model of Customer Satisfaction with Service Encounters Involving Service Failure and Recovery.” *Journal of Marketing Research* 36 (3): 356–372. doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3152082>.

- Smith, Jeffery S., Jayaram, Jayanth, Ponsignon, Frederic, and Wolter, Jeremy S. 2019. "Service Recovery System Antecedents: A Contingency Theory Investigation." *Journal of Service Management* 30 (2): 276–300. doi: [10.1108/JOSM-01-2018-0026](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-01-2018-0026).
- Stock, Ruth M., and Bednarek, Marei. 2014. "As They Sow, So Shall They Reap: Customers' Influence on Customer Satisfaction at the Customer Interface." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 42 (4): 400–414. doi: [10.1007/s11747-013-0355-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-013-0355-4).
- Swanson, Scott R., and Kelley, Scott W. 2001. "Attributions and Outcomes of the Service Recovery Process." *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 9 (4): 50–65. doi: [10.1080/10696679.2001.11501903](https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2001.11501903).
- Tversky, Amos, and Kahneman, Daniel. 1974. "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases." *Science* 185 (4157): 1124–1131. doi: [10.1126/science.185.4157.1124](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.185.4157.1124).
- Van Dyck, Cathy, Frese, Michael, Baer, Markus, and Sonnentag, Sabine. 2005. "Organizational Error Management Culture and its Impact on Performance: A Two-study Replication." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 90 (6): 1228–1240. doi: [10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1228](https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1228).
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves 2012. "Customer reactions to service failure and recovery encounters." PhD Thesis, Ghent University.
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves, and Orsingher, Chiara. 2016. "Service Recovery: An Integrative Framework and Research Agenda." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 30 (3): 328–346. doi: [10.5465/amp.2014.0143](https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2014.0143).
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves, Varga, Dorottya, De Keyser, Arne, and Orsingher, Chiara. 2019. "The Service Recovery Journey: Conceptualization, Integration, and Directions for Future Research." *Journal of Service Research* 22 (2): 103–119. doi: [10.1177/1094670518819852](https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670518819852).
- Wang, Xingyu, Guchait, Priyanko, and Paşamehmetoğlu, Aysin. 2020. "Tolerating Errors in Hospitality Organizations: Relationships with Learning Behavior, Error Reporting and

- Service Recovery Performance.” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 32 (8): 2635–2655. doi: [10.1108/IJCHM-01-2020-0001](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-01-2020-0001).
- Wei, Wei, Hua, Nan, Fu, Xiaoxiao, and Guchait, Priyanko. 2017. “The Impacts of Hotels’ Error Management Culture on Customer Engagement Behaviors (CEBs).” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 29 (12): 3119–3137. doi: [10.1108/IJCHM-04-2016-0226](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-04-2016-0226).
- Wei, Wei, Zhang, Lu, and Hua, Nan. 2019. “Error Management in Service Security Breaches.” *Journal of Services Marketing* 33 (7): 783–797. doi: [10.1108/JSM-04-2018-0114](https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-04-2018-0114).
- Weinzimmer, Laurence G., and Esken, Candace A. 2017. “Learning From Mistakes: How Mistake Tolerance Positively Affects Organizational Learning and Performance.” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 53(3): 451–476. doi: [10.1177/0021886316688658](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886316688658).
- Weun, Seungoo, Beatty, Sharon E., and Jones, Michael A. 2004. “The Impact of Service Failure Severity on Service Recovery Evaluations and Post-recovery Relationships.” *Journal of Services Marketing* 18 (2): 133–146. doi: [10.1108/08876040410528737](https://doi.org/10.1108/08876040410528737).
- Widmier, Scott, and Jackson Jr, Donald W. 2002. “Examining the Effects of Service Failure, Customer Compensation, and Fault on Customer Satisfaction with Salespeople.” *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 10 (1): 63–74. doi: [10.1080/10696679.2002.11501910](https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2002.11501910).
- Zeithaml, Valarie A., Berry, Leonard L., and Parasuraman, A. 1993. “The nature and determinants of customer expectations of service.” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 21(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070393211001>.



## Tables

**Table 1.** Overview of existing research fields and contributions of this study

Authors	Sector		Companies		Methodology		Error		Perspective			Customer awareness of error tolerance		Behavioral outcome(s)		Contribution	
	Tourism	Retail	Fictive	Real	Quantitative	Qualitative	Unspecified	Specified	Employees	Managers	Customers	No	Yes	Unspecified	Isolated perspective		Integrated perspective
Guchait et al. (2015)	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓			✓		Significant positive influence of error management culture on employee helping behaviors.
Guchait et al. (2019)	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓			✓		✓			Identification of the underlying mechanisms linking employee perceptions of the forgiveness climate and perceived SR performance
Wang et al. (2020)	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓			✓		Error tolerance has a direct positive link with employees' psychological safety and self-efficacy, both of which have a positive impact on learning behavior and error reporting. In addition, learning behavior positively influences employees' SR performance.
Wei et al. (2017)	✓		✓		✓			✓			✓	✓		✓			Positive impact of an error management culture on customer engagement behaviors, which are mediated by consumer trust.
Wei et al. (2019)	✓		✓		✓			✓			✓	✓		✓			Evaluation of the impact of error management on consumer attitude, word-of-mouth, and revisit intention, mediated by consumer trust.
Current study		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	See Table 5

**Table 2.** Professional sample description

Company	Activity area	Number of employees	Code	Sex	Expertise
L'Occitane en Provence	Cosmetics	+ 6,500	1	Male	Marketing
			2	Female	Marketing
Bouygues Télécom	Mobile phone and Internet service	+ 5,000	3	Male	Marketing
Ikea	Furniture	+ 160,000	4	Male	Marketing
KultiSeem <sup>2</sup>	Entertainment and leisure products	2,500	5	Male	HR
Fnac-Darty	Entertainment and leisure products, consumer electronics and household appliances	+ 25,000	6	Male	HR
Sports Adventure	Sports	+ 30	7	Male	CEO
Easy Cash	Second-hand items	1,500	8	Male	Sales
			9	Male	Sales
			10	Male	Marketing
			11	Male	Sales
Yves Rocher	Cosmetics	8,000	12	Male	Marketing
			13	Male	HR
			14	Female	HR
			15	Female	Marketing
			16	Female	Sales
			17	Female	Sales
Leroy Merlin	Self-service DIY hardware	+ 85,000	18	Female	Sales
			19	Female	HR
			20	Male	Sales
			21	Female	Sales
			22	Female	Sales

<sup>2</sup> The name of the retailer has been changed.

**Table 3.** Customer sample descriptives

Code	Sex	Age	Job position
1	Female	32	Teacher
2	Female	43	Project manager
3	Male	64	Retiree (former lift technician)
4	Female	38	Executive secretary
5	Female	27	Customer advisor in insurance
6	Male	20	Student
7	Female	54	Payroll accountant
8	Male	42	Administrative
9	Female	28	Business manager in banking
10	Female	49	Equality and diversity project manager
11	Male	36	Project manager
12	Female	50	School teacher
13	Male	47	Insurance sector executive
14	Female	47	Door to door salesperson
15	Male	24	Student
16	Female	67	Retiree (former medico-social sector)
17	Female	40	Manager in construction sector
18	Male	39	Network technician

**Table 4.** Data structure using the Gioia methodology

1st-LEVEL CODES	2 <sup>ND</sup> -LEVEL CODES	AGGREGATED 2 <sup>ND</sup> LEVEL CODES
1.1. The fact that customers are highly informed makes them more demanding (9 quotes).	Customer demands (P1) <sup>3</sup>	Customer attitude
1.2. Customer expectations are constantly on the rise, largely thanks to the standard set by the competition (17).		
2.1. The level of tolerance varies from one customer to the next, but is pretty low overall (78).	Customers' error tolerance (P1)	
2.2. Customer tolerance depends on their mood and the purchase context (19).		
2.3. The tolerance shown by customers depends on the type of company they are dealing with (13).		
2.4. The tolerance shown by customers depends on their previous relations with the company (30).		
2.5. The tolerance shown by customers depends on the consequences of the error (33).		
2.6. The tolerance shown by customers depends on the attitude of the sales staff (35).		
2.7. Customers are more tolerant of staff in training (36).		
2.8. The tolerance shown by customers may depend on their own experience in the workplace (30).		
2.9. The tolerance shown by customers toward the company and individual employees is not the same (41).		
3.1. The real priority for customers is to find a solution to their problem (66).	Customers focus on solutions (P1)	
3.2. Customers expect rapid solutions (22).		
3.3. Customers are tolerant as long as they obtain a solution to their problems (60).		
4.1. Error tolerance is rooted in the company culture (37).	Culture of error tolerance	Error management culture
4.2. Error tolerance is espoused as one of the company's values, or even incorporated into its HR tools (23)		
4.3. Error tolerance is implicit within the company (13).		
4.4. Internal communication ensures the company's values are clear in stores (9).		
5.1. The implementation of error tolerance varies from store to store (32).	Latitude in terms of error tolerance	
5.2. Error tolerance is reflected in day-to-day managerial actions and attitudes (25).		
5.3. Error tolerance may be interpreted as a sign of slack practices (18).		
5.4. Error tolerance is closely connected to the attitude adopted by senior management (37).		
6.1. There is a red line which employees must not cross (45).	Scope of error tolerance	
6.2. It is not acceptable for employees to seek to hide their mistakes (4).		
6.3. Error tolerance does not apply to recurring errors (39).		
6.4. Error tolerance depends on the past and present behavior of the employee in question (18).		
6.5. Less tolerance is shown toward mistakes with serious consequences (22).		
7.1. Error tolerance is not publicized to customers (33).	Visibility of error tolerance (P2)	Information blind spots
7.2. Error tolerance is publicized internally (14).		
7.3. Candidates applying for jobs are informed of error tolerance (8).		

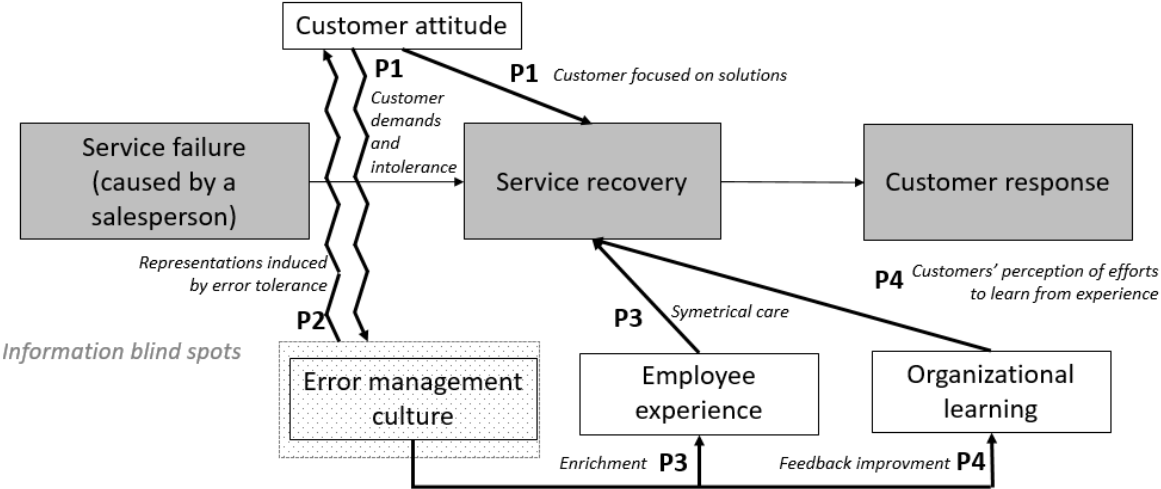
<sup>3</sup> We include here the corresponding proposal in the discussion section.

8.1. The company must avoid allegations of social washing (13).	Representations induced by error tolerance (P2)	
8.2. Publicizing error tolerance is at odds with the idea that the customer is king (7).		
8.3. Publicizing error tolerance would have no impact on the demands of customers (25).		
8.4. Customers might get the idea that the quality of service is compromised (28).		
8.5. Reminding customers that “it’s only human to make mistakes” may prove irritating (26).		
9.1. Customers are sensitive to the way in which employees are treated (HR policy) (40).	Expression of the error tolerance culture (P3)	
9.2. Companies should not advertise error tolerance, but should ensure that it is understood by customers (32).		
9.3. Customers do not want to see employees being reprimanded and/or punished in their presence (61).		
10.1. Error tolerance boosts the sense of attachment to the company (4).	Employee experience enrichment (P3)	
10.2. Error tolerance allows people to work with a greater sense of trust and confidence (28).		
10.3. Error tolerance is conducive to a sense of fulfilment at work (10)		
11.1. Error tolerance encourages transparency with managers (13).	Smoother internal relations (P3)	Employee experience
11.2. Error tolerance mistakes result in greater benevolence and mutual assistance among colleagues (10).		
12.1. A better employee experience is conducive to a better customer experience (60).	Symmetrical care (P3)	
12.2. Error tolerance creates a positive working environment, and customers pick up on this (40).		
12.3. Error tolerance promotes autonomy and initiative-taking when responding to incidents (65).		
12.4. Error-tolerance makes employees more comfortable in terms of customer relations (11).		
13.1. Dissatisfaction is analyzed with reference to customer surveys (31).	Analysis of satisfaction surveys (P4)	
13.2. The results of satisfaction surveys are shared with employees (6).		
13.3. Regional managers help store managers to improve (4).		
14.1. Mistakes are embraced as a potential opportunity for learning (16).	Improving professional practices (P4)	Organizational learning
14.2. Discussing mistakes once they have been resolved allows manager-coaches to deliver constructive feedback (64).		
14.3. Understanding incidents can help to improve processes (32).		
15.1. Customers appreciate the fact that companies seek to improve their services (12).	Customers’ perception of effort to learn from experience (P4)	
15.2. Customers appreciate the didactic approach adopted by managers (6).		

**Table 5.** Propositions around the error management culture and service recovery

<b>Propositions</b>	<b>Boundary conditions</b>
P1: Customers grant a right to make up for mistakes, not a right to make mistakes; some mistakes are even intolerable in their eyes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Retailers must provide a successful service recovery to get a second chance.</li><li>- Customer tolerance depends on the severity of the service failure, the customer's personality and their relationship with the retailer.</li></ul>
P2: Error tolerance constitutes the invisible part of the service recovery system, and it must remain that way to preserve an image of excellence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Error tolerance should not be publicized externally.</li><li>- An error management culture should be indirectly perceptible through the in-store atmosphere (<i>e.g.</i>: convivial, relaxed)</li></ul>
P3: Error tolerance improves employees' experience, which in turn becomes more customer-centric, helping them to successfully manage service recovery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Error tolerance should be publicized internally</li><li>- Error tolerance should be embodied by managers.</li></ul>
P4: Error tolerance facilitates organizational learning, which in turn improves service recovery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Front-line employees should display sufficient contrition and self-reflection.</li><li>- Retailers should demonstrate what they have learned, or at least a willingness to learn.</li></ul>

**Figure 1.** The impact of an error management culture on customers' experience of service failures<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> The Ps correspond to the different propositions in the discussion.