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Leader Construal Level and Employee
Voice: A Future Temporal Focus
Perspective

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August 2024

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Executive Summary

Employee voice or willingness of employees to speak up and promote organizational change is critical to the functioning of organizations. Employees may voice their opinions by speaking up about harmful practices or by challenging current practices and processes. Researchers have increasingly become interested in the phenomenon of employee voice, examining how leadership behaviors may promote or silence employee voice. Drawing on Construal Level Theory, I argue that when leaders construe their work role abstractly, they engender greater future focus among their employees, and promote greater voice behaviors in the organization. Study 1 shows that employee construal level predicts employee temporal focus and voice. Employees who construe their work role abstractly are more likely to adopt a long-term

temporal horizon and provide greater voice compared to employees who construe their work role concretely. Study 2 uses a three-wave field study to examine whether supervisor construal level predicts employee voice. Data from 826 employees and 166 supervisors from various companies in China shows that leader construal level predicts leader temporal focus, employee temporal focus, and employee voice. That is, leaders who tend to construe work roles abstractly, are more likely to promote employee voice by engendering greater employee future focus. This research makes several contributions to the leadership, construal level, and voice literature. The findings also provide recommendations for organizational leaders on ways to nurture employee voice.

Acknowledgements

The research was funded through the Think2Perform Research Institute Grant. The author would like to thank the Think2Perform Research Institute board members for their feedback on the research and Dr. Brian Hammer for their support and assistance through the research fellowship. The author would also like to acknowledge Professor Chenwei Li and Professor Li-Yun Sun for their assistance with data collection in China.

Introduction

Employee voice, or willingness of employees to speak up and promote organizational change, is critical to the functioning of organizations. Employee voice is also critical to stopping ongoing harmful practices. Harmful practices in organizations can take numerous forms including cheating customers, abusive supervision, racism and sexism and are seen across different types of organizations including government agencies, religious groups, academic institutions, accounting firms, and pharmaceutical companies, to name a few. It is only through proactive actions of employees who raise their voice against unfair practices that such harmful practices are curtailed. Employees may also provide voice by identifying ways to improve current practices and processes and by providing new solutions to existing problems. Thus, employee voice plays an important role in creating sustainable organizations.

In this research, I examine the ways in which leader and employee construal of work roles can impact employee voice. Employees can represent the same activity using low level concrete construals or high level abstract construals. For instance, the act of using a computer can be described as “typing on a computer” or “processing information.” The act of attending a meeting can be described as “being present and paying attention” or as “staying up-to-date.” The former descriptors are less abstract compared to the latter descriptors in both the examples presented. The Work Based Construal Level Scale (Reyt & Wiesenfeld, 2015) measures the extent to which employees routinely construe their work using concrete or abstract construals by asking people to choose between concrete and abstract representations to describe different work-related activities.

Literature Review

Employee voice is defined as formal and informal communication by an employee in an organization targeted internally to peers, supervisors, or teams, with the intention to impact the ways in which work gets done (Detert & Burris, 2007; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Morrison, 2014). Organizational scholars have identified two different categories of employee voice—promotive voice and prohibitive voice (Chamberlin, Newlton, & Lepine; 2017; Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). Promotive voice addresses ways in which organizational policies, practices, and procedures can be improved. Employees who provide promotive voice are often rewarded by their supervisors and are seen as being more agentic, more creative, and are evaluated more positively by their supervisors (See Chamberlin et al, 2017 for a meta-analysis of findings). On the other hand, prohibitive voice seeks to discontinue practices, policies, and procedures that hinder organizational performance or harm organizational members. Prohibitive voice uncovers problems within the organization and employees who provide prohibitive voice may be ignored or silenced and even penalized for challenging the status quo. For instance, employees who provide prohibitive voice receive lower performance evaluations and are more likely to leave the organization (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Given that voice is valuable to organizations and yet may be costly or have no benefit for the voice giver, understanding ways in which leaders can encourage employee voice is important. In this research, I examine the ways in which employee and leader construal level may impact their temporal focus and further effect employee voice.

Methodology

Study 1 examines the relationship between employee construal level and employee voice, hypothesizing that when employees adopt higher level construals, they also adopt a longer temporal horizon and provide greater voice. In Study 1, 230 Amazon's Cloud Research (Turkprime) participants, who were either employed part-time or full-time, completed the work-based construal level scale, work-based future focus scale, and a measure of willingness to provide prohibitive and promotive voice in their workplace. I examined whether employee work-based construal level predicted employee voice, exploring the role of temporal focus in mediating the relationship between employee construal level and employee voice. Study 2 examines the relationship between leader construal level and employee voice, hypothesizing that when leaders construe work roles using abstract construals, they demonstrate longer term horizons, and further promote longer term temporal horizons in their subordinates, enabling them to provide greater voice. For the multi-wave field study, 166 supervisors and their 861 subordinates were recruited from different industries in China and requested to complete surveys after three week intervals. In wave 1, supervisors were requested to complete scales assessing work-based construal level, temporal focus, and demographic measures. In wave 2, subordinates completed measures of work-based construal level, temporal focus, and demographic measures. Finally, in wave 3, supervisors completed measures of subordinate promotive and prohibitive voice. Subordinates provided self-report of promotive and prohibitive voice.

Findings

In the pilot study, employee work based construal level predicts employee voice. Furthermore, employee future temporal focus mediates the relationship between employee work-based construal and employee voice. Employees who construe their work using broader, more abstract construals, tend to have a longer temporal horizon, which further enables them to provide promotive and prohibitive voice. Thus, the study suggests that leader behaviors that enable employees to adopt higher level construals and engender longer temporal horizons will promote greater voice behaviors.

Data from the field study in China demonstrates that supervisor construal level predicts employee voice, such that when supervisors chronically construe work roles using higher level abstract construals their subordinates provide greater promotive and prohibitive voice. Furthermore, supervisor temporal perspective and employee temporal perspective mediate the relation between supervisor construal level and employee voice, such that supervisors who construe information at higher levels are more future focused and promote a long term perspective in their employees, enabling them to speak up even in situations when speaking up can be costly. Employee higher level construal is predictive of employee future focus as well as employee voice. However, I do not find any evidence to indicate that supervisor construal level predicts employee construal level, indicating that both supervisor and employee construal level predict employee voice through separate pathways. Overall, these findings suggest that leaders as well as employees' construal level and future temporal focus play important roles in promoting their voice behaviors in the workplace.

Social Significance of Findings

The research studies demonstrate that employee and leader construal level predict employee voice. Furthermore, when employees adopt a future focused temporal horizon, they are more willing to voice their opinions within the organization. The research outlined here can provide specific guidelines for how leaders can encourage voice within the organization. Firstly, leaders can strategically adopt their communication style to meet their goals and objectives. When leaders wish to solicit employee voice, they would benefit by using abstract, vision oriented, and future focused styles of communication. These communication styles will likely engender a greater future focus among employees, thus enhancing the likelihood that employees will speak up to their leaders. Secondly, training practices can be tailored to ensure that leaders are able to use abstract and concrete communication strategically to meet organizational goals. Providing guidance to leaders about the benefits of both concrete and abstract mindsets and communication styles will allow them to flexibly adapt their communication styles to the context. Thirdly, organizations can recruit future-focused employees by using behavioral interviews, psychometric testing, and case studies to identify traits like strategic thinking and adaptability. This selective recruitment will not only enhance the organization's ability to navigate future challenges but also promote workforce diversity by valuing varied perspectives and innovative thinking. Finally, organizations can promote employee voice by adopting a culture that emphasizes not only immediate gains, but also future gains and moral concerns. Organizations can design artifacts and tailor messages in ways that promote employee higher level construals and connections with their own future.

Conclusion

The two studies presented here align with recent calls by construal level theory researchers to examine how construal level differences impact social behavior and communication with others. Furthermore, by introducing future temporal focus as a mediator in the construal level-voice behavior linkages, the studies enhances the explanatory power of construal level theory and its impact on voice. The studies also extend voice literature by identifying leader's and employees' construal level and future focus as an important individual difference-related antecedent that promotes promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors.

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Appendix

Table 1: Employee Construal Level Predicts Employee Voice (Study 1)

	Employee Promotive Voice	Employee Prohibitive Voice
	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)
Employee gender	-.012 (.065)	-.008 (.135)
Employee age	-.085 (.065)	-.005 (.007)
Employee tenure	.095 (.064)	-.032 (.048)
<i>Independent variable</i>		
Employee Construal Level	.032 (.064)**	.033(.010)**
R²	.066*	.052*

Table 2: Employee Future Focus Mediates the relationship between Employee Construal Level and Employee Voice (Study 1)

	Employee Future Focus	Employee Promotive Voice	Employee Prohibitive Voice
	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)
Employee gender	.120(.134)	-.078(.121)	-.057(.127)
Employee age	.002(.006)	.002(.006)	-.005(.005)
Employee tenure	-.120(.042)	-.120(.042)	.016(.046)
<i>Independent variable</i>			
Employee Construal Level	.024(.011)*	.021(.009)	.024(.009)
Mediator			
Employee Future Focus		.448(.078)***	.405(.076)***
R²	.053*	.258***	.213*

Table 3: Supervisor Construal Level Predicts Employee Voice (Study 2)

	Employee Promotive Voice	Employee Prohibitive Voice
	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)
Employee gender	.037(.036)	-.006(.035)
Employee age	.009(.006)	.015(.004)**
Employee tenure	.005(.006)	.010(.006)
<i>Independent variable</i>		
Supervisor Construal Level	.036(.012)***	.034(.012)***

Unstandardized coefficients of path models are reported. †p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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