



## I warn you because I like you: Voice behavior, employee identifications, and transformational leadership

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Voice behavior  
Transformational leadership  
Extra-role behavior  
Identification  
Self-concept

### ABSTRACT

Voice behavior refers to the behavior that proactively challenges the status quo and makes constructive changes. Previous studies have explored the antecedents of employees' voice behavior, but to whom employees are likely to voice their thoughts has remained rarely examined. We propose that voice behavior is target-sensitive and that there are two types of voice behavior: speaking out (voice toward peers) and speaking up (voice toward the supervisor). Transformational leadership facilitates both speaking out and speaking up. However, it produces effects on employees via different types of employee identifications. Specifically, social identification predicts only speaking out, while personal identification predicts only speaking up. In contrast, affiliative extra-role behavior is less target-sensitive, and transformational leadership influences affiliative extra-role behavior via both social identification and personal identification. We examined our hypotheses by collecting both self-reported and coworker data from 191 Chinese employees in different organizations. Our hypotheses gained general support from the data. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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"Because it is a consensus-oriented environment, your power comes from whether people see you as agreeable and easy to work with. Being a rebel is not embraced. (Female, investment banking firm)

The person in charge is paranoid. I felt uncomfortable giving him any advice because he might lash out at me."— from Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003, pp. 1461, 1466

The above two quotes describe a phenomenon that organizational researchers have investigated for decades: employees are usually reluctant to voice their thoughts in organizations (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Van Dyne, Cummings & McLean Parks, 1995). At the same time, *voice behavior*, which is defined as "proactively challenging the status quo and making constructive suggestions" (Van Dyne et al., 1995: 266), is generally believed to play a critical role in organizations because nowadays organizations rely more and more on innovation and quick responses to survive in the rapidly changing markets and severe competitions (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Not surprisingly, a common theme in voice research is to find the factors that encourage employees to express their concerns and opinions freely about organizational issues (Edmondson, 1999; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Individual factors such as satisfaction (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Withey & Cooper, 1989) and general self-efficacy (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison & Phelps, 1999), and

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situational factors such as team psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) have been found to be positively associated with employees' voice behavior. More recent work has stressed the importance of leaders in motivating employees to voice their thoughts (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 2003; Morrison & Phelps, 1999). However, the literature has left two important questions unanswered: (1) to whom employees choose to voice their thoughts and (2) by what mechanisms the leaders may encourage employees to voice their thoughts. The purpose of the current study is to address these two questions.

With regard to the first question, although some studies on voice behavior implicitly suggest that employees are concerned about the target of voice (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 1995), few studies have actually explored to whom employees choose to speak (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). For example, the reasons why the two employees who were quoted at the beginning of our paper did not voice their thoughts may be different from one another. In the first quote, the potential target of the voice was the colleagues, and the concern of the focal employee was the colleagues' resistance to new ideas; while in the second quote, the potential target of the voice was the supervisor, and the concern of the focal employee was the supervisor's revenge. These two quotes suggest that both peers and the supervisor may be the targets of voice, while the employees need to choose to whom they would want to speak. In this paper, we propose that it is important to distinguish the targets of voice. We define *speaking out* as the voice behavior toward peers and *speaking up* as the voice behavior toward the supervisor. Both types of voice behaviors are useful; however, we cannot assume that the conditions that generate one type of voice also generate the other type of voice because voice behavior is target-sensitive. We suggest that making the distinction between speaking out and speaking up can advance further the understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms of voice behavior.

Our second research question is related to the first one. Although recent voice research has emphasized the importance of leaders, the underlying psychological mechanisms of how leadership influences employees' voice behavior have been rarely investigated (one exception is Detert & Burris, 2007). In this paper, we will investigate the connection between voice and transformational leadership, which is a leadership style that has been associated with personal and organizational changes and high performance (e.g., Bommer, Rich & Rubin, 2005; Dvir, Eden, Avolio & Shamir, 2002). Our goal is to draw from the self-concept-based leadership theory (e.g., Howell & Shamir, 2005; Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord, Brown & Freiberg, 1999; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993) and from the social exchange theory (e.g., Ekeh, 1974; Levi-Strauss, 1969) to develop and test a comprehensive model to deepen our understanding of the underlying mechanisms that enable transformational leadership to motivate employees to speak out and speak up.

In the following section, we review the literature on voice behavior and elucidate on the distinction between speaking up and speaking out. We then build our model based on the self-concept-based leadership theory and social exchange theory. Our model suggests that transformational leadership has positive effects on employees' extra-role behaviors including voice and affiliative behaviors via employee identification (personal identification and social identification). Fig. 1 represents our hypothesized model. We surveyed a sample of employees in China to test our hypotheses.

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

### 1.1. Two types of voice behavior

Voice has been conceptualized differently in organizational literature (Avery & Quiñones, 2002). Some researchers define it as the opportunity to express one's views to decision makers (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), while others regard it solely as a response to job dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970; Withey & Cooper, 1989). In this paper, we follow the definition proposed by Van Dyne and

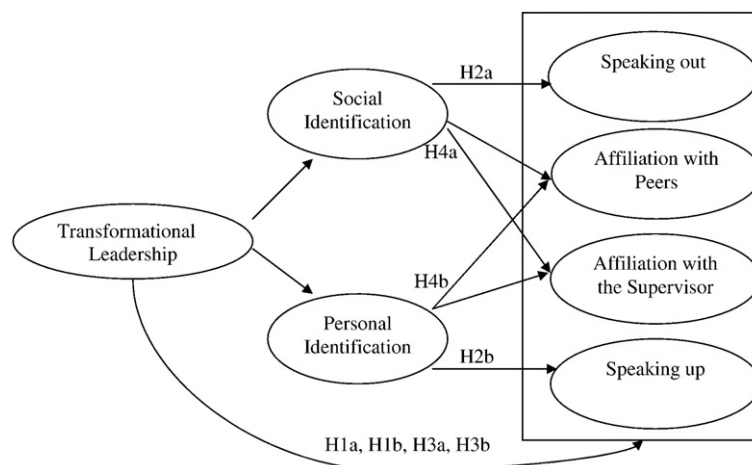


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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