

Leadership behavior and employee voice: is the door really open?

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Background

- **Voice** is the discretionary provision of information by employees intended to improve organisational performance to someone inside the organisation with the perceived authority to act, even though such information may challenge and upset the status quo and its power holders. Voice is (1) an important ingredient in organisational adaptability and continuous improvement, and (2) an indicator of proactive leadership.
- Voice is a facet of 'citizenship behaviour'. 'Citizenship behaviour' essentially involves going 'the extra mile', in terms of support and cooperation; but most such behaviour involves little personal risk. Voice, in contrast, does involve risk. Thus Voice has a special place in the general field of 'employee citizenship behaviour'.
- Previous research has explained Voice in terms of three main ways: (1) employee differences in personality, in that some individuals are simply more likely than others to speak up; (2) employee attitudes, in that speaking up is an indication of dissatisfaction with the status quo; and (3) a function of the organisational context, in terms of the perceived 'psychological safety' of speaking up.

Main points

- Investigated the relationship between Voice and two measures of managerial behaviour: (1) **Openness**, measured by employee perceptions that their manager was both willing to listen to and willing to act on their suggestions; (2) transformational leadership, in regard to **inspirational motivation** (communication of and passion towards organisational goals) and **individualised consideration** (treating each employee as an individual and, in particular, coaching them for skill development). Argued that transformational leadership should affect Voice because such a style was indicative of signalling a concern for employee input, and of processes that would reduce feeling of 'intimidation' associated with raising uncomfortable topics.
- Voice was more strongly related to Openness than to transformational leadership. This implies that 'very specific leader behaviours, rather than generically positive or personalised behaviours, may be needed to stimulate routine voice from subordinates... and to overcome employee restraint'. In other words, **it is not enough to establish a particular leadership style: additionally, the leader must continuously act in accordance with the principles implied in that style**. (Interestingly, this can be explained in terms of **transaction leadership**, in terms of the dimension of contingent rewards, in which the leader states his expectations and then reinforces behaviour which meets these expectations.)
- **Managerial implications:**
 - Seeking and acting on employee ideas should be **measured, developed and rewarded**, by, for example, in a relevant section of 360-degree feedback instruments.
 - Since Voice is partly the responsibility of employees, it is an important dimension of **Followership**. Therefore employees at all levels may need training in the delivery and receipt of upward information.