



The Impact of Empathetic Leadership on Employees' Voice Behavior in Chinese Social Enterprises: A Test of a Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract. This study investigated the impact of empathetic leadership on employees' promotive and prohibitive voice, based on the leader motivational language theory. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 274 samples from 18 social enterprises in China. The findings showed that empathetic leadership positively impacted employees' promotive voice, with organization-based self-esteem mediating the positive relationship between empathetic leadership and promotive voice. Trust in leader positively moderated the impact of organization-based self-esteem on employees' promotive voice. Contrary to expectations, empathetic leadership had no significant impact on prohibitive voice. Finally, practical recommendations were provided for social enterprise leaders to promote employees' voice, and the research limitations were discussed.

Keywords: Empathetic leadership, Promotive voice, Prohibitive voice, Organization-based self-esteem, Trust in leader.

1 Introduction

Social enterprises in China faced challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and strict lockdown policies over the past three years [1]. Employees' voice is a valuable asset for leaders in addressing these challenges. Employee voice is defined as the expression of ideas and concerns regarding organizational improvement, and it was a constructive behavior [2]. Previous studies have distinguished between promotive voice and prohibitive voice [3]. Promotive voice involves expressing improvement for the future, while prohibitive voice expresses concern about potential or existing problems, often with potential interpersonal aggressiveness. Previous studies have focused on the impact of leadership on employee voice [4]. Empathy has been shown to impact employees' cognition, emotions, and behavior. Empathetic leaders were more likely to listen to and understand employees [5]. Empathy is an important motivator for leaders in developing social enterprises and fulfilling the social mission.

Based on the Sullivan's leader motivational language theory, this study explores the impact of empathetic leadership (EL) as an antecedent, organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) as a mediator, and trust in leader (TL) as a moderator on both types of voice

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behavior. This study contributes to the literature in four ways: it extends previous research on promotive voice by examining the impact of empathetic leadership on both promotive and prohibitive voice; it enhances the understanding of the leadership-voice relationship; it highlights the positive influence of OBSE on voice; and it provides practical insights for social enterprises.

2 Hypothesis Development

2.1 Employees' voice behavior and EL

Employees consider their leaders' reactions before voicing their opinions. Those who engage in voice seek understanding, listening, and encouragement from leaders. EL emphasizes the emotional relationship between leaders and subordinates, showing understanding, care, and support for the emotions of subordinates [6]. Previous research supports the positive impact of leaders' empathetic language on employees' voice [7]. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: EL has a positive impact on employees' promotive voice.

H1b: EL has a positive impact on employees' prohibitive voice.

2.2 The mediation of OBSE

Employees' expectations regarding the outcomes of voice impact their motivation to voice. OBSE is defined as the extent to which individuals believe in their abilities, importance, and worth as employees [8]. EL enhances self-esteem and self-efficacy. Higher self-efficacy increases employees' expectations of the outcomes of voice, which in turn promotes the likelihood of voice. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: OBSE mediates EL and employees' promotive voice.

H2b: OBSE mediates EL and employees' prohibitive voice.

2.3 The moderating role of TL

TL refers to employees' belief in the integrity, competence, and benevolence of leaders [9]. Motivational language theory posits that leaders' consistency between words and actions enhances the motivational effect [10]. However, low TL may cause employees to perceive empathy as deceitful and inhibiting voice. TL plays a role in influencing employee voice. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: TL positively moderates the mediating effect of OBSE.

H3b: TL positively moderates the mediating effect of OBSE.

3 Methods

3.1 Sample and procedure

A convenience sample of 274 employees from 18 social enterprises in China participated in this study. Data was collected through a self-report anonymous online survey via QuestionStar in 2023. Data was collected in three waves over a period of 10 weeks to reduce common method bias from self-report questionnaires. The sample was 47.1% male, 52.9% female, 71.2% under 40 years old, 51.5% with a bachelor's degree or above, and 73.4% with less than five years of work experience.

3.2 Measurement

This study employed a seven-point Likert scale for measurement.

Promotive voice. The measurement was adapted from a scale developed by Liang et al. The scale consists of five items. The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.784.

Prohibitive voice. The measurement was adapted from a scale developed by Liang et al. The scale comprises six items. The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.710.

EL. The measurement was adapted from Kock et al. The scale consists of five items. The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.785.

OBSE. The measurement was adapted from Pierce et al. Following Liang et al., three items were removed. The Cronbach's α was 0.812.

TL. The four-item scale was from Farndale et al. [11]. The Cronbach's α was 0.743.

Control variables. Employee gender, age, education level, and organizational tenure were included as control variables.

4 Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

To assess the construct validity, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted via AMOS 22.0 software, a measurement model consisting of five factors was examined. Compared to alternative models, the five-factor measurement model exhibited a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 416.708$, $df = 314$, $\chi^2/df = 1.327$, GFI = 0.902, CFI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.035). This suggests that the measurement tool has good construct validity.

4.2 Correlation analysis

Pearson correlations showed that EL was positively correlated with employees' promotive voice ($r = 0.302$, $p < 0.01$). EL was also positively correlated with OBSE ($r = 0.198$, $p < 0.01$). OBSE was positively correlated with employees' promotive voice ($r = 0.380$, $p < 0.01$). However, no significant correlation was found between EL and employees' prohibitive voice ($r = 0.006$, $p > 0.05$).

4.3 Hypotheses testing

Main effect test. To examine the effect of EL on employees' promotive voice, a hierarchical regression was conducted via SPSS 26.0. Control variables were entered in the first step, and EL was added in the second step. The results revealed that EL had a significant positive impact on promotive voice ($\beta = 0.294, p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesis 1a. Contrary to expectations, the results of the study revealed that EL had no significant positive impact on employees' prohibitive voice ($\beta = 0.005, p > 0.05$). This finding did not support hypothesis 1b. Additionally, since the main effect was not supported, hypotheses 2b and 3b, which predicted a mediation effect and a moderated mediation effect, were also not supported.

Mediation effect test. The PROCESS plugin was used to test the mediation effect of OBSE [12]. A bootstrap analysis was conducted with 5,000 resamples. As shown in Table 1, the 95% confidence interval for the effect of EL does not include zero, indicating that EL has a significant total effect (0.292), direct effect (0.229), and indirect effect (0.064) on promotive voice through OBSE. This supports hypothesis 2a.

Table 1. Total effect, direct effect, and indirect effect

Causal pathway	Effect	Effect size	SE	LLCI	ULCI
EL → promotive voice	total effect	.292	.056	.001	.182
EL → promotive voice	direct effect	.229	.054	.001	.123
EL → OBSE → promotive voice	indirect effect	.064	.028	.013	.121

n = 274

Moderated mediation effect test. The PROCESS plugin was used to conduct a bootstrap analysis. The results showed in Table 2 that the moderating effect of TL on the indirect effect of OBSE was significant. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was [0.007, 0.067], with an effect size of 0.033. When the level of TL was low, the indirect effect was not significant, but when the level of TL was average or high, the indirect effect was significant. This finding supports hypothesis 3a.

Table 2. The moderating effect of TL on the mediator

Levels of moderator	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	
Low	-.011	.027	-.070	.038	
Medium	.039	.024	.003	.094	
High	.090	.039	.019	.172	
index of moderated mediation		Index	SE	LLCI	ULCI
		.033	.016	.007	.067

Figure 1, the simple slope plot, illustrates the moderating effect of TL on the relationship between OBSE and promotive voice. When TL is in high level (one standard deviation above the mean), the positive impact of OBSE on promotive voice is stronger than when TL is in low level (one standard deviation below the mean). TL positively

moderates the strength of the relationship between EL and employees' promotive voice, as mediated by OBSE. It supports hypothesis 3a.

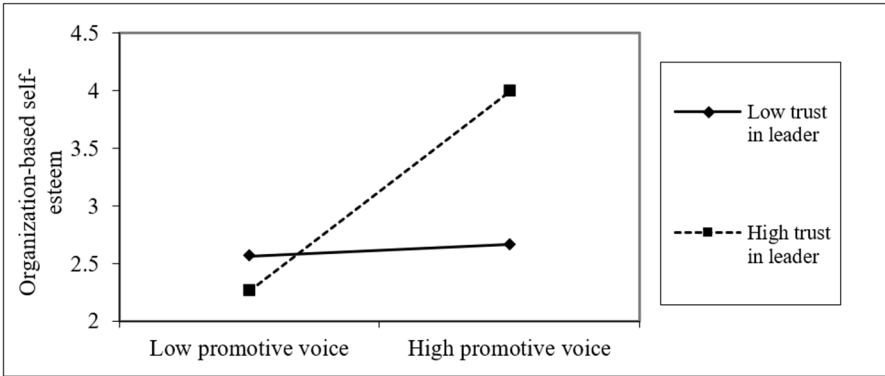


Fig. 1. The simple slope plot

5 Conclusions

The study examined the impact of EL, OBSE, and TL on employees' voice. Empathetic language from leaders facilitated employees' voice, consistent with motivational language theories. OBSE was important in promoting employees' promotive voice behavior, consistent with prior research. However, OBSE did not mediate the link between EL and prohibitive voice, similar to Liang et al.'s findings. Managerial implications highlight empathetic language from leaders in stimulating employee voice. Leaders should improve language skills, foster a culture of empathy, adjust response style, and fulfill promises in order to promote employee voice. This study has several limitations. First, the self-report questionnaires may introduce common method bias. Future research should employ multiple data sources to reduce the bias. Second, the generalizability of findings to social enterprises is limited due to convenience sampling. Third, EL has no significant effect on prohibitive voice. Future research should differentiate the mediating mechanisms underlying promotive and prohibitive voice.

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