



Antecedents of project managers' voice behavior: The moderating effect of organization-based self-esteem and affective organizational commitment

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Abstract

Theory and research stress that employee voice behavior (VB; discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns with the intent to improve organizational functioning) positively influences decision making, improvement, and innovation. However, the VB construct has rarely been studied in the specific context of project management. Using a sample of 618 project managers and 154 project portfolio coordinators nested in 154 firms, the main purpose of this study was to analyze a moderated model, in which specific contextual factors interact with individual-level variables to predict project managers' VB. Consistent with our hypotheses derived from self-consistency theory, moderated hierarchical regression analysis revealed that idea encouragement, career perspectives, qualification opportunities, and peer collaboration related more positively to VB for project managers with a high level of organization-based self-esteem. For project managers high in affective organizational commitment, we found stronger positive relationships of peer collaboration and idea encouragement with project managers' VB.

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1. Introduction

For about 50 years, extra-role behavior, i.e., discretionary behavior that is “not specified in advance by role descriptions” (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998, p. 108), has been recognized as beneficial for organizations, especially in dynamic environments (Morrison, 1994; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). For example, Katz and Kahn (1966) noted that organizational effectiveness is aided by employees' “innovative and spontaneous activities that are beyond the prescribed role requirements”

(p. 146). In this study we focus on employee voice behavior (VB), a form of challenging and promotive behavior (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998), defined as “discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning” (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). VB is therefore mainly focused on improvement rather than solely criticism (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). Especially in today's dynamic business, where firms tend to apply projects as the main organizational structure to cope with the growing need for flexibility and innovation, VB may be a pivotal aspect contributing to organizational effectiveness (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). Astonishingly, although VB has been extensively analyzed in leading journals from the areas of psychology and organizational behavior, it has not been applied to the specific and increasingly important realm of project management. Projects, on the one hand, are a key source for new ideas, innovations, and improvements and on the other hand, VB

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seems to be essential to manage dynamic project environments (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

We aim to address this research gap by analyzing a predictive model for project managers' VB with contextual antecedents at the organizational level of analysis and individual-level factors as moderators. We follow calls by several leading voice researchers to explain VB through a combination of relevant situational and individual variables, thus acknowledging that individuals with distinctive personal characteristics and attitudes may respond differently to similar organizational context factors (Fuller et al., 2007; Morrison, 2011). Overall, the present study suggests that beneficial organizational measures related to innovation management as well as project management will more likely facilitate VB among individuals who are high in favorable organization-related individual factors, including a positive self-concept as an organization member (i.e., high organization-based self-esteem; Pierce et al., 1989) and a strong emotional attachment to the organization (i.e., affective organizational commitment; Meyer et al., 1993).

1.1. Voice behavior in a project and project portfolio environment

Project managers are a highly critical resource for project success (Ahsan et al., 2013; Geoghegan and Dulewicz, 2008). In today's project-oriented business, project success is essential for overall business success (Midler, 1995; Söderlund, 2005). However, project failures are still a common phenomenon, especially in R&D or new product development portfolios or in dynamic and complex environments (Shepherd and Cardon, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2011). We suggest that project managers' VB may play a significant role in explaining the success of individual projects and overall project portfolio success. Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggested in their framework that organizational silence, which may be seen as the opposite of voice (Morrison, 2011), leads to less effective organizational decision making as well as poor error detection and correction. In order to make appropriate decisions on a higher project portfolio level and to correct serious project situations, decision makers need information from project managers (Morrison, 2011). Moreover, because project environments are highly dynamic, project managers' VB seems to be essential in order to enable organizations to constantly improve and further develop project management procedures (Detert and Burris, 2007; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). Furthermore, project managers' upward communication may positively influence the innovative potential of the overall project portfolio in a company. Additionally, project managers' VB directed at project team members may have positive effects on decision making, improvement, and innovation as well (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). We follow the notion of Morrison (2011) and understand VB as verbal expression directed upward to higher levels as well as directed to members of one's team. Several studies showed that the supervisor's behavior has a direct impact on the VB of employees or related constructs (e.g., Detert and Burris, 2007; Dutton et al., 1997; Morrison,

2011; Saunders et al., 1992). A high degree of project managers' VB potentially fosters the establishment of a communicative project culture, in which problems and ideas will be addressed directly and openly.

However, the literature on employee silence provides us with many motives for project managers to withhold potentially important information even if they are generally willing to help the organization with improvement (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003; Grenny et al., 2007; Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). To voice or not to voice is a decision process in which employees need to balance risks and opportunities by analyzing negative and positive consequences (Detert and Burris, 2007). Employees consider if their improvement suggestions are likely to be effective and will have an impact (referred to as perceived efficacy) and additionally, if their behavior will likely induce negative personal outcomes (referred to as perceived safety of speaking up) (Morrison, 2011). Project managers tend to whitewash serious situations because they have concerns about negative personal consequences, such as negative career-related effects, negative performance appraisals, or harm to one's image (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). Athanassiades (1973) found a positive relationship between the ambition to rise in the hierarchy and the tendency to distort upward communication. Seibert et al. (2001) found a negative relationship between VB and salary progression as well as promotions in the subsequent two years. In Detert and Edmondson's (2011) study one interviewee stated that "to stop a project or say it is worthless would be a career ender" (p. 470). Such implicit beliefs about the risks of VB give reason for the assumption that negative project information may be withheld as long as possible. Consequently, many projects may fail even though the indications for failure are detected on time but project managers hesitate to communicate the information upward to higher-level decision makers.

1.2. Purpose and research question

Given the specific practical importance of VB in a project and project portfolio environment (Grenny et al., 2007) and keeping in mind the increasing importance of project and project portfolio success for the overall success of modern organizations, it seems to be critical to gain knowledge of antecedents of project managers' VB in this context. Therefore, the main research purpose is to develop and analyze a predictive model for project managers' VB. Since the body of research on employee voice is relatively mature, there are several studies analyzing the decision process determining whether to speak up or withhold information (Morrison, 2011). Some individuals show significantly more VB than others, even in the same organizational setting (Morrison, 2011). "Most studies focus exclusively on main effects, rather than analyzing interactional models, despite the likelihood that employee voice may be highest when individual differences lead some individuals to respond to favorable situational factors" (Fuller et al., 2007, p. 135). Researchers found that even if there are certain motives to voice (e.g., important information to share, desire to help the organization), often the opposite is the fact, since there are other factors overpowering these motives (Van

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