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Paternalistic leadership and cabin crews' upward safety communication: The motivation of voice behavior



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ABSTRACT

Being the frontline operators in the airline industry, flight attendants constantly obtain and collect first-hand information from their interactions with passengers and other crew members. Their experiences and observations may contribute greatly to airlines' safety management and policy making. It is thus critical to learn how to enhance cabin crews' voice behavior, particularly communicating safety related issues upward through specific leadership styles. The current research aims at the flight attendants working for Taiwanese international airlines. The cabin crew department managers' paternalistic leadership style is adopted to observe how it may trigger cabin crews' different types of voice behavior. This research addresses the following two major questions: 1. What is the motivation for cabin crew to conduct upward safety communication? 2. How does department managers' paternalistic leadership style impact cabin crew's voice behavior? Regression analysis is used to analyze the empirical data collected by the questionnaire survey. The results are applied to provide airlines with practical references for constituting human resource management policies, and the findings also enhance existing literature regarding management applications and employees voice behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Cabin crew members play an essential role in the development of the airline industry. Their top priority duty is to guard cabin security and ensure the execution of safety regulations. However, limited research has examined cabin crews' proactive safety related organizational behavior, such as upward safety communication between flight attendants and cabin crew department managers. Previous research regarding cabin crew's communication related topics mostly focused on in-flight communication among aircrew members (e.g. Brown and Rantz, 2010; Chute and Wiener, 1996; Murphy, 2001). Despite the importance of crew resource management between cockpit and cabin crews, flight attendants' willingness to conduct upward safety communication to the department managers may provide valuable and irreplaceable observations from the front-line working experience, benefiting greatly on organizations' overall performance. Hofmann and Morgeson (1999) propose that upward safety communication is negatively related to adverse safety events. As being the liaison among cockpit, cabin and ground while at work, communication has long been

recognized essential to flight attendants' performance. Smith et al. (1978) argue that open communication and frequent interactions between employees and managers are important factors that can lower accident rates. Meanwhile, researchers reveal that communication significantly helps employees' physical safety level of the work site and safety performances (Kines et al., 2010). It is thus expected that the more cabin crew members are willing to conduct such communication as a proactive safety behavior, the better the interactions and the understanding between flight attendants and cabin crew department managers, which may lead to better safety performance.

Voice behavior is regarded an extra-role organizational citizenship behavior, which can be defined as "non-required behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenges with an intent to improve rather than merely criticize" (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998, p. 109). Nowhere is the need for voice more crucial than in sets of interdependent individuals who share responsibility for work outcomes (Sundstrom et al., 1990), such as cabin crew members. In the present paper, voice behavior is viewed as safety citizenship behavior, which presents in communicating upward, particularly on safety related topics, from cabin crew to the department managers. Being the frontline operators, flight attendants constantly obtain first-hand information from their

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interactions with passengers and other crew members (Chen and Chen, 2014). The special characteristics of cabin duties, such as being a liaison among diverse groups of people, offer flight attendants exclusive opportunities to experience the practice of airlines safety policies and collect the feedback directly from various channels. Performing voice behavior demonstrates that flight attendants take proactive steps to participate in airlines safety practice. It is thus worth working to identify possible factors which affect such behaviors, and further trying to enhance the positive effects and avoid the negative ones.

Previous research indicated that leadership affects subordinates' safety attitude and team's safety culture, eventually determining safety performance of the team (Flin and Yule, 2004). Since there is a significant relationship between managers' leadership style and employees' organizational behavior (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), including safety citizenship behavior (Conchie and Donald, 2009), how department managers' paternalistic leadership affects flight attendants' voice behavior is the major issue discussed in the current study. Such attempt may bridge the gap of the literature since less work has been conducted considering the related topics.

The target population of the current study is flight attendants working for Taiwanese international airlines. While paternalistic leadership has been prevalently observed in the Greater China region, where a relationship-oriented culture is predominant, it is believed that the three sub-constructs of paternalistic leadership performed by the department managers may influence cabin crews' voice behavior in different ways. Up to the present, employee voice has been studied mostly in relation to western leadership styles, the investigation of paternalistic leadership is expected to advance the understanding of the antecedents of employee voice in the Chinese context, as it takes into account the impact of leadership on employee voice from a cultural perspective (Chan, 2014).

Furthermore, leadership technique that encourages flight attendants to communicate upward is not the only thing that matters. As different motivations may lead to divergent work outcomes, recognizing the diverse motivations behind cabin crews' voice behavior may indeed be more critical in this context if managers truly value the feedback received from the cabin attendants. To further extend the previous observations related to the causalities between leadership styles and employees' safety citizenship behaviors, the current study applied paternalistic leadership to examine how it may trigger specific types of voice behavior, namely acquiescent voice, defensive voice and pro-social voice. The findings can be used as practical references to aid in safety managerial planning and implementation, and also enhance the existing literature regarding management applications and employees' voice behavior.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Paternalistic leadership

Chemers (1993) advocates that leadership, although quasi-universal, is embedded in culture and nationality. For example, paternalistic leadership, which is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural values, expresses the traditional Chinese way of life (Tsui et al., 2004). Cheng et al. (2004) argue that paternalistic leadership is long-term oriented and extends beyond the leaders being thoughtful with regard to their subordinates' personal issues. Paternalistic leadership style highly values dignity, loyalty to organizations, and harmonious working relationships, which are expected to exert certain influence on employees' perceptions regarding open communication within the organization. It thus well represents the indicator of cabin crew department managers'

leadership style in the current research.

Paternalistic leadership has been a growing research area in management literature in recent decades (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). Lately, instead of viewing paternalism as a form of absolute authoritarianism, a number of studies described it as a father-like leadership style that combines managerial support, protection, care and authority toward subordinates (e.g. Farh and Cheng, 2000; Redding et al., 1994). Gelfand et al. (2007) define paternalism as a "hierarchical relationship in which a leader guides professional and personal lives of subordinates in a manner resembling a parent, and in exchange expects loyalty and deference" (p. 493). In traditional Chinese societies, leaders enact a paternalistic role with fatherly benevolence (Cheng et al., 2000; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). The construct of paternalistic leadership has thus been recommended as presenting the fundamental features of Chinese business leaders' behaviors in family businesses and modern organizations (Farh and Cheng, 2000).

Based on the results of a series of studies, Farh and Cheng (2000) proposed a model of paternalistic leadership which consists of three dimensions, including morality, benevolence and authoritarianism. Among these, morality and benevolent leadership styles have been identified to be positively related to employees' job outcomes, while authoritarian leadership mostly has an adverse effect (e.g. Chou et al., 2005; Erben and Güneşer, 2008). Chan (2014) examines the impact of paternalistic leadership behaviors on employee voice, indicating that benevolent leadership is positively associated with employee voice and authoritarian leadership discourages employees from communicating upward. In the last decade, these three sub-constructs of paternalistic leadership have been well observed and analyzed in both field work and academic research (e.g. Anwar, 2013; Cheng et al., 2000; Saheer et al., 2013). However, it has been scarcely examined in the context of Taiwanese international airlines, the current research target, which are viewed as rooted in Chinese culture but aiming to be internationalized. Therefore, this study intends to explore how department managers' morality, benevolent and authoritarian leadership behaviors may affect cabin crew's upward safety communication, particularly on triggering the three specific types of voice behavior.

2.1.1. Morality leadership

Morality leadership indicates a leader who displays superior personal virtues through acting with self-discipline and unselfishness (e.g., never using personal relationships to obtain illicit personal gains; always practicing what he/she preaches), thus gains subordinates' respect and identification (Farh and Cheng, 2000). Those managers perform morality leadership tend to serve as role models for employees and exert referent power on them (Chen et al., 2011; Rhode, 2006). Chinese tradition highly values personal moral integrity. Moral leaders are thus greatly respected, admired, and viewed as ideal leaders by Chinese employees (Chen et al., 2011; Niu et al., 2009). As moral leaders constantly set themselves as respectful role models to staff, morality leadership may likely motivate subordinates to devote more efforts to their work, and step further in responding to the call of duty for their leaders (Colquitt et al., 2007).

Previous research has confirmed that morality leadership positively leads to employees' organizational citizenship behavior (Chu and Hung, 2009; Chou et al., 2005), obligation toward others (Aycan et al., 2000), and organizational commitment (Farh et al., 2006). Consistent with the suggestions of prior research, this paper hypothesizes that department manager's morality leadership may motivate flight attendants to conduct upward safety communication.

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