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We can do it! Inclusive leader language promotes voice behavior in multi-professional teams

Mona Weiss^{a,b,*}, Michaela Kolbe^{b,c}, Gudela Grote^b, Donat R. Spahn^d, Bastian Grande^{c,d}

^a New York University, Leonard N. Stern School of Business, Department of Management and Organizations, United States

^b ETH Zurich, Department of Management, Technology and Economics, Switzerland

^c University Hospital Zurich, Simulation Center, Switzerland

^d University Hospital Zurich, Institute of Anesthesiology, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Although it is known that leaders can have a strong impact on whether employees voice work-related ideas or concerns, no research has investigated the impact of leader language on voice—particularly in professionally diverse contexts. Based on a social identity approach as well as on collectivistic leadership theories, we distinguish between implicit (i.e., First-Person Plural pronouns) and explicit (i.e., invitations and appreciations) inclusive leader language and test its effects on voice in multi-professional teams. We hypothesized that implicit inclusive leader language promotes voice especially among team members sharing the same professional group membership as the leader (in-group team members) while explicit inclusive leader language promotes voice especially among team members belonging to a different professional group (out-group team members). These hypotheses were tested in a field setting in which 126 health care professionals (i.e., nurses, resident and attending physicians), organized in 26 teams, managed medical emergencies. Behavioral coding and leader language analyses supported our hypotheses: Leaders' "WE"-references were more strongly related to residents' (in-group) and explicit invitations related more strongly to nurses' (out-group) voice behavior. We discuss how inclusive leader language promotes employee voice and explain why group membership functions as an important moderator in professionally diverse teams.

Introduction

When employees speak up with alternative ideas or voice problems they can improve team or organizational effectiveness. Because hierarchies often impede voice behavior from those with lower status, scholars have emphasized the importance of team leaders and superiors in encouraging subordinates to speak up (e.g., [Detert & Trevino, 2010](#)). Several studies have shown that people are more likely to speak up and contribute to their organization or team if leaders are perceived as open for and appreciative of subordinates' input (e.g., [Detert & Burris, 2007](#); [Edmondson, 2003](#); [Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007](#); [Liu et al., 2015](#); [Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006](#); [Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012](#)). However, the general approach in most of the previous research on leadership and voice is to look at how leaders are *perceived* rather than investigating how leaders actually communicate with their followers. Moreover, most studies have not taken into account how leaders can encourage voice in multi-professional team contexts

* Corresponding author at: New York University, Leonard N. Stern School of Business, Management and Organizations Department, 44 West 4th St, New York, NY 10012, United States.

E-mail address: mweiss@stern.nyu.edu (M. Weiss).

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where different professional identities are salient. Thus, to this point we do not know what exactly leaders should do or say to solicit voice behavior among different followers. This is problematic as in many organizational contexts work is carried out by teams that include members from different professions whose critical input is essential to enhance team performance (e.g., DeChurch et al., 2011; D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014; Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006).

We suggest that leaders can solicit team member voice through inclusive language. Specifically, we distinguish between two different types of inclusive language: *implicit* inclusive leader language, that is, First-Person Plural pronouns such as “WE” and *explicit* inclusive leader language, that is, direct invitations to voice and appreciation of follower input. For implicit inclusive leader language, we draw on social identity and self-categorization theory, which has shown that leaders can mobilize followers through collective pronouns (i.e., WE, US, OUR) by which they *implicitly* highlight the superordinate team or organizational identity (e.g., Hornsey, Blackwood, & O'Brien, 2005; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). In doing so, followers identify more with their organization or team and, in turn, are more motivated to contribute to it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012).

Regarding explicit inclusive leader language, we draw on research showing that employees are more likely to speak up if leaders are perceived as open to subordinates' input (Detert & Burris, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012) and when they feel invited and appreciated by their leader (Edmondson, 2003; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

While we argue that both implicit and explicit inclusive leader language can promote voice, we suggest that differences in professional group membership within multi-professional teams pose a boundary condition and explain which type of inclusiveness is most effective for whom. Based on the social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), we propose that team members who share the same professional group membership with their team leader (in-group team members) can be more effectively addressed by implicit inclusive language (“WE”) than team members from a different professional group (out-group team members). This is because in-group team members see leaders as a more prototypical representative of their group and thus are more easily motivated and influenced by them (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2004; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Hogg et al., 2012; Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001). Conversely, we suggest that out-group team members need more explicit forms of inclusion than in-group members as they do not see the leader as a prototype of their group. Moreover, because of their out-group status they are also more likely to doubt whether “it is their place to speak up”. Thus, explicit leader inclusiveness (invitations and appreciations) will help especially out-group team members to feel psychologically safe to speak up with suggestions or concerns (Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

By investigating how leader language can promote voice within multi-professional teams, we contribute to several areas of leadership research. First, our study contributes to and extends previous research on leader behaviors and voice, such as managerial openness (Detert & Burris, 2007) or leader consultation (e.g., Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012), by highlighting the specific communication patterns through which leaders can solicit and listen to employees' suggestions or work-related concerns.

Moreover, by investigating the impact of collective leader language on employee voice, we relate to leadership theories that differentiate between personalized vs. socialized leaders, that is, leaders who are concerned with exerting power and influence over others vs. those who are oriented towards the common good (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; House & Howell, 1992). Against this background, our research informs so-called “collectivistic” approaches to leadership that recently came under scrutiny. It has been noted that leaders who emphasize the “WE” in their team can foster team performance as they bypass traditional authority structures and recognize the potential of their followers in adopting leadership functions rather than exerting authority and promoting obedience (e.g., Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). Relatedly, it could be shown that leaders who empower their followers—for example, through a shared vision and participative decision-making—can positively affect team effectiveness (Mathieu et al., 2006; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014), and facilitate employee creativity (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Sun, Zhang, & Chen, 2012). Our findings complement this line of research as they show that by using collective language (“WE”-references and invitations to speak up) leaders de-emphasize hierarchical barriers and highlight the importance of the group as a whole. This, in turn, encourages employees to engage in discretionary, extra-role behaviors such as voice. This is important given that team and organizational effectiveness benefit from followers who are not only creative or good performers but who also proactively challenge the status quo (Morrison, 2011).

A second major contribution of our study relates to the multi-professional team context, in which we examine the relationship between leader language and voice. Building on a social identity approach to leadership (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2000), we provide insights into why some forms of leader inclusion efforts work better for some groups than for others and discuss the role of social identity/self-categorization processes occurring within an intergroup context. In specifying which professional group benefits optimally from implicit vs. explicit inclusive leader language, we speak to the effects of professional diversity in teams (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). We highlight how inclusive leader language can function as a form of intergroup leadership and thereby enhance the potential of professionally diverse teams (Hogg et al., 2012).

A final contribution of our study is that we investigate the proposed relationships within a high-risk organizational context (i.e., multi-professional healthcare teams). Thus, we connect with research on leadership within extreme environments, which has emphasized “dynamic delegation” of the leader, that is, situations, in which leaders actively seek input and contributions from followers vs. situations in which their leadership is more directive (Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006). At the same time, we believe that the proposed effects are by no means restricted to high-risk organizations. In today's increasingly complex and rapidly changing organizational landscapes, leaders must be able to effectively and timely solicit input from a diverse set of employees to ensure optimal team performance and organizational effectiveness. Our findings speak to these demands by showing how inclusive leader language can facilitate employee proactivity on the spot even when teams have to deal with highly complex problems under enormous time pressure.

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