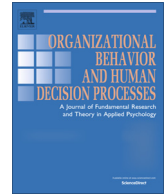




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp)

# Overcoming the fear factor: How perceptions of supervisor openness lead employees to speak up when fearing external threat



R. David Lebel

Katz School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, 364 Mervis Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 26 March 2014

Revised 26 April 2016

Accepted 5 May 2016

## Keywords:

Employee voice

Upward communication

Fear

Discrete emotions

Layoffs

Supervisor openness

Prosocial motivation

## ABSTRACT

While fear is generally assumed to powerfully limit employee voice, a functional view of emotions suggests that responses to fear vary. Instead of assuming that fear is negatively associated with voice, I argue that this relationship may be more complex. Adopting a functional view of emotions, I hypothesize that fears from external sources focus attention on shared threat to the organization and may be positively associated with employee voice. This effect is likely contingent: when employees perceive their supervisors as open to input, they are motivated to speak up. Thus, perceptions of supervisor openness can help transform other-focused motives resulting from fearing external threat into information-sharing. Results from two studies suggest that fear of external threat positively relates to voice when employees perceive their supervisor as open to input. Additionally, results suggest that this interactive effect is mediated by prosocial motivation spurring employees to speak up when fearing external threat.

© 2016 The Author. Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Given growing economic uncertainty and competitive threat at work, managers need feedback from employees at all levels in order to implement strategy and make informed decisions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Senge, 1990). A flow of information from employees facilitates organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999) and enhances decision quality (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999). As such, employee voice behavior—defined as discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns intended to benefit the organization (Morrison, 2011)—can help improve the organization's responses to the external competitive environment, as well as its effectiveness and performance (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013; Lam & Mayer, 2014; Mackenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011).

Because employee voice is important for organizational functioning, voice scholars have focused on the antecedents to this behavior (Morrison, 2014). While much of this research has emphasized the role of cognitive processes that influence whether employees speak up, there is a lack of understanding as to how emotions influence voice (Grant, 2013). An exception is a body of work suggesting that employees often withhold their ideas and suggestions, primarily due to fears of negative consequences, such as supervisor retaliation or punishment, negative labels (e.g.,

“whiner” or “trouble-maker”), damage to one's image, not being supported, or harming work relationships (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003).

However, there is reason to believe that the relationship between fear and voice may be more complex. A functional view of emotions suggests that negative emotions, such as fear, can be adaptive, motivating and coordinating action to deal with potential or existing threats (Elfenbein, 2007; Frijda, 1986). The experience of fear functions to protect a person from threat, often in the form of “flight” responses such as withdrawal, freezing in place, or avoiding a situation (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). Fear's protective behavior, however, may not always involve flight (Rosen & Schulkin, 1998; Öhman, 2008). Responses to fear depend on the situation: “carefulness when the threat is transitory; protective effort when there is no immediate way of escape or immediate need to escape; escape when such is possible and the threat is more than protective behavior can handle” (Frijda, 1986, p. 198). Therefore, whether action is taken and the form this behavior takes depends on the nature of threat and what is instrumental for seeking protection from that threat (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2008; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989).

Adopting a functional view of emotions, I explore the conditions under which fear may lead to voice. First, responding to fear of external threats, such as economic downturn, employees may make an effort to change the situation (George, 2011). Indeed,

E-mail address: [rdlebel@katz.pitt.edu](mailto:rdlebel@katz.pitt.edu)

employees fearing external changes often focus their attention on shared threat to the organization, which sparks other-focused motives and potential action to protect the collective (Vuori & Huy, 2016). Second, cues from supervisors and leaders are particularly important during times of uncertainty (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Rachman, 1990). When employees perceive that their supervisors are open to input, they believe they can approach them with suggestions or problems and that such input will be listened to, providing a means to cope with fears of external threat. Taken together, I argue that employees are motivated to speak up when they are fearful of external organizational threats and when they perceive high levels of supervisor openness. I further argue that the effect of this interaction on voice is mediated by prosocial motives. These hypotheses are tested across two studies: a field study in three organizations impacted by organizational and economic uncertainty, and, to explore possible mediating mechanisms, a lagged survey study of full-time employees from a range of organizations.

This article makes several theoretical contributions to the literatures on employee voice and emotions in organizations. First, it examines when and why fear of external threat may motivate employees to speak up. Doing so adds complexity to the notion that all fear decreases voice. Second, this article contributes by proposing a contingent relationship between fear and voice, arguing that emotional factors interact with employee perceptions of the situation. Despite indications from the emotions literature that fear's impact on employee behavior may vary (e.g., Roseman et al., 1994), the voice literature has yet to explore this relationship's possible contingencies. Third, this article extends a growing and nascent body of work exploring when negative emotions may have constructive outcomes at work (Bohns & Flynn, 2012; Geddes & Callister, 2007). The findings of this research also have practical implications for understanding how supervisors and employees can effectively manage and respond to fears of external threat.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Fear of external threat

Fear is an emotional state involving a sense of uncertainty and the threat of harm or an undesirable event (Frijda, 1986; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). As an experience, fear involves subjective feelings of apprehension, as well as associated physiological changes including increased heart rate (Rachman, 1990). Fear is a discrete emotion, which entails a distinct feeling state elicited by a specific stimulus or event (Lazarus, 1991). Fear is thus source-specific, and has an identifiable target (Öhman, 2008). Specifying the target is important to understanding how people respond to fear, as the source can influence the behavioral response to this emotion (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2008).

In the workplace, employees can experience fear in response to a variety of sources (Basch & Fisher, 2000), both external and internal (Menon & Pfeffer, 2003). Fear of external threat is defined as feelings of uncertainty that result from sources outside an employee's organization. These sources can include economic or industry downturn, competitive threats, changes in technology, or mergers and acquisitions (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991). Fears stemming from external sources can also involve shared feelings of threat to an organization and potential organizational loss (Vuori & Huy, 2016). Fear of external threat is distinct from fear of speaking up to one's supervisor, one form of internal threat, which involves interpersonal fears of retaliation, punishment, negative labels, or harming relationships with others (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). A primary distinction

between these two types of fear is the originating source of threat. Additionally, whereas fear of speaking up focuses employee attention on the potential negative consequences of voice, fear of external threat focuses attention on the negative consequences that may arise if the source of threat is not addressed. Because of the perceived negative consequences of speaking up, voice scholars have primarily focused on how employees often remain silent due to fears of speaking up (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009).

In this article, I focus on fears of external threat for two key theoretical reasons. First, fear of external threat is commonly experienced in organizations (Huang, Zhao, Niu, Ashford, & Lee, 2013), with assumed negative effects on employee behavior and health (Ashford et al., 1989). Second, employees may respond differently to fears of external threat than to fears of speaking up (Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006). In particular, research suggests that external threats can motivate information-sharing intended to protect the larger collective (Vuori & Huy, 2016), whereas fears of speaking up can motivate information-withholding for self-protective reasons (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). This has important, yet unexplored implications for research on employee voice, suggesting that fear resulting from external sources may increase a flow of information within an organization, and therefore the likelihood of speaking up.

### 2.2. Fear of external threat and voice: a functional emotions perspective

Emotions can be functional, helping people adapt to events, changes, or threats (Frijda, 1986). Emotions coordinate behavior in social interactions and direct behavior toward addressing problems or the demands of the environment (Elfenbein, 2007). For example, the function of fear is to motivate protection from psychological or physiological threats (Izard & Ackerman, 2000; Öhman, 2008). A functional perspective also suggests that emotions prepare a person to take action, referred to as states of action readiness (Frijda, 1986). States of action readiness involve automatic or learned behavioral patterns following emotional experience, such as moving away from or towards a person or object (Frijda et al., 1989). Discrete emotions, such as fear, are accompanied by distinct patterns of action readiness (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). The state of action readiness accompanying fear, for example, often results in withdrawing from a situation, avoidance behavior, or freezing in place, whereas anger often results in aggressive action towards another individual (Shaver et al., 1987).

While fear generally motivates protection through flight or withdrawal, a functional perspective suggests that the behavioral consequences of emotional experience vary. Thus, individuals may respond to fear with withdrawal (i.e., flight), protective effort (i.e., fight), or increased attention towards a threat, depending on what is appropriate for ensuring safety (Frijda, 1986). Indeed, functional theorists argue that emotionally-directed behavior is contingent and "dependent on the joint occurrence of an emotion and specific external or internal stimulus conditions" (Roseman et al., 1994, p. 216). That is, the experience of fear functions to direct a person to seek safety, but the form that safety-seeking behavior takes can vary based on perceptions of the situation.

Thus, from a functional view of emotions, there are circumstances when fear leads to increased effort and aggressive action (fight), rather than flight (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2008). Following this, I argue that there are certain situations when fears of external threat can direct employees towards protecting the larger collective (fight). Different sources of threat invoke different patterns of knowledge-sharing within an organization (Menon & Pfeffer, 2003). For example, fear of external threats can motivate employees to improve an organization's position and performance relative to other organizations (Vuori & Huy, 2016). This motivation can

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7248151>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7248151>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)