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# The Role of Transformational Leadership in the Relationship between Proactive Personality and Employee Voice

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

*Transformational Leadership, Proactive personality, Employee voice, Leadership style*

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Transformational leadership is seen as a mediator of employee voice behavior. This study attempts to investigate the influence of leadership style as an organizational variable that can motivate employee voice behavior and expand understanding of the relationship between personal characteristics and employee voice. The research was conducted among public sector employees online. A total of 410 questionnaires were collected. After the elimination of invalid questionnaires, 356 questionnaires were received. For data processing, we used the six-item Employee Voice Questionnaire, the 17-item Proactive Personality Scale (PPS), and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ- 5S). The result shows that leadership style as an important organizational variable helps employees with a proactive personality to show more positive behavior. Transformational leadership style positively and significantly moderates the relationship between proactive personality and employee voice.

The increase in complexity and the volatile environment pose more challenges to managers in problem-solving and information processing (Chakravarthy et al., 2003). This is particularly the case in organizations with somehow professional bureaucracy or in public organizations with centralized decision-making, in which ensuring compliance with laws and decisions on the one hand and managing environmental pressures caused by client expectations, on the other hand, present challenges. For example, providing various efficient services in private companies creates the expectations to receive services of similar quality and quantity when referring to public organizations. While in public organizations, creating a kind of change and organizational flexibility in providing services, etc., requires a lot of coordination and even legislation at the macro level of society. Therefore, the employees of these organizations mostly have a better understanding of the expected changes, while due to the type of concentration and bureaucracy in the processes, their voices are less heard, and in creating a balance between the organization and the client, they may express dissatisfaction. It even leads to organizational silence and causes the organization to be deprived of the positive impact of employees' opinions and ideas in helping the continuous process of organizational improvement. Hence, it is vital for managers to understand the conditions that contribute to employees' communicative behaviors, such as employee voice behavior (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008).

Employee voice behavior is a preventive work behavior that aims to improve working conditions (Parker & Collins, 2010). Hirschman (1970) emphasizes that when employees are faced with unsatisfactory conditions at work, they are likely to either withdraw or express their opinions and concerns. The voice behavior of employees can be described as expressing constructive ideas and opinions about the change in organizations (Dyne et al., 2003). Therefore, it can be seen as an active and constructive behavior that improves (and not criticizes) the system (Kanten & Ulker, 2012). Previous studies have shown that active people are more involved in employee voice behavior (Uğurlu & Ayas, 2016). But in the meantime, there are many intervening organizational factors and leadership behavior style as one of the most important variables within the organization is at the top. This is especially true in public organizations, where the leader of an organizational department can practically act as a facilitator of communication between employees and higher levels and somehow manages the employee voice of his area. Part of a leader's function is to work with employees to find problems within an organization and solve them (Fragouli, 2019), which is in close relation with the voice of employees.

It is possible that a proactive personality is positively related to employee voice and precedes performance (Ristig, 2008). Proactive people tend to suggest new ways of doing tasks and generate new ideas to improve their initiatives and performance (Jafri et al., 2016). In fact, proactive people evaluate what they stand to gain or lose before speaking up about their ideas and thoughts to avoid personal harm (Detert & Burris, 2007). Employees engage in voice behavior only when they believe it is safe and will bring effective results (Ho, 2017). Employees are more likely to talk about important issues when they receive support from their supervisors (Miceli et al., 2008). By contrast, most studies have focused on how to reduce employees' concerns about voice behaviors (Detert & Burris, 2007; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) and ignore the factors that motivate employees to engage in voice behaviors.

Therefore, the present study tries to investigate the influence of the leader's behavior style as an organizational variable that can motivate employees' voice behavior to expand the relationship between individual inputs such as personality and how it interacts under the influence of leadership style on employees' voice.

## **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

### ***The Relationship between Proactive Personality and Employee Voice***

Although various research has been conducted on proactive personality since the 1990s (Kanten & Ulker, 2012), the role of proactive personality in expressing opinions and the voice of employees, in general, were not significantly covered until the importance of organizational knowledge of individuals and the role of organizational voice in organizational flexibility have become increasingly important. The importance of maintaining and developing competitive advantage in the current organizational environment indicates that survival and competitive advantage can result from ideas presented by employees to managers and supervisors to improve processes, products, and services (Dustin et al., 2014). Understanding employees' views in interaction with managers and supervisors is very important for organizations because organizations must continuously use employees' ideas and opinions to improve and gain a competitive advantage (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). It, therefore, focuses on the verbal expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs, and its purpose is clearly to benefit the group or organization.

A proactive personality is considered one of the most important indicators of an employee's preventive efforts at the workplace. Therefore, this topic has been the focus of researchers (Li et al., 2010; Thompson, 2005; Yang & Chau, 2016). Employees with a proactive personality are of great value to the workplace (Crant, 2000; Fuller Jr & Marler, 2009; Wang et al., 2017). They tend to suggest new ways of doing tasks and develop new ideas to improve their initiatives (Jafri et al., 2016). Proactive personality refers to individual characteristics in which employees use effort, persistence, and effort to shape an environment (Zhang, 2009).

In addition, Bateman and Crant (1993) defined proactive personality as a relatively stable tendency to influence environmental changes, which distinguishes people based on the extent of their influence on their environments. People with lower proactive personality face challenges in adapting to work conditions and cannot determine opportunities (Zhang et al., 2012). Empirical findings have generally shown positive relationships between people's proactive personality and organizational outcomes, including Job performance, tolerance, work demands and stress, leadership effectiveness, participation in organizational initiatives, teamwork performance, and entrepreneurship (Seibert et al., 2001). Hence, as a behavioral process related to work, employees' voices can be related to their proactive personality. Because people with proactive personality tend to make changes and exert positive effects, they try to fulfill this goal by influencing others, transmitting information and participating, and expressing opinions. The findings support Fuller Jr and Marler (2009) and Xie et al. (2014), that proactive personality is positively and significantly related to employee voice. Proactive personality is one of the main determinants of voice behavior (Kanten & Ulker, 2012). Therefore, the first hypothesis can be stated as follows:

**First hypothesis:** Proactive personality predicts employees' voices positively and meaningfully.

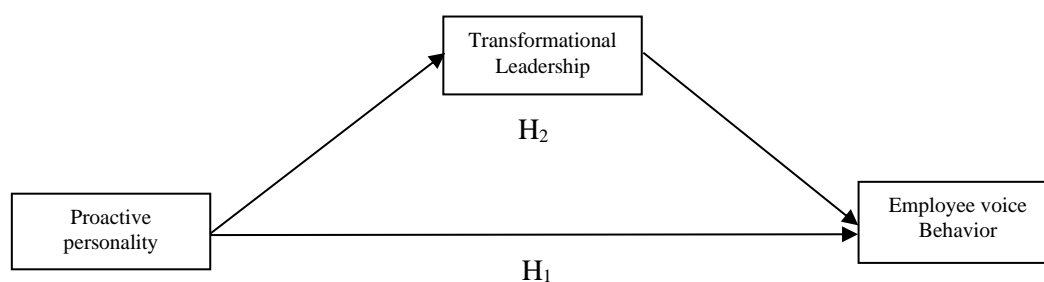
### **Transformational Leadership and the Voice of Employees**

Employee voices may challenge the status quo, pose personal risks and costs, and cause stress. These characteristics may make many employees who experience cultural barriers reluctant to speak up. Under transformational leadership, employees will have high levels of trust and recognition from their supervisors, which can lead them to express their opinions freely and comfortably with less concern about misunderstanding or criticism; for example, Duan et al. (2017) stated that transformational leadership allows employees to get more opportunities and use more communication channels to speak up and share information or ideas with supervisors informally. By having more informal exchanges and communication with supervisors, employees usually benefit more from supervisors' support and responsiveness in the workplace (Fix & Sias, 2006). Because of potential cultural barriers, this is especially the case with employees who need more support from their supervisors before engaging in employee voice.

Transformational leaders intellectually encourage their employees to explore opportunities, challenge current conditions, and see old problems from new perspectives. Detert and Burris (2007) point out that transformational leaders support psychological safety of their employees or the idea that engaging in risky behaviors does not lead to personal harm; hence, they reduce negative feedback concerns, which will increase employee voice. It can also prevent gossip and disrupt the professional well-being of employees in the organization (Aghbolagh et al., 2021; Voitenko et al., 2022). It is assumed that (Duan et al., 2017) employees under transformational leadership have more freedom of action in exchanging new ideas due to a higher level of trust and social interaction. Inspirational motivation (another component of transformational leadership) will help followers realize the collective vision of the organization, and while encouraging collective objectives, frequent interactions may begin to occur among employees. This is the motivation that a transformational leader provides to pursue a common cause and concept, and all group members begin to make suggestions for that shared vision. In addition, through dedicated attention and idealistic influence, transformational leaders emphasize employees' personal growth and are attentive to their needs and desires, increasing individual confidence and effectiveness. Employees are more willing to take risks, express their opinions, and worry less about shortcomings when they receive support, encouragement, and trust from their leaders (Martin et al., 2016). Therefore, the second hypothesis of the research is proposed as follows:

**Second hypothesis:** Transformational leadership style positively and significantly moderates the relationship between proactive personality and employees' voice.

The conceptual model of the study's variables and their relationships is presented in [Figure 1](#).

**Figure 1***The Conceptual Model of the Study*

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

The questionnaires were sent to employees in the public sector and were completed online. A total of 410 questionnaires were collected. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires, 356 valid questionnaires were received. The recovery rate and average age of the respondents were 86.8% and 39.83 years, respectively; 73.9% of the respondents were male ( $n = 263$ ); education: college degree 7% ( $n = 25$ ), bachelor's degree 63.8% ( $n = 227$ ), master's degree or above 29.2% ( $n = 104$ ); from among whom only 10.4% ( $n = 37$ ) of respondents were single.

### Measurement

**Employee Voice.** We used a six-item employee voice questionnaire developed and validated by Van Dyne and LePine's (1998). Employees indicated how frequently each statement fitted their own behavior. Response scales ranged from "almost never" (1), to "almost always" (5). Sample items are "I speak up and encourage others in this group to get involved in issues that affect the group" and "I communicate my opinions about work issues to others in this group even if my opinion is different and others in the group disagree with me". Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .84.

**Proactive Personality.** Proactive personality was assessed through a shortened version of Bateman and Grant's (1993), which was a 17-item Proactive personality Scale (PPS). Bateman and Grant (1993) presented evidence for the scale's reliability (Cronbach's alphas across three different samples ranged from .87 to .89, and the test-retest reliability coefficient was .72 over a 3-month period) as well as for convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity. This study evaluated proactive personality with the shortened version of the proactive personality scale (S-PPS) developed by Seibert et al. (1999). This scale includes ten items (e.g., "If I see something I don't like, I fix it" and "I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life"). Participants answered on a 5-point response ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

**Transformational Leadership.** Transformational leadership behavior ratings were obtained using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire known as MLQ-5S (Bass & Avolio, 2000). We used 20 items of the instrument to measure idealized influence, idealized behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Several studies have indicated a high-order factor for this scale and have used a composite of all 20 items to measure transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019) ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Items are scored using a five-point Likert scale with responses that range from "never" (0) to

“frequently, if not always” (4). Sample items are “Expresses confidence that goals will be achieved”, and “Instills pride in me for being associated with him/her”.

### **Assessment of Common Method Variance**

Since the data was collected from the same respondents at the same time, the potential influence of common method bias was also examined. First of all, we used the guides introduced by Jordan and Troth (2020) to overcome the systematic bias, e.g., instructions given to respondents about the purpose of the research and by keeping questions concise and simple without double-meaning items. Second, Harman’s single-factor test was used to examine common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). These authors explained that if a single factor explains less than 50% of the covariance, common-method bias does not affect results. Exploratory factor analysis showed that nine factors had an eigenvalue greater than 1, and the first factor accounted for 21.52 % of the total variance, which is less than the recommended threshold of 50%.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

The data were analyzed by SPSS 22.0 and PROCESS. First of all, the reliability and validity were tested to ensure the distinction validity of each scale. Secondly, descriptive statistics and regression analysis were conducted. In order to avoid the influence of unrelated variables on the outcome variable, demographic variables were controlled: gender, marital status and years of working, etc. (Alingh et al., 2019). Third, the mediation effect was tested to verify the study hypothesis. Finally, the Hypotheses of the model were verified via AMOS. The statistical significance of the indirect mediation effect on the outcome variable was assessed by bootstrapping (5000 samples) with a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2017).

### **Convergent and Discriminant Validity Analyses**

A confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS software was conducted to evaluate a three-factor measurement model (i.e., each variable was independent). The goodness-of-fit statistics for the three-factor model were  $\chi^2 = 1120.18$  ( $p = .01$ );  $df = 521$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.15$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .90; and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, demonstrating a satisfactory fit. All items were also associated with their corresponding factors at  $p < .001$ . The results show that the three-factor model was acceptable rather than one and two factor measurement models, as shown in Table 2.

### **Descriptive Analysis**

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients of the main variables in this study are displayed in Table 1. Consistent with the above hypotheses, proactive personality was positively correlated with the voice of employees ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ) and transformational leadership ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ), and voice of employees was positively correlated with transformational leadership ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ). The age of the employees is just positively related to the voice of employees ( $r = .14, p < .01$ ) and negatively to transformational leadership ( $r = -.10, p < .05$ ) and has no significant relationship with other variables.



**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Variables*

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1- Gender	1.74	0.44	----						
2- Marital	1.90	0.30	.19**	---					
3- Age	39.6	7.12	.44**	.29**	---				
4- Education	3.23	0.66	.04	-.07	-.05	---			
5- Proactive personality	4.32	0.43	.08	.09	.03	.02	(.83)		
6- Voice of Employees	4.36	0.42	.14**	.07	.16**	.04	.49**	(.74)	
7- Transformational Leadership	2.07	0.47	-.10*	-.05	-.09	.11*	.15*	.21**	(.91)

Note. Gender: 1 = Female, 2 = Male; Marital Status: 1-Single, 2 = Married; Education: 1 = high school and lower 2 = associate 3 = bachelor 4 = master 5 = PhD; Cronbach's alpha values are reported in diagonal; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2***The Goodness-of-fit Results*

Model	$\chi^2$	df	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
One-factor model (PP+VE+TL)	1120.18	521	.76	.85	.84	.85	.06
Two-factor model (PP, VE+TL)	1232.59	520	.73	.82	.81	.82	.06
Two-factor model (PP+TL, VE)	1231.83	520	.89	.88	.87	.88	.06
Three factor model (PP, VE, TL)	1121.96	516	.89	.90	.89	.90	.05

**Hypothesis Testing**

We used SPSS PROCESS to test the hypotheses (Hayes, 2017). As shown in Table 3, Proactive personality is positively associated with the voice of employees ( $\beta = .66$ ,  $SE = .188$ ,  $CI = [.29, 1.03]$ ). Transformational leadership is also associated with the voice of employees ( $\beta = -.41$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $CI = [.32, 1.155]$ ). To examine the moderating effect of transformational leadership, we conducted a moderated model analysis with voice as the dependent variable and transformational leadership as moderate as model 1 in Hayes (2022). As shown in Table 3, after controlling for the main effects, the interaction between Transformational leadership and proactive personality is significant based on 5000 bootstrap samples to generate bias-corrected bootstrap with 95% confidence intervals ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $SE = .85$ ,  $CI = [.07, .26]$ ). Hypothesis 2 predicted that transformational leadership would moderate the relationship between proactive personality and the voice of employees such that employees, who perceived high levels of transformational leadership, would report a stronger voice than those with lower levels of transformational leadership. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not supported as positive moderation but supports negative moderation effects.

**Table 3***Moderator Effect of Transformational Leadership on the Relationship between Voice of Employee and Proactive Personality*

	Voice of employee				
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$SE$	95% CI
					LLCI, ULCI
Constant	1.39	1.42	.156	.84	-.46, 2.87
Gender	0.04	0.92	.353	.05	-.05, 0.14
Age	0.07	2.84	.004	.02	.02, 0.12
Education	0.01	0.34	.728	.03	-.04, 0.06
Marital	-0.02	-0.41	.678	.06	-.15, 0.10
Transformational leadership	-0.41	2.62	.0074	.37	-.32, -1.15
Proactive personality	0.66	3.54	.0005	.18	.29, 1.03
Transformational leadership*Proactive personality	-0.20	-2.10	.0062	.08	.07, 0.26

Note. Analysis performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1; Hayes, 2017). Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit.

## Conclusion

The results showed that transformational leadership can moderate the effect of a proactive personality on employees' voices. The result shows that leadership style as an important organizational variable helps employees with the proactive personality to show more positive behavior. This is because transformational leadership facilitates the possibility of people getting involved in the job (Wu & Lee, 2020) and causes the person to participate and express his opinion by getting more involved. In fact, being involved in work is one of the characteristics of people with active intelligence, which can be increased or decreased with the intervention of leadership behavior in the organizational context. The impact of leadership on decision-making and groups and individuals in organizations indicates that leaders should be more Kinetic and encourage action, allowing people to show disagreement while maintaining and encouraging energy through positive reinforcement (Darville, 2019).

Transformational leaders provide an opportunity for people to express their opinions and act more innovatively and provide a space to welcome new ideas. These conditions allow people to express their criticisms and opinions freely and comfortably without being worried about negative consequences. In other words, by creating a suitable atmosphere for getting involved in work and increasing the possibility of giving opinions, transformational leadership gains the trust of employees, and given the fact that their voice will not lead to risk, as well as by receiving positive feedback from conflicts in the job, employees are provided with the actual possibility of showing their personality traits. Employees are more willing to give feedback through increasing work experience and improving previous experiences of leadership behavior and feedback. Individuals, older ones in particular, through gaining more experience, information, and job knowledge, can show more voice behavior if they perceive the lack of negative reaction. This may explain Douglas and Roberts (2020) reports which indicated that employees 50 years of age and older were found to have statistically significant higher work engagement scores than those under 50.

In the present research, a significant correlation has been obtained between respondents' age and the variables of employees' voice behavior and transformational leadership. This indicates that an increase in work experience may lead to a sense of job security and a decrease in fear of the consequences of giving an opinion. It can be said that employees with more experience and information have more control over the quality and type of their relationship with their superiors and have more knowledge of various dimensions of the consequences of their decision and the possible reaction of their superiors. Therefore, they can express their opinions in a specific and more acceptable area, and because of the history of communication with these people, superiors have more trust and show less negative feedback. This is especially the case in public organizations, where due to the support of labor organizations, employment laws are regulated with better conditions for employees that, in turn, may lead to a situation in which negative consequences of presenting different opinions are different from those of private and industrial sectors. On the other hand, over time, a person has more knowledge on administering punishments by superiors and their unpleasant areas and, therefore, can easily show voice behavior in areas where he is less likely to be challenged. However, this requires further studies. But with the passage of time and approaching the retirement period ending their career with the organization, considering the previous experience and the background of organizational support for the employees, the individual measures the impact of his behavior on the organizational



performance and, therefore, less involved himself in making changes or trying to exert positive effects. In fact, the middle-aged workforce still hopes to help the organization with their experiences or benefit from their help before leaving the organization. But by approaching the end of his career and not expecting to see these changes or their effects and benefits, the person does not tend to engage in voice behavior.

This research showed that leadership behavior and style can affect many working conditions in the organization. Depending on the methods leaders use to manage people, it can show its effects not only in the short term but also in the long term and in the older age range of the employees. Therefore, examining people's experiences of leadership styles during their careers and the long-term effects of these styles on employees' behavior and reactions can help better understand the importance and behavior of leaders. Moreover, from a longer-term point of view, the personality differences among people and their influence on organizational variables can guide the leadership perspective. Therefore, organizational leaders should consider the impact of their behaviors in the short and long term, and to gain people's knowledge of the job and provide a platform for involving employees in the organization, they should investigate the impact of their behaviors in different groups.

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