

SPEAKING UP ABOUT THE FOREST TO SOMEONE WHO
ONLY THINKS ABOUT THE TREES: THE EFFECT OF
CONSTRUAL LEVEL AGREEMENT ON SUPERVISOR
ENDORSEMENT OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

by

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Employee Voice

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Employee voice is a vital part of improving the status quo within organizations. Many changes, whether regarding business culture, organizational structure, or workplace procedures, can only come about if employees speak up. For improvements to arise from employee voice, supervisors generally need to accept and implement employees' input. The purpose of this research is to determine why employees' feedback is often poorly received by supervisors, preventing the employee from bringing about positive organizational change. I use construal level theory in this paper to highlight one area that can positively influence supervisors' reception of employee voice. Construal level theory describes the psychological distance between individuals and their work. In other words, this theory reflects the level of abstractness or concreteness that people have when thinking about the work they perform. I collected the data for this paper through a survey administered to 128 people in management roles. I hypothesized that when a supervisor and an employee's construal levels are in agreement, whether it be high level or low level, that the supervisor is more likely to endorse instances of employee voice. Both parties' perceived construal levels were

compared to see whether agreement in employee-supervisor construal level was associated with supervisors endorsing their employees' input. I found that my hypothesis was not supported and agreement in construal levels does not correlate to higher rates of supervisor endorsement of employee voice. Incidentally, I found that employees speaking up at a higher construal level (abstract) is the best predictor of supervisor endorsement. Overall, my research indicates construal level theory is an important tool to understanding supervisors' receptivity to employee voice and could be further applied to understand workplace communication and employee-supervisor relationships.

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Introduction

Employee voice is defined as an individual's willingness to speak up with suggestions or concerns to improve the status quo (Burriss, 2012). Employees may voice ideas about how communication, processes, or projects could be improved within the workplace. Past research shows that voice has a positive impact on both organizational efficiency and profitability of organizations (Burriss, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, actually getting employees to speak up is more complex than it sounds. There are many factors that determine whether employees feel safe speaking up. For example, supervisors may encourage employee voice by creating an environment that encourages idea sharing, collaboration, and common goals. This paper defines supervisor endorsement of employee voice as a supervisor's willingness to share their employee's suggestions or concerns with upper-level management (Burriss, 2012).

One potential barrier that might contribute to a breakdown in the voice process, the steps an employee takes to communicate their ideas up the chain of command, is that supervisors and employees are not on the same page about work matters (Morrison, 2014). This may seem to be a typical occurrence of miscommunication, but it points to a deeper issue. The inability of employees and supervisors to communicate effectively with each other and reach an understanding could denote a fundamental difference in how each party thinks about issues. I propose that one barrier to employees speaking up is a difference in construal levels between supervisors and employees.

Construal level theory examines the psychological distance between a person and a task (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The phrase, "not seeing the forest for the trees" offers one illustration of construal level theory. People with a low level of construal

may not see the whole forest because they are focused on the individual trees (i.e., concrete, detail oriented). People with a high level of construal may not see the individual trees because they are focused on the whole forest (i.e., the abstract, big picture). When people are unable to find common ground or a common view on the most basic parts of a task, communication will likely break down. Applied to employees and supervisors who work together, an employee may focus on low level, nuts and bolts perspectives while the supervisor has a high level, “in the clouds” interpretation. For example, an employee may think they are sharing an idea about the font on their report, whereas their supervisor may think that they are expressing high level concerns about communication clarity.

To further illustrate incongruence in construal levels, consider an instance where a supervisor and employee are unable to see eye to eye. Imagine that an organization is installing a new phone system that is supposed to improve the efficiency of the organization. During the installation, one of the employees installing the code runs into a problem. Subsequently, the employee approaches their supervisor to suggest an alternative mode of installation that fixes the issue. However, the supervisor is already thinking of the effects the project will have on the organization's profitability and long-term success. This supervisor should be less able to see the issue from the employee's perspective because they are looking at the big picture, rather than the step-by-step process. Therefore, the supervisor should be unlikely to implement the potentially helpful employee suggestion because they are too focused on finishing the whole project. In short, the supervisor and employee should be unable to have a meeting of the minds and the supervisor will be hesitant to endorse employee voice. Supervisor

endorsement of employee voice is a supervisor's favorable response to improvement-oriented suggestions, including a willingness to implement said suggestions (Burriss, 2012). The next time the employee has a suggestion they may be less likely to consult their supervisor because of this negative experience. Therefore, the organization is missing out on the potential benefits of employee voice.

My work contributes to employee voice literature by exploring a novel factor in the success or failure of instances of voice in the workplace. This new consideration is important because employee voice is vital to organizations, and I explore one potential barrier to the voice process that organizations should understand. This research could be used to help employees feel and be more heard by their supervisors and organization as a whole. Many organizations are pushing for more employee engagement and involvement in high-level decision-making processes that previously were not open to them. These trends suggest that organizations are looking for ways to connect employee's feedback and ideas with actual organizational change. Researching the many factors that affect employee voice is important to the success of organizations, and congruence or incongruence in construal level is one more piece of that puzzle.

Literature Review

Upward voice occurs “when employees voluntarily communicate suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or work-related opinions to someone in a higher organizational position” (Morrison, 2014). Employees choosing to stay silent deprives organizations of potentially useful input that could be vital to the organization's success (Morrison, 2014). I will use Morrison’s aforementioned definition of upward voice in this paper and measure supervisor’s endorsement of instances of upward voice in relation to construal levels. There are several inhibitors of employee voice defined in Morrison’s paper which are broken into five categories: individual dispositions, job and organization attitudes and perceptions, emotions, beliefs, and schemas, supervisor and leader behavior, and other contextual factors. Employees could be discouraged from speaking up because of achievement orientation, detachment or powerlessness from the job itself, or the fear that their feedback will negatively impact their career. Employees could be further inhibited by abusive leadership or company culture or structure, especially if the company has a change-resistant culture.

Previous literature in this field explores how managers and organizational leaders affect employee voice as a result of their behavior, personality, and rank within the company. Detert and Treviño (2008) analyzed how various levels of leadership affect employees’ perceived risk of speaking up. This article helped lay the foundation for early exploration of employee voice, beyond acknowledging that it has a positive impact on organizations (Detert & Treviño, 2008). In a later article, Burris (2012) explores how managers specifically can directly or indirectly affect employees' willingness to speak up. This article offers a different perspective to the field as

previous research only explored the employees' feelings about how managers perceived or reacted to situations of employee voice. Burris (2012) details how there are two main ways managers respond to situations with employee voice. They either support and communicate the employee's thoughts up the chain of command or they evaluate the employee's performance and character to determine the credibility of their suggestions. Given this background on managers' role in employee voice, another layer of understanding is added to the existing knowledge base surrounding this concept (Burris, 2012).

Additionally, Liang and colleagues (2012) decided to approach employee voice from a psychological perspective rather than looking at individual and contextual antecedents. In an effort to analyze the psychological mechanisms of promotive and prohibitive employee voice, the authors elected to explore how the same factors that affect promotive voice might also affect prohibitive voice (Liang et al., 2012). Liang et al. (2012) use three psychological factors pulled from previous research: psychological safety, felt obligation for constructive change, and organization-based self-esteem can impact both promotive and prohibitive voice.

Concurrent with voice research, psychologists have developed construal level theory. Trope and Liberman (2010) explain that construal level theory suggests that people make predictions about events that are not presently being experienced. These 'mental constructions' could be predictions about future experiences, recalling past events, or speculations (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance and construal level theory are often conflated, but they are in fact slightly different. Trope and Liberman (2010), state that "construal levels refer to the perception of what will occur:

the processes that give rise to the representation of the event itself'. Psychological distance from an event is more closely related to the distance from the event rather than the event's properties (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Present Research

The goal of this research is to understand how construal level theory can play a role in supervisor's endorsement of employee voice. Employee performance and morale are significantly affected by their relationships with their supervisor. Employee voice has never been studied in relation to construal level theory. Exploring the relationship between these two phenomena is an important next step to better realizing the effects of supervisor-employee relationships on overall performance and profitability of organizations. Evaluating the efficacy of construal level theory as a measure to determine how the level of psychological distance between two people and the same task affects employee voice is a logical next step in this field. When both parties have high levels of construal that means that they are both looking at the big picture, seeing the whole forest rather than individual trees. Whereas, if both parties have low levels of construal, they are looking at the specific details of the picture, seeing the individual trees that make up the forest rather than the forest as a whole. On the contrary, incongruence in construal levels indicates that the employee and the supervisor do not have the same perspective. Therefore, it may take more time for the employee to communicate their input and more time for the supervisor to understand it, if they are able to move past their incongruence at all.

Agreement in construal levels occurs when an employee and supervisor possess similar or matching construal levels (Cable & Edwards, 2004). That is to say, whether they are both approaching things from a high level of construal (abstract thinking), or they are both approaching things from a low level of construal (detail-oriented thinking). Congruence in construal levels is important because it stands to reason that

when people are seeing eye to eye they are communicating better and able to get to the root of an issue faster. When supervisors think the same way as their employees, their employee's ideas will be more appealing to them because they are quickly able to follow their employee's reasoning and see the employee's perspective. I hypothesize that when both parties start from the same perspective (agreement in construal levels), the supervisor will be more likely to endorse instances of employee voice. In other words, supervisors will be better able to follow and understand employee voice when there is agreement in their construal levels.

Congruence in construal levels, whether high or low, is important because a supervisor is likely to view the employee favorably if they see similarities between the employee and themselves. The supervisor is unlikely to discount the employee's ideas if they are similar to the supervisor's because people tend to think of themselves in a favorable light (Cristofaro & Giardino, 2020). Congruence in construal levels may lead to higher levels of trust between the employee and the supervisor, which should then correlate to higher rates of supervisors endorsing instances of employee voice. If an employee looks at the big picture (high level of construal), a supervisor who also looks at the big picture may seek out that employee's feedback more because the supervisor recognizes the similar perspectives and assigns more value to their input. The underlying reasoning being that the supervisor endorses instances of employee voice with this particular employee because there is agreement in their construal levels. I propose that high versus low level of construal agreement does not matter because employees and supervisors will be on the same page, with similar perspectives regardless. In short, supervisors will be more likely to support their employees and

share their employee's input with their supervisors if the supervisors themselves are thinking about the issue/situation the same way.

Incongruence in construal level will likely lead to less favorable receptions of employee voice because the supervisor is unable to see things from the employee's perspective. There is a fundamental difference in the way both parties are thinking about the problem and that difference results in confusion and frustration. No matter how many times the employee voices a concern they have, the supervisor cannot understand why the employee is apprehensive because they are approaching the issue from a completely different angle. Neither party is aware of the other party's level of construal, thus both parties are unable to comprehend the ideas of the opposite party. Neither party is right or wrong; they just have different ways of thinking (incongruence) and are unaware of those differences. Much like if two people are looking at opposite sides of a book, when asked to agree on what color the book is, neither will be able to agree on a conclusion because the two sides of the book are in fact different colors. Incongruence in construal level is the same, neither party "sees" the other party's perspective.

A supervisor may be skeptical of their employee's input if their perspectives differ. Incongruence in construal levels is defined as a difference between employee's and supervisor's construal levels (i.e., one party has a high level of construal and the other has a low level of construal). I propose that supervisors will endorse employee voice less when there is incongruence in their construal levels because employees and supervisors are not seeing eye to eye. It will be frustrating for an employee to try and communicate their ideas to their supervisor when the employee is thinking about the

overall outcome of the project and the supervisor is thinking about the specific details of completing the project.

Hypothesis 1: The higher the congruence (the more agreement) between a supervisor's and an employee's construal levels, whether they both have a high level of construal or a low level of construal, the more likely the supervisor is to endorse instances of employee voice.

Method

Sample and Procedure

I recruited one-hundred and twenty-eight participants from Amazon MTurk and the survey was administered online via Qualtrics. All participants were required to be supervisors of at least one employee to be eligible to participate. Additionally, all survey respondents were required to be over the age of 18. Participants were instructed to take part one of the survey from their own perspective to indicate the supervisor's level of construal. In the second part of the survey, participants rated their employee's construal level. In the third part of the survey, I determined how receptive the supervisor is to their employee's suggestions, feedback, and ideas. All participants that completed the survey in its entirety were awarded \$2.00. Due to the nature of the survey qualifications, all participants were between the ages of 22 and 60, with 72 identifying as female and 53 as male. The ethnicity of the participants was 77% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic or Latino, 8% African American, 2% Asian, and 4% selected other or prefer not to share.

Measures

In order to determine construal level of supervisors and employees, participants were tested using the three-item measure from Venus et al (2019). The three statements that determine the supervisors' construal level are "I focus on the big picture rather than on details.", "I focus on the general meaning or overall effect of my work." and "I care more about central characteristics of my actions rather than specifics" ($\alpha = .67$). The same items were adapted for ratings of employees' construal level ($\alpha = .60$).

Supervisors' endorsement of employee voice was measured by asking supervisors how much they endorsed their employee's input on a regular basis. This paper defines supervisor endorsement as approval or support of employee voice. The lead-in to the items is "Over the past several weeks I have...". The items are "I thought (employee first name)'s input should be implemented," "Agreed with (employee first name)'s ideas" "Considered (employee first name)'s comments to be valuable" "Taken (employee first name)'s comments to my supervisor(s)" "Supported (employee first name)'s suggestions when talking with my supervisor(s)" ($\alpha = .74$). Each of these five questions will be ranked on a 5-point scale (1-never, 2-rarely, 3-sometimes, 4-often, 5-always). The supervisor's average score was then taken and the result was a score reflecting their endorsement of employee voice (1-not receptive, 2-sometimes receptive, 3-neutral, 4-often receptive, 5-always receptive).

Analyses

The supervisor's and employee's perceived levels of construal were measured on a five-point scale, with a value of 1 representing a low level of construal and 5 representing a high level of construal. To calculate congruence between employees' and supervisors' construal levels, I subtracted each supervisor score from their employee score. I used the absolute value of each difference to quantify the disparity between employee and supervisor construal levels. The closer this absolute value is to zero, the closer the pair of employee and supervisor are to the same level of construal, meaning they are in agreement. In other words, an absolute value of zero represents complete agreement in construal level and is expected to correlate to higher levels of supervisors endorsement of employee voice. In contrast, an absolute value of four indicates that the

supervisor and employee have different levels of construal and represents incongruence in construal levels. Thus, a value of four is expected to correlate to higher levels of supervisors not endorsing instances of employee voice. I used linear regression to test the relationship between the difference score (i.e., absolute value of the difference) for supervisor's and employee's construal level and supervisor's endorsement of their employee's voice. I analyzed the data with SPSS software.

Results

I hypothesized that when a supervisor and employee's construal levels were in agreement (either both high or both low), that the supervisor would be more likely to endorse employee voice. The significance level for all tests was set to $p = 0.05$. Refer to Table 1 for the correlations table. The dependent variable supervisor endorsement of employee voice was regressed on construal levels of each party, as well as the difference score, to test the hypothesis.

Table 2 presents the results of my regression analysis. Supervisor construal level did not have a significant relationship with supervisor endorsement of employee voice ($b = .13, p = .13$). Employee construal level did have a significant relationship with supervisor endorsement of employee voice ($b = .55, p < .001$). This finding indicates that the higher level of construal an employee had (i.e., focusing on the bigger picture), the more likely the supervisor was to endorse their ideas. Agreement in construal levels did not have a significant relationship with supervisor endorsement of employee voice ($b = -.02, p = .85$). Thus, my hypothesis was not supported.

However, I did find that employee construal level was a significant predictor of supervisor endorsement of employee voice.

Discussion

I did not find evidence to support my hypothesis that agreement in construal level positively impacts supervisor endorsement of employee voice. Interestingly, I did find that there is a significant, positive relationship between employees' level of construal and supervisor endorsement of employee voice. When employees had a high level of construal, supervisors on the whole were more likely to endorse instances of employee voice. Strictly speaking, when employees speak to the big picture, employee voice is more likely to be supported by supervisors. In other words, supervisors appear to like big-picture, forest level voice rather than voicers who frame their input from a lower level. It is important to note that construal level theory in relation to employee voice still needs to be explored further. Construal level theory could be an imperative component of understanding employee voice from a supervisor's perspective, as well as explaining why some employees are more likely to speak up than others, even when they are both under the same supervisor. As discussed earlier, previous research from the perspective of the supervisor is largely unexplored. This paper provides novel insights into the ongoing exploration of employee voice and also suggests an additional influence on the frequency of employee voice in the workplace. It is possible that supervisor endorsement of employee voice could, in turn, affect voice frequency. Further research would need to be conducted in order to explore this potential connection.

The practical applications of this study would be to suggest that employees gain an awareness of how they voice their feedback or concerns to their supervisors. Informing them that their supervisors like hearing suggestions from the high level of

construal. This means that supervisors are more likely to endorse their suggestions and move them up the chain of command if they speak from an abstract, big picture perspective. This could be because as feedback and suggestions are promoted upward, the leaders want to understand the big picture benefit of implementing the suggestion as well as high level costs or requirements associated with the idea. Additionally, if supervisors are aware of their preferences to endorse employees that exhibit a high level of construal then they could run their employee's feedback by other supervisors with similar mindsets (low levels of construal) to their employees to help the supervisor understand the suggestions and weigh the input based on merit rather than on how the employee communicates their perspective. Alternatively, if the supervisor understands their differences in construal, they could work with the employee to interpret the detailed suggestion from a higher level of construal, with the big picture components in order to promote the suggestion to the next level of management. The most important takeaway for employees is to remember that when they are speaking to their supervisor with ideas they should focus on communicating the big picture ideas that their supervisors prefer, and be aware that even if they are voicing valid low level of construal concerns to their supervisor, they may be less likely to be supported by their supervisor.

There are several limitations to my research and extensions that could be explored to build on my work. Supervisors were asked to think of instances where they had supported their employee's ideas, but there were no controls for precisely what types of employee voice, formal or informal, the supervisors were or were not supporting. Participants may have been incentivized to think more favorably of

themselves or their employees and intentionally recalled instances where they had endorsed employee voice even if typically they do not endorse it. Therefore, this study is susceptible to social desirability bias, which is a “research participants' tendency to bias their responses in surveys and experiments in order to appear in a more favorable light” (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Vesely & Klöckner, 2020). Furthermore, the study only takes the supervisor's point of view into account and future studies should take both employee and supervisor’s perspectives into account. This is called common method bias and is “normally prevalent in studies where data for both independent and dependent variables are obtained from the same person in the same measurement context using the same item context and similar item characteristics” (Podsakoff et al., 2020). Controlling for the type of industry and duration of working together would also be good ways to confirm that the results in this study are not prone to bias/error. In the future, studies can build upon this concept in order to understand the intricacies of employee voice and organizational behavior from a psychological perspective.

Tables

Table 1. Correlations

	Supervisor Construal Level	Employee Construal Level	Supervisor Endorsement of Employee Voice	Absolute Value of the Difference in Supervisor and Employee Construal Levels
Supervisor Construal Level	1			
Employee Construal Level	.455**	1		
Supervisor Endorsement of Employee Voice	.410**	.705**	1	
Absolute Value of the Difference in Supervisor and Employee Construal Levels	.012	-.610**	-.407**	1

** . Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

Table 2. Results of Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
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All Three Variables	1.240	.317		3.908	<.001
Supervisor Construal Level	.128	.083	.120	1.536	.127
Employee Construal Level	.547	.085	.640	6.449	<.001
Absolute Value of the Difference Between Construal Levels	-.018	.095	-.017	-.189	.851

a. Dependent variable: supervisor endorsement of employee voice

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