

## **Influence of Ethical Leadership on Prohibitive Voice and Mediating Mechanism**

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### **Abstract**

Prohibitive voice is helpful for enterprises to correct failure and enhance adaptability so as to obtain competitive advantage. The leader as the voice target often makes a difference to the voice behavior. Ethical leadership can improve the psychological security and organizational identification of subordinates, and thus motivate prohibitive voice. The study applied two types of statistical analysis approaches: multiple hierarchical regression analysis and structural equation model, and made two sessions of investigation to 341 employees. The analytical results show that the psychological security and organizational identification completely play a medium role in the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice.

**Key words:** ETHICAL LEADERSHIP; PROHIBITIVE VOICE; ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION; PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

### **Introduction**

Under the increasingly complex business environment, active voice from employees plays crucial part in the competitive edge and development of enterprises. But the reality comes out that employees usually keep silent even if recognizing some problems or defects in the organization. Especially, people are deeply influenced by the traditional culture so that harmonious interpersonal relationship is strong highlighted. In order to avoid negative impact, people tend to refrain from proposing prohibitive voice. Prohibitive voice refers to the active

behavior of raising objection or publicly making criticism to the existing or potential problems and disadvantages in the organization [1-2]. The leader as the voice target has a significant influence to the voice of employees [3]. How to guide employees to make prohibitive voice becomes the realistic problem in front of leaders. Therefore, the study explored the influence of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice and the medium mechanism of psychological security and organizational identification.

### **2. Research hypotheses**

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## 2.1 Ethical leadership and prohibitive voice

Ethical leadership refers to a moral behavior that leaders become the ethical model for employees through their words and deeds and stimulate their subordinates with methods of two-way communication, incentive policy and decision-making [4]. Ethical leaders should have moral traits of honesty, integrity, justice, equity and concern for others, to make employees believe that they can point out the existing problems and defects in the organization and will not be retaliated by leaders even if publicly pointing out the leaders' mistakes. Only in this way can truly encourage employee to make prohibitive voice. Ethical leaders can take a series of management measures to enlighten employee's moral behavior. Criticizing leaders and pointing out others' mistakes in public require a certain morality and courage. Based on the analysis above, we have:

*Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership has positive influence on prohibitive voice.*

## 2.2 Mediating mechanism of psychological security

Psychological security is an awareness of interpersonal risk. The reason why employees are afraid to open dialogues mainly lies that accompanied by interpersonal risk, voice, particularly prohibitive voice, is often misunderstood as complaints or challenge to the authority of leaders. Therefore, merely when employees feel psychological secure will they freely voice their opinions without worrying about the negative impacts [3, 5]. Ethical leaders should adhere to moral code and arrange work for subordinates according to fairness and impartiality. Under this circumstance, subordinates will believe that the leader will treat their meritorious criticism right. Such perception of psychological security is conducive to prohibitive voice [6]. On the basis of the analysis above, we have:

*Hypothesis 2: Psychological security has a medium mechanism effect on the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice.*

## 2.3. Mediating mechanism of organizational identification

Organizational identification refers to a sense of belonging formed when the person begins to define himself as a member of the organization [7]. If an individual has an identification of the organization, he will blend himself into the organization and work hard to fulfill the organizational objective. There are studies finding that organizational identification has positive correlation with organizational

citizenship behavior [8]. Since prohibitive voice is exactly a form of expression for organizational citizenship behavior, the employees with higher organizational identification are more likely to make prohibitive voice. Ethical leadership emphasizes ethical value and more responsibilities. Employees working under this kind of leadership can truly experience the social meaning of work, thus can satisfy the needs for higher hierarchies and generate a strong sense of belonging. According to the analysis above, we have:

*Hypothesis 3: Organizational identification has a medium mechanism effect on the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice.*

## 3. Research method

### 3.1 Sample

The search sample comes from four enterprises among which 743 employees took the questionnaire investigation. In order to reduce common method bias, the investigation adopted time interval method. To be specific, the researcher mainly investigated the contents of ethical leadership, psychological security and organizational identification at Time 1 and retrieved 498 pieces of valid questionnaires with a retrieving rate of 67.02%. A month later, we made a second questionnaire investigation to the same 498 employees and mainly investigated their background information (such as gender, age, education level and years of working) and prohibitive voice behavior. At last we got 401 pieces of valid samples with a retrieving rate of 80.5%. Wherein, 50.1% are male, the average age is 34.89 (standard deviation=9.50), the average years of working is 10.24 (standard deviation=9.63) and those with college degree or above accounts for 32.3%.

### 3.2 Variable measurement

In the part of ethical leaders, the researcher adopted the scale compiled by [4] with a total of 10 items. For example, "My boss established a model of doing things based on code of ethics". In the part of psychological security, the researcher utilized the scale compiled by [9] with a total of 3 items. For example, "I don't worry about voicing my opinion at work". In the part of organizational identification, the researcher used the scale compiled by [10] with a total of 6 items. For example, "I myself will feel embarrassed when someone criticized my company". In the part of prohibitive voice, the researcher applied the scale compiled by [2] with a total of 6 items. For example, "I will point out the undesirable phenomenon in the company even if it is embarrassing". The scales all employed the

likert-5 grading methods to guide employees to make comment. 1 represents “strongly disagree”; 5 represents “strongly agree”.

**4. Statistical analysis and findings**

**4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis**

The study made a confirmatory factor analysis with AMOS17.0 Software. The results are shown in Table 1 that each fit index of four-

factor model is expressed as  $\chi^2(269) = 633.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $CFI = 0.93$  and  $TLI = 0.93$ , all reaching the standard and superior to other substitution models. This implies that the four variables involved in this research have a good discrimination validity and this research does not have a serious common method deviation.

**Table 1.** Variable Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Fitting index	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Four Factors Model	633.53	269	2.35	0.06	0.93	0.93
Three Factors Model <sup>a</sup>	1013.07	272	3.73	0.09	0.86	0.85
Three Factors Model <sup>b</sup>	1253.13	272	4.61	0.10	0.82	0.80
Two Factors Model <sup>c</sup>	1628.17	274	5.94	0.12	0.75	0.73
One Factor Model <sup>d</sup>	2630.24	275	9.57	0.16	0.57	0.53

Note. <sup>a</sup> combining ethical leadership and psychological safety into one factor; <sup>b</sup> combining ethical leadership and organizational identification into one factor; <sup>c</sup> combining ethical leadership, organizational identification and psychological safety into one factor; <sup>d</sup> combining ethical leadership, organizational identification, psychological safety and prohibitive voice into one factor.

**4.2. Descriptive statistical analysis**

The research made a descriptive statistical analysis of the data with the SPSS19.0 Software. The results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Internal Consistency Statistics

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender								
2. Age	0.00							
3. Education	0.11*	-0.23**						
4. Tenure	0.08	0.71**	-0.11*					
5. Ethical leadership	0.00	-0.17**	0.10	-0.09	(0.93)			
6. Psychological safety	-0.05	-0.03	0.05	-0.07	0.19**	(0.77)		
7. Organizational identification	0.08	-0.14*	0.19**	-0.05	0.58**	0.19**	(0.89)	
8. Prohibitive voice	0.03	-0.02	0.05	-0.05	0.22**	0.56**	0.30**	(0.90)
Mean	0.51	34.89	2.17	10.24	3.83	3.89	4.07	3.79
SD	0.50	9.50	1.20	9.63	0.83	0.71	0.78	0.74

Note. N=341. Symble \* on behalf of  $p < 0.05$ , Symble \*\* on behalf of  $p < 0.01$ ; Cronbach’s alphas are displayed on the diagonal

**4.3. Hypothesis Verification**

(1) Hierarchical Regression Analysis

The researcher used SPSS19.0 Software to make verification of the hypotheses, shown as in Table 3. It can be reflected from Model 4 that ethical leadership has significant positive influence on prohibitive voice ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting Hypothesis One. In the meantime, we can infer from Model 1 and Model 2 that ethical leadership also has significant positive influence on psychological security ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and

organizational identification ( $\beta = 0.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); It can be proved from Model 5 that ethical leadership has less significant influence on prohibitive voice after adding psychological security and organizational identification into the regression equation. The psychological security and organizational identification also show a significant positive influence on prohibitive voice with regression coefficient of  $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Therefore, psychological security and organizational identification

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completely play a medium part in the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice,

supporting Hypothesis Two and Hypothesis Three.

**Table 3.** Testing Results of Hypothesis 1 to 3

	PS	OI	PV		
	Model1	Model 2	Model3	Model4	Model5
Control Variable					
Gender	-0.05	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.05
Age	0.09	-0.04	0.04	0.09	0.05
Tenure	0.05	0.12**	0.04	0.03	-0.02
Education	-0.10	0.03	-0.08	-0.09	-0.04
Independent Variable					
EL	0.19**	0.56**		0.23**	0.02
Mediating Variable					
PS					0.52**
OI					0.20**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.35	0.01	0.06	0.36
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.30	0.01	0.05	0.30
F	3.31**	36.72**	0.50	4.00**	26.75**
ΔF	12.77**	157.78**	0.50	17.88**	78.97**

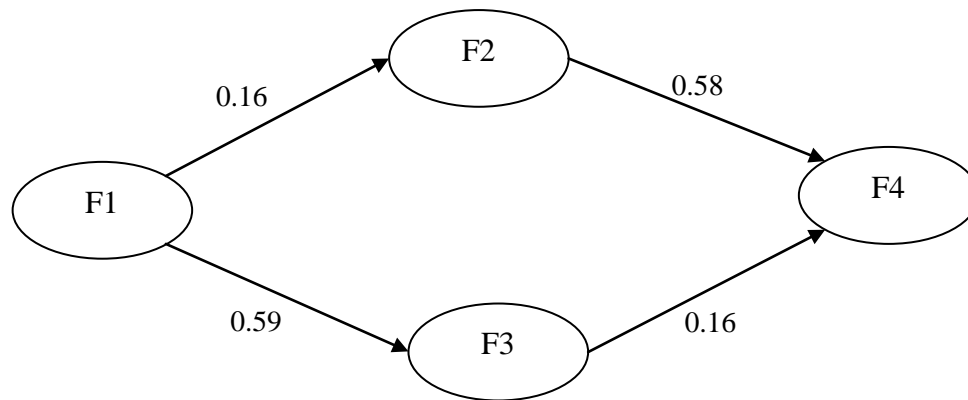
Note. (1)EL: ethical leadership, PV: prohibitive voice, PS: psychological safety, OI: Organizational identification; (2)N=341. Symble \* on behalf of  $p < 0.05$ , Symble \*\* on behalf of  $p < 0.01$ .

### (2) Structural Equation Model

To further verify the medium mechanism effect of psychological security and organizational identification to ethical leadership and prohibitive voice, we applied AMOS17.0 Software to test the hypotheses. The results are shown in Figure 1. The parameter estimated valued of model and all path coefficient indicate: psychological security has significant medium effect (the path coefficient of ethical leadership to psychological security  $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; the path coefficient of psychological security to prohibitive voice  $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); the medium effect  $0.16 \times 0.58 = 0.09$ ; organizational identification has

significant medium effect (the path coefficient of ethical leadership to organizational identification  $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; the path coefficient of psychological security to organizational identification  $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); the medium effect  $0.59 \times 0.16 = 0.09$ . In conclusion, the hypotheses proposed in the research are further verified.

The fit index of the structural equation model is  $\chi^2 = 637.59$ ;  $df = 271$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.35$ ; RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.93. Each index fulfills the standard requirement, reflecting that the models have a desirable fitting situation.



**Figure 1.** Mediating Model of Psychological Safety and Organizational Identification

Note. F1: ethical leadership, F2: psychological safety, F3: Organizational identification, F4: prohibitive voice.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

### 5.1. Conclusions

Prohibitive voice refrains organization from sliding continuously along the wrong path, but often leads to relatively high interpersonal risks. For this reason, some employees are unwilling to point out the disadvantage of organization in public even if being aware of it. This phenomenon is quite common under the background of Chinese culture. China is a country advocating harmonious interpersonal relationship. Pointing out one's mistake face to face is prone to cause interpersonal strain. Hence, how to motivate employees to make prohibitive voice is a research topic of great theoretical and realistic significance. This article explored the influence of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice and the medium mechanism. The results show that ethical leadership has positive effect on prohibitive voice and mainly promotes the prohibitive voice through enhancing the psychological security and organizational identification of employees.

### 5.2. Practical implication

Under the fiercely competitive business environment, prohibitive voice plays a vital role in the survival and development of enterprises. Thus, managers should take the ethical leadership to inspire employees to propose advice for the healthy development of organization. Research finds that psychological security and organizational identification have more direct influence on prohibitive voice, so managers should establish trustful interpersonal relationship inside the organization and promote the psychological security of employees by alleviating their worry and misgivings. The manager should also attach importance to build up a sense of belonging for employees in the practical human resource management and direct them to make prohibitive voice by enhancing their organizational identification.

### 5.3. Research limitations

All the measured data of variables in this research come from the self-report of employees. There may be some common method deviations. In order to reduce the deviations, the researcher used time interval method and selected two time points to collect data. Meanwhile, the results of confirmatory factor analysis show that the testing model has good fitting rate with the data, which indicates that the common method deviation does not have fundamental influence on the research results. In spite of this, the future research should still be stricter and apply the longitudinal research methods to further verify the conclusion made in this research.

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