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Experimentally Investigating the Role of Voice Non-Endorsement Over Time: Implications for Innovation in Organizations

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Abstract

Introduction

Reporting problems or wrongdoings and suggesting ideas to improve functioning are crucial for organizations' wellbeing, especially in today's increasingly competitive world. These conducts are known as "voice behaviors" and are defined as discretionary behaviors initiated by workers to incite change in their environment by communicating information to individuals with decision making power (Detert et al., 2013; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). These change-oriented behaviors are at the root of innovative processes as workers are focused on impacting their organizational environment by making efforts to promote personal ideas (Liang et al., 2019; Qin et al., 2014). Voice is a highly desirable behavior for allowing corrections of malfunctions and promoting new practices or innovations, and silence deprives organizations of these benefits. Having a sense of control through actions which produce desired results is fundamental to psychological functioning and is an important predictor of motivation for future actions in a particular situation or environment (Rauvola et al., 2022; Skinner, 1996). Therefore, repetitive failures of actions to produce desired results or to prevent aversive events may lead to less motivation for future efforts, to passivity, and, if failures are repetitive enough, to helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 1976, 2016). The state of (learned) helplessness results from the repeated absence of action-outcome contingencies. People in this state are reluctant to initiate actions for change, even if they could have impacted the situation. It's as though they learned that their actions will not have a positive outcome, and they generalize this reasoning to future similar situations. Applying helplessness concepts to voice in organizations, workers who frequently express ideas that are rejected or not heard could experience multiple action-outcome non-contingencies and choose to remain helpless and silent when a new opportunity for voice arises. This is an unfortunate outcome for organizations which need the potential benefits of voice to incite innovations.

Experimental Procedure

Our work aims to understand how workers find themselves in situations where they prefer to choose to stay silent based on resignation motives (i.e., acquiescent silence; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). To this end, we employed experimental designs (created in accordance with

*Speaker

classical protocols of learned helplessness; Seligman, 1975) to examine how the repetition of different levels of voice instrumentality influence the number of voiced propositions and the motivation to use voice in a new situation. We studied these effects in several populations and also examined peoples' feelings in these situations.

The first two experiments (carried out online) were conducted in two settings: university students who participated without monetary compensation ($N = 339$) and retail professionals, compensated for their participation (i.e., 1.60£; $N = 315$). In these studies, a cover story invited participants to voice on various topics regarding their organization. It indicated that the study hoped to catalog suggestions regarding improving aspects of quality of life (at the university or at work). They were incited to make innovative suggestions as only the most creative propositions would be retained. In reality, feedback regarding the propositions retained was determined randomly depending on the experimental condition. Participants were invited to voice as many propositions as they could on four trials, each randomly presenting a new topic relative to the quality of life. Participants' propositions were either repetitively rejected (low voice impact condition), repetitively accepted (high voice impact condition), or no indication was provided regarding the acceptance or rejection of their propositions (control condition).

Results and Discussion

Results generally corroborated our assumptions. Participants for both studies for whom voice was never instrumental (i.e., low impact) were more silent and felt more helpless compared to participants with high voice impact or no specific feedback. Interestingly, participants in Study 1 made fewer propositions over time when their voice was not impactful, whereas participants in Study 2, continued to use voice over the four trials despite feeling more helpless and being silent when a new opportunity for voice was offered.

These results have important applied implications, particularly for workers in fields of innovation (e.g., research and development teams). Idea generation is one part of innovation processes, but implementing and defending these new ideas is also crucial (West, 2003). First, it is important to take into account individuals' efforts to impact their environment when they voice suggestions to an authority. When innovation is an organizational objective, people's propositions must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, over time, people may feel helpless and prefer silence as predicted by learned helplessness theory. Second, extrinsic motivators such as monetary retributions may not be effective in motivating individuals to continue voicing when their ideas are consistently rejected. Results of Study 2 which included compensation indicated that participants in the low voice impact condition continued voicing equivalent numbers of ideas during the four "contractual" trials of the study, but they did not wish to seize a new, extra opportunity to propose ideas and developed greater helplessness feelings. To expand on this work, we are currently conducting a pre-registered study to investigate the impact of a superior's justification for voice non-endorsement over time: How a supervisor justifies non endorsement of ideas might have an important impact on workers' subsequent voice behaviors over time.

Keywords: voice behavior, innovation, action, outcome contingency, organizational silence, decision making