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# Who says there's a problem? Preferences on the sending and receiving of prohibitive voice

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## Abstract

Which employees are likely to warn leaders about threats to the workplace? When employees do speak up, will these messages gain the leader's interest? In this article, we rely on theories of power to predict how employee characteristics (work prevention regulatory focus, closeness to the leader (leader-member exchange) and rank) influence whether employees send messages about threats (prohibitive voice). We also explore whether employee characteristics (closeness to the leader and rank) affect leaders' attention to threat messages. In a two-wave field study with 55 leaders and 214 employees, we found that leaders were more likely to show interest in messages about threats from

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employees who they were not close to, but who had high rank. However, only employees with a strong work prevention regulatory focus and/or those of higher rank were likely to prioritize the sending of such messages. Although we also expected that employees who had a good relationship with the leader would send more information about threats, we found they were *less* likely to do so. This research suggests that there may be “opaque zones” in organizations, places where employees are unlikely to warn leaders about threats and where leaders will not pay attention even if they do.

### **Keywords**

attention, employee voice, leadership, LMX, power, prohibitive voice, regulatory focus

The complexity and knowledge intensity of contemporary organizations means that employees are often privy to information that leaders need to leverage in order to make sound decisions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). However, employees often feel it is too risky to share their knowledge and opinions with leaders (Milliken et al., 2003), and even when they do speak up, leaders may not be paying attention. The importance of both employees’ ability to capture leaders’ interest and leaders’ receptivity to employee messages cannot be overstated. Leader attention is, after all, a primary step in determining what gets noticed and what gets ignored, and it sets the stage for much of the action and non-action in organizations (Ocasio, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that influence employees’ communication of riskier forms of voice (i.e. prohibitive voice) and leaders’ attention to such messages. Voice is the discretionary communication by employees of perceived risks, areas for improvement, or opportunities for the organization (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998). There is evidence that distinguishing between voice focused on opportunities (i.e. promotive voice) and on risks (i.e. prohibitive voice) is important to understanding why employees engage in voice and the outcomes of doing so. (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2015).

Liang et al. (2012) define promotive voice as the expression of suggestions for improvement of the work environment; it is focused on making gains or moving towards an ideal future state. Prohibitive voice, on the other hand, is about issues that could harm the organization, and is designed to stop or prevent losses. In other words, promotive voice highlights available opportunities, whereas prohibitive voice focuses on avoiding negative outcomes. Although both can be perceived as challenging by the receiver, the two types of voice are expected to impact people differently. Promotive voice may ultimately lead to wider benefits. Prohibitive voice brings attention to harmful aspects of a situation, and may cause negative emotions and conflict. Prior research has demonstrated that managers react defensively toward voice that challenges the status quo (Fast et al., 2014) and more negatively evaluate employees who deliver such voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Fast et al., 2014). Thus, not surprisingly, employees consider prohibitive voice to be particularly risky (Wei et al., 2015).

Cognizant as they are of the risks, employees may suppress prohibitive voice unless they feel confident that it will not impose an undesired cost (Fast et al., 2014). Prior

research has found a relationship between employee perceived influence and voice (e.g. Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2012) and between felt authority and voice (Lam and Mayer, 2014), suggesting that employees who feel more powerful are more likely to speak up. But these studies have focused on voice generally construed, rather than prohibitive voice, and have not provided a strong theoretical backdrop.

If perceptions of the risk of prohibitive voice make it less likely to be expressed by employees, the likelihood of problems being recognized and dealt with may be reduced even further by the limited nature of leader attention. Given that leaders are confronted with multiple demands at any given moment, they must selectively direct their focus to some stimuli, and neglect others (Ocasio, 2011). Much of the attention literature focuses only on the attention of leaders at the highest level (Day and Schoemaker, 2006) and on issues external to the organization (Chattopadhyay et al., 2001). The related issue-selling literature looks a little deeper within the organization to explore how middle managers influence the attention of senior leaders. However, little consideration is given to how internal issues become salient owing to the efforts of employees located throughout the organization.

To understand this critical process, we conducted a field study to explore the conditions that encourage the sending and noticing of messages about threats (prohibitive voice). We draw mainly from power theories (French and Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003) to suggest that employee hierarchical status, the quality of relationship with the leader (i.e. leader-member exchange (LMX); Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), and employee work prevention regulatory focus will influence whether employees send prohibitive messages; and that employee hierarchical rank and LMX, singly and jointly, predict leader interest in threat messages from employees.

This study makes a number of contributions. First, in general, the management literature has focused mainly on how leaders influence followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), with scant attention given to how followers influence leaders. Leaders are seen as the initiators of action, while followers are often portrayed as passive players that simply serve as conduits for leader power (Yukl and Van Fleet, 1992). The voice literature, by definition, is focused on follower behavior, but researchers often investigate general workplace conditions that promote voice and consequences that are follower-centered (e.g. employee job satisfaction, turnover). In contrast, this study looks at follower characteristics that predict voice and lead to a leader-oriented outcome.

In addition, although the original conceptualization of LMX posits that both employees and leaders should be mutually influenced by relationship quality (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), most work in this area has focused solely on how LMX affects employees. This study includes a consideration of not only how LMX affects the type of information leaders may receive from their employees, but also how LMX affects leader interest in messages. Furthermore, we explore the importance of the dyadic relationship between leader and employee to the receipt and use of voice in organizations. Researchers have explored how transformational leadership style influences voice levels (e.g. Detert and Burris, 2007; Liu et al., 2010), and this speaks to the overall climate in which employees assess risk. However, the voice process is also likely dependent on the unique relationship between the leader and employee.

The empirical testing of distinct forms of voice is a fairly new development in the voice literature. The research that does exist on the topic (e.g. Liang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2015) relies on leaders' reports of how much employees have engaged in each type of voice, in general. Such reports may be vulnerable to biases associated with recall, availability, and attribution (Kopeck and Esdaile, 1990; Pachur et al., 2012). Our methodology integrates specific voice messages connected to a typical work situation within existing work dyads. This method enables a higher level of objectivity and an increased certainty regarding the type of message employees sent and leaders received. To our knowledge, only one study has examined voice recipient reactions to a specific instance of voice, and the dependent variable in that study was endorsement of the message (Burris, 2012). Yet, leaders have to be willing to show interest in an employee's message in order to assess whether they should endorse it or not. Our research investigates what happens at that crucial early step in the process.

Finally, while there has been some interest in connecting the regulatory focus and voice literatures (e.g. Neubert et al., 2008, 2013), most of this work does not take a direct approach by linking regulatory focus to voice behavior. Through our use of regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998) and power theories (French and Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003), we strengthen the conceptual understanding of the motivational processes behind employee voice.

### *Influence of employee rank and relationship quality on employee communication of prohibitive voice*

Power is an individual's ability to influence others' states by giving or withholding resources or punishments (Keltner et al., 2003), and is fundamental to understanding voice behavior because voice is implicitly an effort to exert influence (Fleming and Spicer, 2014: 245). Power approach theory suggests that individuals with elevated power are less inhibited, and more likely to take risks to achieve rewards. People with low power, conversely, are apt to worry about potential punishments, leading to constrained behavior (Keltner et al., 2003).

Past research has found that high-power individuals are more likely to disregard social norms of politeness (Ward and Keltner, 1998), and are more risk-tolerant (Carney and Cuddy, 2010). Low-power individuals are more likely to experience negative emotions like anxiety and fear (Anderson et al., 2001; Keltner et al., 2003) and are more often the targets of mistreatment (Aquino and Bommer, 2003), which might leave them less willing to engage in discretionary interpersonal behaviors that carry risk. Thus, people with higher levels of power may be more willing to make statements that challenge the status quo.

French and Raven (1959) suggest that there are multiple sources of social power, one of which is legitimate power, or the formal authority given to a person based on the person's structural position in the organization. Hierarchical rank is considered a source of power (Aquino and Bommer, 2003) because it is a signal of the value the organization places on the individual. More senior employees are also likely to possess more experience, have greater knowledge of the inner workings of the organization, and are more attuned to the strategic goals of the organization (Corley, 2004). Also, higher-ranked

employees tend to possess greater confidence (Ibarra, 1999), which is positively associated with prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Thus, consistent with these power theories (French and Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003), we would expect that higher-ranked employees are more likely than lower-ranked employees to experience motivational and affective states and social perceptions that minimize fear of engaging in prohibitive voice:

*Hypothesis 1:* There is a positive relationship between employee hierarchical rank and employee prohibitive voice communication.

A positive relationship with the leader could also be an informal source of employee power. Employees with a high LMX relationship enjoy higher levels of trust, liking, latitude, attention, mutual support, and loyalty (Schriesheim et al., 1999). In prior research, employee-perceived LMX has been positively associated with coworkers' perceptions of an individual's influence (Sparrowe and Liden, 2005). According to LMX theory, leaders not only provide high LMX employees with greater discretion, but also with greater resources and opportunities (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Since power can result from asymmetries in resources (Keltner et al., 2003), high LMX employees should feel greater power than low LMX employees, enabling the former to feel safer to express prohibitive voice. Consistent with a more common, exchange-based perspective on LMX and voice (Burris et al., 2008), high LMX might make employees more willing to engage in risky discretionary behaviors like prohibitive voice because the trust inherent to a strongly positive exchange relationship facilitates interpersonal risk-taking (Colquitt et al., 2007). This is aligned with another one of French and Raven's (1959) social power bases—referent power. Thus, employees who are liked and respected by their leaders may feel more powerful.

Although LMX is designed to measure a shared perspective, leaders and their employees often have discrepant views of LMX levels. Results of a meta-analysis by Gerstner and Day (1997) showed the average sample-weighted correlation of the agreement between leaders' and employees' ratings of LMX to be only .29. Since we are focusing on employee perceptions of workplace conditions, we expect that employee perceptions of LMX levels will bear upon message choice. Employees who perceive a high LMX relationship with their leader will be more alert to threats and more comfortable about raising them to their leaders:

*Hypothesis 2:* There is a positive relationship between employee-rated LMX and employee prohibitive voice communication.

### *Influence of employee work regulatory focus and interaction with employee rank and LMX*

The concepts of promotive and prohibitive voice are consistent with regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), which posits that people self-regulate by pursuing ideal states (promotion regulatory focus) or avoiding the pain of loss (prevention regulatory focus). Regulatory focus may be both dispositional and situational (Higgins, 1997). Our focus is on individuals' work-related regulatory focus, consistent with research findings that

personality measured relative to its expression in the work context is more predictive of work outcomes than are global measures of personality (Heller et al., 2009).

Highly prevention-oriented individuals are more sensitive to threat (Lanaj et al., 2012) and are driven by the motivation to avoid failure (Crowe and Higgins, 1997). As such, they are likely to assign more importance to prohibitive voice than are promotion-oriented individuals. For instance, prevention-oriented employees may be more willing to speak up when they fear a mistake is about to be made because negative outcomes could endanger their job or the organization:

*Hypothesis 3:* There is a positive relationship between employee work prevention regulatory focus and employee prohibitive voice communication.

One of the propositions of power approach theory (Keltner et al., 2003) is that high power increases the likelihood of behaving consistently with one's chronic tendencies. When someone is powerful, they feel less need to ensure that the situation is safe for them to say or do what they want. For instance, there is evidence that low-power individuals look for cues from the environment in deciding what emotions to express, whereas high-power individuals are more likely to express emotions consistent with their affective disposition (Anderson et al., 2001). Likewise, if rank and LMX influence followers' sense of power, then high levels of either should strengthen the likelihood that those employees who are high in work prevention regulatory focus will express concerns:

*Hypothesis 4a:* The positive relationship between employee work prevention regulatory focus and employee prohibitive voice communication is moderated by employee hierarchical rank, such that the relationship is stronger for higher ranked employees than it is for lower ranked employees.

*Hypothesis 4b:* The positive relationship between employee work prevention regulatory focus and employee prohibitive voice communication is moderated by levels of employee-rated LMX, such that the relationship is stronger for employees at higher LMX levels than it is for employees at lower LMX levels.

### *Influence of employee rank and relationship quality on leader interest in prohibitive voice*

The first step in the process of organizational decision-making is noticing there is an issue, and signals about threats and opportunities often come from those situated in lower levels of the organization. The issue-selling literature suggests that middle managers influence decision-making by "providing or concealing important information about issues, by framing the issues in particular ways, and by mobilizing resources and routines that direct top managers' attention to some issues and not others" (Dutton and Ashford, 1993: 398). Their input is considered valuable to senior leaders because they are close to organizational realities.

However, leaders are often inundated with too much information. Organizations have been described as a "cacophony of complementary and competing change attempts, with managers at all levels joining the fray and pushing for issues of

particular importance to themselves” (Dutton et al., 2001: 716). Leaders are not able to attend equally to all of the information that is presented to them. Some signals will get more attention (or interest) than others.

Characteristics of the message sender may influence leader attention (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001). There is evidence, for instance, that employees’ values and emotional dispositions affect how well supervisors receive their voice (Grant, 2013; Grant and Mayer, 2009). Likewise, the power level of the employee who raises concerns about risks may also increase leaders’ receptivity. Thus, we expect that powerful employees will be better able to capture the interest of leaders.

The enhanced influence some employees enjoy may stem from structural rank. According to French and Raven (1959), formal authority is a source of legitimate power. Thus, leaders may expect high-level employees to have a perception of the organization that is closer to their own, and thus consider higher-level employees to be better able to discern which threats are important (Corley, 2004). Higher-ranked employees may also be seen by the leader as bearing some responsibility for, and possessing the capability to help with, the problem being raised, thus reducing the pressure on the leader to provide the solution. This is important since leaders’ confidence in their ability to effectively address a problem influences their openness to input (Fast et al., 2014). Lower-level employees, on the other hand, may seem less well-positioned to understand the dangers that deserve managerial attention, less likely to hold accountability, and less able to help:

*Hypothesis 5:* There is a positive relationship between employee hierarchical rank and leader interest in prohibitive voice.

As with higher-ranked employees, leaders may believe that high LMX employees are aware of, and committed to, the leader’s needs and goals (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). In addition, French and Raven (1959) suggest that individuals may be influenced heavily by people that they like and admire (i.e. referent power). Closeness with an employee might mitigate the effects of being challenged by that employee.

Thus, we expect that leaders, who have a limited amount of attention to give, will tend to give more notice to messages from employees with whom they have a close relationship. Since the leader view of relationship quality will affect perceptions of employee attunement and concern for the leader, we expect that the leader’s perception of LMX will be influential in this case. This is in contrast to much of the LMX literature, which treats the employee’s view of LMX as primary (Scandura and Schriesheim, 1994):

*Hypothesis 6:* There is a positive relationship between leader-rated LMX level and leader interest in prohibitive voice.

### *Interactive effects of rank and relational quality on leader interest in prohibitive voice*

We have considered two sources of power (legitimate and referent) in isolation; however, they may interact. Lower hierarchical rank might detract less



from an employee's credibility when the leader sees their relationship as strong. LMX relationships are characterized, in part, by mutual respect and influence. At high levels of LMX, the exchange of resources between leader and employee is so extensive that it serves as a base of power for the employee. Indeed, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995: 233) noted that the high LMX relationship "becomes one more like peers than superior-subordinate". Thus, the influence of formal status differences on leader attention becomes minimized.

In contrast, there should be little effect of high status on the relationship between leader-rated LMX and leader attention to prohibitive voice. Whether the leader feels close to the employee or not, the leader realizes that high-status employees are positioned to make credible assessments that also carry weight with others. Thus, leader-rated LMX is less relevant a factor in leaders' attention to prohibitive messages from higher-ranked employees:

*Hypothesis 7:* The positive relationship between leader-rated LMX and leader interest in prohibitive voice is moderated by employee hierarchical level, such that the relationship is weaker for higher-ranked employees than it is for lower-ranked employees.

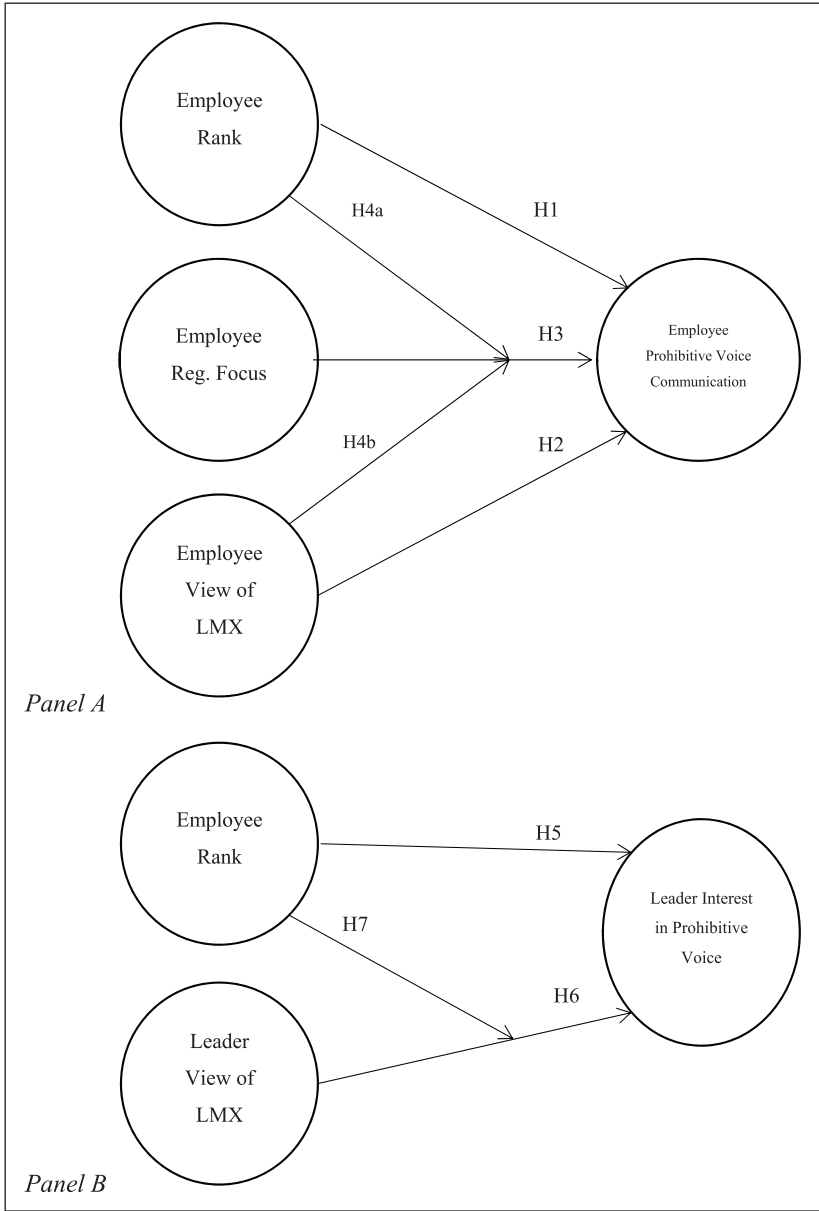
See Figure 1 for an overview of all of the hypothesized relationships.

## Method

### Participants

Potential participants were identified by contacting organizations via email. Chamber of Commerce public listings of businesses (total number of organizations = 157) that operated in the major cities within a 100-mile radius of the first author's home institution were used, along with a listing of 183 alumni from a business school (accessed through the school's advancement office). These sources were chosen because they were both easily accessible and representatively diverse in terms of company size and type. Individuals at approximately 340 organizations were initially contacted with information about the research. For the business listings, the person contacted was the representative listed in the company description (usually a senior manager or HR manager). Alumni contacts were in a variety of positions. Representatives at 47 organizations agreed to participate and provided email contact information for one or more leaders and his/her employees. Consistent with the broader leadership literature (for a review see Avolio et al., 2009), leaders were defined as business owners or employees with the title of supervisor or higher, each of whom had direct report employees. These organizations were in a variety of industries (e.g. food manufacturing, metal casting, aerospace, web design, financial services, energy, communication) and were of different sizes (30% had under 100 employees, 36% had between 101 and 1000 employees, and 34% had over 1000 employees), and did not appear to be different in any substantial way from non-responding organizations in terms of industry type and number of employees.





**Figure 1.** Hypothesized relationships: Panel A—Predicting employee prohibitive voice communication; Panel B—Predicting leader interest in prohibitive voice.

A total of 72 leaders and 308 of their direct report employees from the responding 47 organizations were emailed an invitation to participate in a study on leadership. The invitation included the information that participants would be entered in a random

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Respondents.

	Leaders	Employees
Response rate	76%	70%
Male	73%	46%
Caucasian	93%	87%
Most common age range	41–60 years	31–50 years
College educated	96%	82%
Most common organizational tenure range	10 years	5+ years

drawing for a \$100 gift card. Fifty-five leaders and 214 employees agreed to participate in the study, for a response rate of 76% for leaders and 70% for employees. Most leaders were male (73%), white (93%), between the ages of 41 and 60 years (80%), and a college or university graduate (96%). Leaders were in a variety of job types, including business/financial/accounting (40%), technology (12%), and communication (11%). Sixty-one percent had six or more direct reports, and all leaders had a minimum of two employees participating in this study (each of whom had been direct reports for at least three months). Leaders had, for the most part, been in their positions for a significant period of time (5% between three months and one year; 34% between one and five years; 32% between five and 10 years; and 29% over 10 years). All rated their positions at the middle (16%) or upper third (84%) of the organizational hierarchy, and this appears consistent with the reported titles. Most employee participants were female (54%), white (87%), between the ages of 31 and 50 years (58%), and a graduate of college or university (82%). Some employees were in non-managerial positions (38%), a few were supervisors (6%), and the remaining employees were managers/directors (56%). Sixty-seven percent of leaders were either a director or owner, with the other 33% at the manager level. Most leaders had been with their organization over 10 years (64%) and most employees had organizational tenure of at least five years (64%). Employee tenure with the leader varied: under a year (16%), 1–5 years (52%), 5–10 years (23%), and over 10 years (9%). See Table 1 for an overview.

### Procedure

Data was collected in two waves. In Wave 1, we sent leaders a link to an online survey that contained demographic questions, a measure of work regulatory focus, and a measure of LMX to be completed for each employee (leader-rated LMX). Employees received an email message with details of the study and a link to a survey that contained demographic questions, measures of study variables (i.e. employee-rated LMX, work regulatory focus), and a series of four in-basket scenarios. Each scenario described a managerial issue that the employee's leader would be asked to resolve at a later point. After each scenario, employees were asked to prioritize which of two potential voice messages should be sent to the leader to help him/her deal with the in-basket task. Each message described either a threat (prohibitive voice) or an opportunity (promotive voice) connected to the scenario. For example, in one scenario employees were told that the leader had to set an agenda for a

weekly meeting to ensure the effective implementation of a new software system. The employee was told he/she had two thoughts on what should be added to the meeting agenda, and was asked to prioritize between an agenda item that focused on opportunities to improve productivity (promotive voice) or an agenda item that focused on possible threats to productivity (prohibitive voice) (see the Appendix for more detail).

We pre-tested the messages to ensure that they were consistent with the conceptualization of promotive and prohibitive voice as discussed by Liang et al. (2012). Four business school doctoral students, who were not otherwise involved in this study, were given the definition of promotive and prohibitive voice as conceptualized by Liang et al. (2012) and the study voice messages. There was 93% agreement that each message was aligned with the construct it was meant to represent. At the end of the employee survey, participants were given an open text box and asked to, "Please describe how you made your decisions on what messages to send to your leader. We want to understand why you chose to send certain messages or why you chose not to send certain messages." We were interested to find out whether they cited factors consistent with our hypotheses and if there were other relevant factors that we had not considered.

It is reasonable to assume that employees usually place some personal value on sending a message that will be likely to receive attention from their leader. In order to induce this motivation, employees were told that each time their leader showed interest in their recommendations, the employee would receive an additional chance for a draw to win the \$100 prize, but that each time the employee made a recommendation that the leader did not attend to, a chance for the draw would be lost. This was a deception because employee chances of receiving the reward were not reduced if leaders did not choose their message. Employees were also given an open text box in which to write a message urging the leader to consider their input.

In Wave 2 (an average of 38 days after Wave 1), leaders were sent a link to a second online survey that contained the in-basket scenarios already seen by the employees. This two-wave design allowed for a clear separation in terms of time and format (survey versus in-basket exercise) for the dependent and other variables. After each scenario, leaders were told that there were two messages available for them to view. Each was determined by the researchers, but presented to the leader as though they were sent by two of the leader's employees. The purpose of this deception was to achieve a high degree of realism.

The messages offered to the leader were described as being from a particular high/low LMX employee by name, and were either about an opportunity that could make the work situation better (promotive voice) or about a threat that could make the work situation worse (prohibitive voice). The data from the first leader survey allowed the researchers to determine which employees the leader assessed as having the relatively highest and lowest LMX scores of all direct reports, and embed these names into the second survey. For instance, if a leader completed LMX survey data on six employees, the name of the employee with the highest LMX score and the name of the one with the lowest LMX score would be embedded in the leader's second survey. Thus, the leader would only be presented with messages from these two high/low LMX employees.

As an example, in one scenario, leaders were told to imagine that weekly department meetings would be held to support an important software system implementation. They were to set a tight agenda for the meetings in advance, and some employees had

suggestions for agenda items. Leaders were informed that their employee, for example "Maria," had a message for them about dealing with possible opportunities to make the implementation go better (promotive message); and another employee, for example "Tara," had a message for them about dealing with possible threats connected to the implementation (prohibitive message). Both high and low LMX employees were shown as offering an equal number of promotive and prohibitive messages. Leaders were asked to indicate how much interest they had in seeing each message. Interest is considered to be synonymous with attention (Dutton and Webster, 1988).

To increase leaders' belief that messages were from actual employees, we pulled the statements from the employee surveys that were meant to urge the leader to use that employee's advice. These statements were shown to the leader at the start of the second survey, prior to scenario presentation. High and low LMX employees were equally likely to submit encouraging statements. Leaders were informed of this deception at the end of their second survey, prior to submission. In other words, in order to ensure no employees would be negatively affected by their actions in this study, leaders were informed immediately after completing the scenarios that the messages they received were actually determined by the researchers. This study received full approval from an ethics review board.

Similar to our process with the employee participants, at the very end of the survey, leaders were given an open text box, and asked to: "Please describe how you made your decisions on the various scenarios. In other words, please describe what influenced your choices, if you can." We hoped to gain a better understanding of the factors that influenced their interest levels.

### Scenarios

The in-basket scenarios were developed from the widely-used in-basket exercise, the General Management In-Box (GMIB; Joines, 2011). This recruitment tool is based on common management challenges, has been taken by over 20,000 individuals, and has shown a consistent relationship with actual managerial performance (Conoley and Impara, 1995; Joines, 2011). Building the scenarios around the GMIB invoked authentic workplace situations, adding to the realism of the task. The standard scenarios of the GMIB did not allow for direct testing of the hypothesized model; therefore, the scenarios were modified for this study with the assistance of the owner/author of the GMIB (Richard Joines). The scenarios dealt with common management challenges connected to the implementation of a new software system. Managers faced a number of dilemmas, which included: revising the guidelines that had been written for the implementation; adding optional features; choosing amongst agenda items for the regular project meeting; and determining whether to coach some employees. Six doctoral students with managerial experience, who were not otherwise involved in this study, completed the in-basket measures as a pilot test.

### Measures

*Employee voice communication.* After reading each in-basket scenario, employees indicated how much they wanted to send each message to the leader by distributing 100

points across the two types of voice messages (employee promotive and prohibitive voice communication).

*Leader interest.* Leaders distributed 100 points across the two voice messages (promotive and prohibitive) to indicate how much attention they wanted to give to each one.

*LMX.* Employees completed a measure of LMX for their leader (employee-rated LMX), and leaders completed the measure for each employee (leader-rated LMX). Scandura and Graen's (1984) measure of LMX was used owing to its high criterion validity (Liden et al., 1993). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." Sample items on the employee measure include: "I have a good working relationship with my leader"; "I usually know where I stand with my leader"; and "I can count on my leader to 'bail me out', even at his/her own expense, when I really need it." Sample leader items include: "I have a good working relationship with this employee"; "I usually let this employee know where he/she stands with me"; and "I would be willing to 'bail out' this employee, even at my own expense, if he or she really needed it."

*Organizational hierarchy.* Participants were asked: "If your company hierarchy was broken into three equal parts, where would your position be at this point in time?" Possible responses were: "Bottom third"; "Middle third"; and "Top third" (Jacobs and McGee, 2001). The categories were coded as 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

*Work Regulatory Focus.* The Work Regulatory Focus scale (Neubert et al., 2008) was used. It consists of subscales for prevention and promotion focus. Participants rated items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of items measuring prevention focus include: "At work I focus my attention on completing my assigned responsibilities" and "I do everything I can to avoid loss at work."

*Employee psychological safety.* Edmondson's (1999) scale of psychological safety was used. Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) based on a work team that included co-workers and the leader. Examples of items include: "Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues" and "It is safe to take a risk on this team."

*Control variables.* Since message content could influence ratings, we created dummy variables to control for the effects of the scenarios. Also, because prohibitive voice may violate prescriptive norms for women to behave supportively (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999; Rudman et al., 2012), gender may influence the likelihood of engaging in risky voice or of being listened to. Likewise, women tend to be lower in the hierarchy of organizations owing to a number of reasons, including bias, discrimination, and a lack of developmental opportunities (Davidson and Burke, 2011; Powell, 2010). Therefore, we controlled for gender, as well. Age was controlled because higher-ranked employees are likely to be older. Also, age is associated positively with status and power (Fiske, 2010). Thus, older employees' prohibitive messages could be seen as more credible. We,

furthermore, controlled for employee perceptions of psychological safety and leader and employee work promotion regulatory focus. Psychological safety has been found in previous research to be associated with both LMX (Burris et al., 2008) and prohibitive voice (Liang et al., 2012). Finally, work promotion regulatory focus might make employees and leaders less likely to allot more points to prohibitive than promotive messages.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for study variables can be found in Table 2. The data were nested (ratings within individuals); therefore, we used multilevel modeling in RStudio (2015), centering the continuous variables in order to facilitate interpretation of the interactions (Aiken and West, 1991). Given that all of the predictor variables were between-individual, they could not predict within-individual variance in employee or leader allotments of points to prohibitive messages. Rather, they predicted the average number of points allotted across scenarios.

The results of the analyses for hypotheses 1–4 are in Table 3. As expected, the relationship between employee hierarchical position and employee prohibitive voice communication (ratings of prohibitive messages) was positive ( $B = 5.07, p < .05$ ), supporting H1. Contrary to H2, employee perceptions of LMX were *negatively* related to employee prohibitive voice communication ( $B = -4.16, p < .05$ ). Consistent with H3, employees' work prevention regulatory focus was positively related to employee prohibitive voice communication ( $B = 6.51, p < .05$ ).

Neither employee rank nor LMX moderated the relationship between employee work prevention focus and employee prohibitive voice communication. Therefore, H4a and H4b were not supported.

The results of the analyses predicting leaders' ratings of interest in prohibitive voice (hypotheses 5–7) are in Table 4. Contrary to H5 and H6, neither leaders' perceptions of LMX nor employees' rank was related to their interest in seeing prohibitive messages from those employees. The interaction between employee rank and leaders' perceptions of LMX was significant ( $B = -8.36, p < .05$ ). However, as evidenced in Figure 2, H7 was not supported in that LMX was negatively associated with leader interest in prohibitive voice at all levels of employee rank. The relationship was only significant for the highest-ranked employees (simple slope =  $-3.12, p < .05$ ). At that level, leaders were more likely to demonstrate interest in prohibitive voice from lower LMX employees. Thus, although we expected that the relationship between LMX and interest would be stronger for lower ranked employees compared to highly ranked employees, we instead found that leaders were most likely to show interest in prohibitive voice from low LMX, high ranking employees.

### *Post hoc analyses of qualitative data*

We sought insight into our findings by coding responses to open-ended questions posed at the end of the employee survey and the second leader survey. Participants were asked to describe how they made their decisions. 83% of employees and 84% of leaders responded to the open-ended questions.

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Employee age	4.00	1.06	1.00											
2. Employee gender	1.54	.50	-.04	1.00										
3. Employee rank	2.18	.76	.16*	-.26**	1.00									
4. Employee work prevention focus	3.82	.56	.08	.15*	-.23**	.78								
5. Employee work promotion focus	3.56	.60	-.20**	.00	.01	.13	.82							
6. Employee psychological safety	5.21	.87	-.02	-.08	.20**	-.14*	.16*	.78						
7. Employee-rated LMX	5.74	.84	-.13	.01	.09	.06	.16*	.46**	.89					
8. Leader work prevention focus	3.52	.56	.14	-.07	-.07	.19**	-.06	-.12	.10	.74				
9. Leader work promotion focus	3.26	3.32	-.15	-.08	-.06	-.05	.00	.01	-.03	.10	.72			
10. Leader-rated LMX	6.00	.60	-.01	.11	.01	-.13	.04	.19*	.31**	.03	-.09	.89		
11. Employee prohibitive voice communication	40.00	22.24	-.07	-.10	.14*	.09	-.08	-.01	-.10	-.04	.11	-.11	1.00	
12. Leader interest in prohibitive voice	86.61	35.55	-.02	.11	.12	.12	-.22*	-.02	.23**	.21**	-.13	.04	-.05	1.00

N = 83-214. Alpha coefficients are on the diagonal. '1' = male, 2 = female.  
\*p < .05, two-tailed. \*\* p < .01, two-tailed.



**Table 3.** Hierarchical linear modeling results for predictors of employee prohibitive message ratings.

	B	SE
Constant	65.13	7.93**
Scenario 2	4.25	3.18
Scenario 3	-16.84	3.19**
Scenario 4	-22.07	3.19**
Employee age	-2.57	1.48
Employee gender	-3.75	3.13
Psychological safety	.99	2.00
Employee work promotion regulatory focus	31.03	21.56
Employee work prevention regulatory focus	6.51	2.88*
LMX (employee-rated)	-4.16	2.02*
Employee rank	5.07	2.17*
Prevention focus * Rank	7.38	3.88†
Prevention focus * LMX	4.20	2.96

*N* (employees) = 207. *N* (ratings) = 826. 1 = male, 2 = female.

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

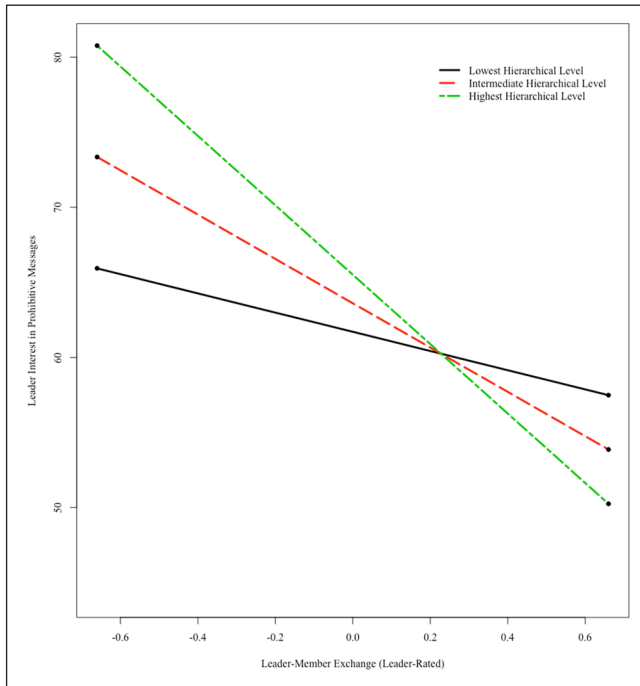
**Table 4.** Hierarchical linear modeling results for predictors of leader message ratings.

Parameter	Preference for prohibitive message	
	B	SE
Constant	59.81	8.38**
Scenario 2	.66	4.66
Scenario 3	-.93	4.65
Scenario 4	7.22	3.40*
Employee age	-3.37	1.51*
Employee gender	-3.32	3.35
Leader work promotion regulatory focus	-7.28	4.69
Leader Work prevention regulatory focus	9.40	4.65*
LMX (leader-rated)	1.96	3.91
Employee hierarchical rank	1.90	2.44
LMX * Employee rank	-8.36	3.31*

*N* (leaders) = 44. *N* (ratings) = 159. 1 = male, 2 = female.

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

The first and second author began by coding the employee responses for whether participants had mentioned that either their relationship with their leader or the focus of the message on opportunity or risk had informed their ratings. After coding several responses and comparing impressions, we realized other potentially interesting and relevant categories of response. This resulted in the addition of two more coding categories: whether the employee showed a commitment to a balanced emphasis on risk and



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of employee hierarchical level on the relationship between leader ratings of LMX and leader interest in employee prohibitive voice.

opportunity, rather than privileging one over the other, or whether they mentioned that they considered their leader's preference for a certain type of information. Full agreement on coding decisions was reached by the raters. Table 5 provides examples of comments representative of each coding category and the percentage of employees whose comments fell into each. No employees commented that their relationship with their leader influenced the type of message they sent.

We followed a similar process for coding the leader responses (see Table 6). Ultimately, we coded for an emphasis on opportunities, emphasis on risks, a preference for a balanced focus on risks and opportunities, self-identification as a leader who is open to the input of employees in general, and whether the leader mentioned the recommending employees' specific strengths or weaknesses as a reason for showing interest in messages. Again, full agreement on coding decisions was reached.

To explain why they chose to send either messages about threats (prohibitive voice) or ones about opportunities (promotive voice), the majority of employees (54%) suggested that it was important to express messages with a positive tone (opportunities). Only 5% of employees emphasized the importance of passing on information that raised concerns (threats). This confirms our expectation that employees believe promotive voice is more acceptable than prohibitive voice. A small minority (6.7%) took a balanced view, expressing a preference to provide information about both opportunities and threats

**Table 5.** Examples of employee responses in each coding category (some comments fit two categories)—Total respondents = 178 employees.

<p><b>Emphasis on opportunities/positives</b> (54% of respondents)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Focus on what is gained, on the success, and the goal; not the negative.”</li> <li>• “I believe focus should be on making things better, not fear of things getting worse.”</li> <li>• “I don’t like to focus on negatives, only positives. I am a relatively quiet person and only make suggestions based on improvements.”</li> <li>• “I believe [focusing on positive options] is the best way to create team cohesion.”</li> <li>• “I selected the most positive messages to demonstrate that I’m a team player and care about the success of my organization.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emphasis on risks/negatives</b> (5% of respondents)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In sending my messages, I looked at the worst case senerio [sic] . . . It is the negative that will lead to a process not running smoothly.”</li> <li>• “I sometimes chose to give 75% to the answer that pointed out the negative impacts and only 25% to the positive message. I did so because the potential negative impacts are often more alarming.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emphasis on balance between positive and negative</b> (6.7% of respondents)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think it is very important to discuss all options good or bad when making decisions.”</li> <li>• “I think when giving messages/influences to your leader that you should present both sides—good and bad. This way the leader is able to make a better rounded decision.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emphasis on leader’s preferences</b> (43% of respondents)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I made my decisions based on knowing whether in certain situations, my leader would prefer to know the threats or advantages. Generally my leader would prefer to know the threats.”</li> <li>• “My boss is usually a very positive person, so I have tried to go with positive messages whenever possible.”</li> </ul>

in equal measure. Employees’ accentuation of positive messages outstripped specific mention of tailoring messages to their boss’s preference or simply seeking the best outcome for their organization. Of the 43% of employees who indicated that their perceptions of their leader’s preferences influenced their decision, 29% said that it was because their boss preferred positive information.

Thus, employees seemed to feel that prohibitive voice was less welcome and, given that none of the employees mentioned it, they did not appear to consider the quality of their relationship with their leader as a factor that influenced the sending of certain types of messages. This is inconsistent with our theorizing that high LMX employees should feel more comfortable delivering prohibitive voice; however, it is consistent with our quantitative findings.

Although the majority of employees seemed to think that positive messages would be better received, when we looked at the leaders’ comments, we found only 26% of leaders said they preferred positive messages. A small number (5%) looked for

**Table 6.** Examples of leader responses in each coding category (some comments fit two categories)—Total respondents = 46 leaders.

<b>Emphasis on opportunities/positives (26% of respondents)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think the scenarios that were presented in a positive light were always better received.”</li> <li>• “I generally favor opportunities over threats.”</li> <li>• “The challenge with negative messaging is that it’s hard to know if someone has issues with the other individual.”</li> </ul>
<b>Emphasis on risks/negatives (5% of respondents)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I fear threats more than upside as a starting point.”</li> <li>• “Considering this was a new implementation I would be typically more concerned with threats so as to get the implementation completed on time &amp; budget etc. Opportunities can be considered later post successful completion.”</li> </ul>
<b>Emphasis on balanced attention to positives and negatives (13% of respondents)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I typically like to hear both the risks and opportunities so wanted to hear both messages.”</li> </ul>
<b>Emphasis on being open to employee input (32.6% of respondents)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Input from all employees is valued—each brings different perspective/experience/opinion to the matters (<i>sic</i>).”</li> <li>• “Senior management has an obligation to ensure their managers’ voices are heard and that all possible input has been considered prior to making decisions. Even if the decision is not the one a manager would have preferred, at least they know that their opinion was heard, considered and valued.”</li> </ul>
<b>Emphasis on specific employees’ strengths or weaknesses (48% of respondents)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Trust. I trust that (<i>employee #1 name</i>) would only make recommendations that would benefit the team and our final product. He has worked with me for many years, and I have learned to trust his judgment and consider his opinion. (<i>Other employee</i>) is rather new to my team, and based on her performance and experience, I trust her judgment less.”</li> <li>• “While I support both managers and rely on their experience, I will occasionally put more value in (<i>employee’s name</i>) input as he has a much broader work scope of experience having come from the manufacturing field and being involved in a lot of different shops.”</li> <li>• “I looked back at my past experiences getting information from these two employees and how reliable that information was.”</li> </ul>

negative messages, and 13% said they tried to balance their attention between threats and opportunities. A significant number (45%) of leaders, however, claimed they were influenced by the strengths and weaknesses of the employee sending the message rather than the type of message. This finding is consistent with our expectation that characteristics of the sender impact how a message is received.

## Discussion

In this study, we found clear differences in how employees and leaders handled distinct types of voice. Communication of prohibitive voice was positively predicted by the

employee's work prevention regulatory focus and rank but, contrary to our expectations, negatively predicted by the employee's LMX perceptions. Thus, employees with a high prevention focus or a high rank were more likely to communicate threat messages (prohibitive voice), but those with a close relationship with the leader were less likely to do so. Meanwhile, when we looked at how leader-perceived LMX and rank interacted to affect leader interest in prohibitive voice, we found that neither LMX nor employee rank alone predicted leader interest in prohibitive voice from employees. Rather, the relationship of LMX with leader interest was contingent on employee rank, and in a counterintuitive way. Leaders were most likely to show interest in prohibitive messages from low LMX, high-ranking employees. The open-ended responses suggest that employees tended to accentuate the positive because that is what they thought leaders wanted to hear. Leaders, although they expressed a desire to be open to all input, strategically considered the characteristics of the message sender when responding to information in some instances. These findings suggest that there may be "opaque zones" in organizations; places where employees are not likely to warn leaders about problems and where leaders may not pay attention even when they do.

The findings—particularly about LMX—are surprising given that theory and research on LMX strongly suggest that employees would be more likely to send, and leaders would be more likely to attend to, prohibitive messages when they have a strong relationship. One would expect this to be true, especially, when the employee is higher-ranked. Moreover, the influence of work prevention regulatory focus with both employee sending and leader interest in prohibitive voice suggests that dispositional inclinations toward speaking up might be more powerful than interpersonal factors such as relationship quality and status.

### *Theoretical implications*

This research builds bridges among several linked, but heretofore mostly isolated, streams of literature. Ocasio's (1997) attention-based view of the firm asserts that leader attention determines organizational action; however, there has been little empirical work at the micro-level to develop our understanding of the mechanisms that direct leader attention (Ocasio, 2011). Our study goes deep within the organization to look at how signals that originate at lower levels travel up the organizational hierarchy, an underdeveloped approach.

In addition, we know, in general, that high-quality LMX relationships involve the exchange of goods like trust and loyalty. But little is known about the concrete effects of these intangibles. We found that employees with a strong relationship were less likely to send threat messages to their leaders, even though we had expected that close employees would be more willing to raise the alarm about problems. It may be that employees who are close to their leaders want to protect them by withholding potentially stressful information. They also may fear damaging the relationship by raising concerns that might threaten the leader. Alternatively, it may be that employees who tend to focus on the positive are more likely to develop a close relationship with the leader. More research is needed to understand this unexpected finding. This is especially important if leaders mistakenly believe that cultivating close relationships with employees creates an environment in which those employees feel comfortable speaking up.

This work also contributes to the voice literature by considering it against the backdrop of social bases of power and power approach theory (French and Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003). Power may deserve a larger role in the voice literature. Power likely determines not only who speaks up and how, but also whether they are heard, whether they are penalized or rewarded, and whether anything changes as a result. Power might also be an outcome of voice; people may become more or less powerful through its exercise. Organizational leaders may do well to carefully assess how people who speak up in the workplace are treated in consequence.

Our findings also suggest the importance of further considering the meaning of gaps between leader and employee assessments of their relationship. Consistent with prior meta-analytic evidence (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Sin et al., 2009), employee- and leader-perceived LMX were only modestly correlated in our sample ( $r = .31$ ). Moreover, through post hoc analysis, we found that leader-rated LMX did not predict how much priority employees gave to communicating prohibitive voice messages, nor did employee-perceived LMX predict leader interest. This raises questions regarding what constitutes a good relationship and how positive relationships actually affect outcomes. The results here suggest that not only is the relationship in the eye of the beholder, but so is the meaning of the relationship. Viewing a relationship as high in mutual trust and respect makes employees more cautious about engaging in prohibitive voice, and sometimes makes leaders less open to such messages. The leaders in our sample appeared to see themselves as open and willing to listen to employees. It may not occur to them how reticent employees are about raising certain types of issues. And high LMX employees may actually be more hesitant to engage in riskier types of voice in order to preserve that valuable relationship with the leader.

On the other hand, the gap between leaders and employees could be related to how we measured LMX. The LMX scale used in this study (Scandura and Graen, 1984) was designed to measure the quality of the relationship between the leader and the employee, but a closer look at the items shows that only one question asks about the mutual relationship between the two parties (i.e. "I have a good working relationship with my leader/this employee"). The other six questions ask how the leader views the employee. Briefly, study participants were asked if the leader would use his/her power to help the employee, would bail out the employee, understands the employee's needs, recognizes the employee's potential, would defend the employee, and lets the employee know where he/she stands. Thus, the measure does not seem well-designed to assess mutuality. Furthermore, by this measure, it is easy to see how an employee high in LMX would still not feel influential. Although LMX theory posits that managers provide greater discretion and expect constructive criticism in a high LMX relationship (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), the scale seems to be more of a measure of the leader's willingness to protect and nurture the employee. A severe power imbalance could be evident to the subordinate in a high LMX relationship of this type.

Our results may propel LMX scholars to reconsider whether the most commonly used LMX measures actually weigh mutuality. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) theorized that, at the highest levels of LMX, the leader and follower are in "partnership." Thus, employees need to not only feel that their leader will care for and protect them, but also that they would be willing to do the same for the leader. We suspect there may be a real difference between asking both parties how they feel about the relationship and asking both parties how the leader feels about the relationship.

### *Practical implications*

Especially relevant to practicing leaders, our findings demonstrate that it may be difficult to obtain information about threats from certain employees. Barriers to this knowledge can lead to severe organizational setbacks. In high-reliability organizations, for instance, there is an ongoing need for employees to raise concerns about potential risks. Thus, organizations may need to focus, in particular, on showing that it is safe and worthwhile to let leaders know about threats. This may include training leaders on how to encourage communication about threats. Leaders might also be made aware of the aversion their closest employees may have regarding speaking up about threats, so they can map potential “opaque zones” within their areas of responsibility. Processes can be put in place to regularly solicit information about threats from these potentially under-reported areas; or these zones could be seeded with employees most likely to speak up (e.g. those with high prevention regulatory focus/high rank). Recruiters may want to consider the prevention regulatory focus of candidates when hiring new employees, especially when staffing high-risk departments or areas. Our qualitative data suggested that some employees focus on positive messages because they want to be a strong “team player.” It may be wise for leaders to actively encourage norms that increase levels of dissent (e.g., devil’s advocates welcomed). Employees can learn that raising negative issues does not mean they will be seen as negative people. Leaders can also ensure that they resist filtering messages through their past experiences with employees.

We found that leaders are interested in prohibitive voice from high ranking, but low LMX employees. Leaders may see these people as the truth-tellers, the employees with enough rank to have credibility, but far enough outside the inner circle to speak openly. Leaders may recognize that, on some level, high LMX employees are hesitant to talk about threats. Organizations perhaps should implement training and incentives to focus managers on the issues that deserve attention, regardless of the framing or the source. Programs can be instituted that systematically devote attention to threatening issues. For instance, while many organizations have suggestion boxes that focus on opportunities for improvement, a separate hot line could be used to register threats. Perhaps the issues could be reviewed anonymously at first to reduce bias; relatedly, the attention of leaders from different areas could be combined to determine the merit of threats.

### *Strengths and limitations*

A key strength of this study is in the operationalization of voice. Our design enabled us to see exactly which type of messages were being sent and attended to rather than relying on leaders’ or participants’ recall of how much they had engaged in each form of voice. This approach may have reduced common method bias inherent to measuring both voice and its antecedents via survey (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The use of a widely-used in-basket exercise increased the realism of the study. The voice messages could be criticized because they were based on fictional scenarios in which participants had no real investment. But the fact that we found some effects consistent with our hypotheses, in spite of the use of fabricated issues that had no bearing on the participants’ organizations, suggests that this study was a conservative test. Although the scenarios were fictionalized, each employee was led to believe that messages were



going to their actual leader and each leader thought the messages were coming from actual employees, people with whom there was an ongoing relationship. Therefore, they can be expected to have responded in ways in which they were accustomed to in the context of that relationship. And, although employees knew that the message was unrelated to their actual work, they might still have been motivated to impress their leader with their assessment of the fictional situations.

Comments made by participants at the end of the surveys provide evidence that both employees and leaders were treating the exercise in a manner similar to a regular work situation. For example, one employee prompted the leader by writing, "After working together for 13 years, you can be confident in my judgment pertaining to both productivity and the well-being of the organization. I encourage you to follow my suggestions." Leaders' responses also provide evidence that they approached the task in a way akin to a regular work assignment. Many were similar in tone and content to this one: "I looked back at my past experiences of getting information from these two employees and how reliable that information was."

### *Future research*

It is important to continue to examine actual, specific instances of voice because participants' recall of their voice behaviors may be limited and biased. Yet, we acknowledge that research will need to advance beyond voice messages created by researchers to the examination of organically-produced voice messages. In this way, we can gain greater confidence that, for instance, highly-ranked employees actually produce more threat messages on their own rather than simply selecting a threat message when one is presented. Event-contingent or experience sampling methodology could be a promising method for achieving this insight. Participants could be asked to respond to a survey each time they engage in or pay attention to voice, or at the end of each day. Employees and leaders could be asked to summarize the voice message(s) they sent or received on each occasion or since the prior survey. Each message could later be categorized into different voice types. These approaches would still be vulnerable to recall, but less so than methods that ask people about their general levels of voice over longer periods.

The qualitative data suggest that employees strongly considered leader preferences when determining which type of message to communicate. It would be interesting to look more closely at how employees ascertain leader preferences. Employees may be making general assumptions, but leaders may be sending signals, also. More work could also be done exploring factors that influence leader actual preferences for different types of employee voice (e.g. leader regulatory focus or personality).

Many of the employees in our sample were themselves either supervisors (6%) or managers/directors (56%). This is not surprising considering the high rank of many of our leaders (84% rated themselves in the top third of the organizational hierarchy). Although we found that rank affected prohibitive voice communication, future research may want to look at whether managerial experience specifically is a predictor. Similarly, our model did not consider the effect of organization size, industry, or culture. We expect that it would be worthwhile to explore how these macro-level characteristics can influence both the sending and receiving of prohibitive voice.

Common method bias was minimized by the use of temporal, psychological, and methodological separations. Future research could attempt to further minimize potential common method bias by collecting data from different sources (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For example, it would likely be advantageous to have a more objective measure of the dependent variable of leader interest. Perhaps interest could be measured by tracking how long or how often an issue raised by an employee is discussed in a weekly department meeting, or how many times it is mentioned in email messages or in discussions with others.

Additional empirical work is needed to understand how message type influences broader organizational outcomes. It would be interesting to vary the stakes involved in the threats and opportunities, and to examine whether it matters to whom the threat or opportunity applies. For example, a leader may respond differently when the threat or opportunity is larger and when it is aimed at the employee, the leader him/herself, the department, the organization, the industry, the environment, or another target. In addition, the effects of organizational viability and climate could also be explored in terms of employee and leader preferences for threats versus opportunities. Future research might also look at whether leaders pay more or less attention to certain messages if the messages are lengthier, difficult to decipher, or are transported via different methods.

## Conclusion

If we can understand the conditions that both foster and impair the transmission of information upwards in an organization, leaders may improve their ability to take advantage of the valuable data available from employees, including those at the front-line. In addition, a broad range of stakeholders may benefit from the development of a work environment that shows an appreciation of input from all levels of the organization.

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## Appendix

### Sample scenario and voice messages

**Employee Scenario:** Your department will soon be implementing a new software system. Senior leaders have let your leader know that, as the pilot group, it is important that this initial implementation go smoothly and on schedule. If your leader makes good decisions, his/her reputation will likely improve—this is a significant opportunity. If your leader makes poor decisions, his/her reputation will likely suffer—this is a significant danger. Your department will have a weekly meeting to keep the implementation on track. Most of the agenda has been set, but there may be room for additional agenda items. Every item that is on the agenda will take time to cover, so it is important to only put on those items that matter most. Your leader may need to justify the decisions about what to put on the agenda. You have the opportunity to recommend additional items that should go on the agenda. Your leader will be given the opportunity to hear messages from some employees in order to improve his/her decision. For the leader to make the best decisions, feedback from employees is important. You have two thoughts on what should be added to the agenda. Indicate how much you would like to send each of these messages by dividing 100 points between them. **Promotive Message:** Part of the meeting should be devoted to improvement opportunities that increase productivity. This would be a time for us to focus on practices that can let us achieve the productivity benefits we expect from this software implementation. If we put this item on the agenda, we can help ourselves to be better off. You think you should put this item on the agenda. **Prohibitive Message:** Part of the meeting should be devoted to possible threats to productivity. This would be a time for us to focus on obstacles that can stop us from achieving the productivity benefits we expect from this implementation. If we put this item on the agenda, we can stop ourselves from being worse off. You think we should put this item on the agenda.