Practice Note*

Partner-Manager Voice Modeling Behavior, and the Effects of Mixed Messages on Audit Teams**

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Executive Summary

Team science research in the organizational behavior (OB) literature shows that successful teams must elicit "voice" from its members, i.e., the willingness to speak up and share information with the team. We propose a framework that recognizes when leaders exhibit their own "voice" behaviors, it creates psychological safety for the team – i.e., it allows team members to feel safe and encouraged to speak up about important audit matters. Analysis of data from 127 audit engagement teams with 754 auditors indicates the following. First, there is a positive and dominant effect on an audit team's psychological safety (and ultimately on team voice climate and team performance) when managers engage in voice role modeling behavior. However, when the manager is also seen to engage in negative counterproductive behaviors, such as taking "short cuts" during the audit, the positive effects of his / her voice modeling behaviors are lost. This finding shows the importance of avoiding "mixed messages" from the manager, as this leads audit team members to question whether it is safe to speak up. Second, our findings reveal that when the partner and manger differ in emphasizing voice behaviors (one high, one low), these mixed (inconsistent) messages did not diminish perceived team psychological safety. Thus, if at least one leader (either the partner or the manager) is enacting high levels of voice role modeling behavior, the team still has high psychological safety and team voice climate. The results emphasize the need for leadership training to help partners and managers demonstrate, through their own "voice" leadership behaviors, that there is an environment of psychological safety that enables voice for the audit team. However inconsistent signals from team leaders can potentially compromise the team's sense of psychological safety.

Research Team:
Jere R. Francis, Maastricht University
Murray Barrick, Texas A&M University
Olof Bik, Groningen University
Lena Pieper, Maastricht University
Ann Vanstraelen, Maastricht University

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**Partner-Manager Voice Modeling Behavior,
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Introduction

Successful leaders must encourage team members to freely speak up and share suggestions that improve decision-making, fix problems, or challenge the status quo with controversial information; actions that are called team member *voice* (Farh & Chen, 2018). When the leader actively engages with team members to encourage them to freely share ideas and opinions that differ from other teammates, the potential to improve a team's performance is enhanced (Sanner & Bunderson, 2015; Duhigg, 2016; Morrison, 2014). This is especially the case when multiple members are working on complex, knowledge intensive tasks that require collaboration in action teams such as audit teams, as well as other teams such as consulting teams, flight crews, and surgical teams. When team members express their voice, they voluntarily share important knowledge and learning experiences and doing so, improves team processes, strengthens team voice climate and increases team performance (Detert & Burris, 2007; Frazier & Bowler, 2015).

The primary purpose of our study is to explore how leader behaviors can enable team members to have a strong sense team voice climate, thereby enhancing team performance. It is common to have two leaders in charge of an action team such as audit teams. Yet, prior research on employee voice has primarily focused on the influence of a single leader (Morrison, 2023). The importance of recognizing the influence of two leaders simultaneously is revealed in a study by Detert and Trevino (2010), who asked employees which leader affected their willingness to engage in voice behavior and found that the immediate boss impacted 93% of the employees, yet about 50% also reported being influenced by the skip-level leader: the hierarchical higher team leader (audit partners in our case). While this result shows the centrality of the direct supervisor (manager), it also highlights the need to account for the effect of the skip-level leader's behavior. Thus, the second key purpose of our study is to fully account for all leader effects of dual leaders in hierarchically structured audit teams.

Team Voice

Encouraging the use of voice behavior is an important goal of team leaders. This is particularly salient in audits, where a lack of voice behavior in the audit team can ultimately threaten audit quality, as important information including potential fraud concerns are not brought

forward, discussed, nor effectively resolved. The fundamental challenge in eliciting voluntary, discretionary voice of ideas, concerns, even challenges to the status quo or those with greater responsibility (Burris et al., 2022; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), is that speaking up is interpersonally risky, may harm the actor or another's career, even jeopardize team harmony (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011). For all of these reasons team members likely view the costs to voice as being greater than the benefits to overcome the fear of speaking up.

The initial study on promoting voice focused on surgical team failures and emphasized the importance of team leader contributions to members' perceptions of safety and security and a willingness to speak up. Subsequent research has continued to focus on the importance of the supervisor's behavior to predict when employees will voluntarily use voice behaviors (Morrison, 2011). Nearly all of this research has focused on the supervisor's use of positive leadership styles or active solicitation to enhance follower voice or has considered the leader's openness to voice (Morrison, 2023).

Psychological Safety

Research suggests that before team members are willing to speak up and demonstrate voice, they need to feel safe and secure (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Morrison et al., 2011). For this reason, *team psychological safety*, which is defined as a shared belief that there is low personal risk in engaging in voice behaviors (Edmondson, 1999), is expected to be an important mediator (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Detert & Burris, 2007) of voice climate in the team. Therefore, we expect that leaders who model (exhibit) voice behaviors will influence team psychological safety and in turn, this will enhance the team climate of voice behavior and team performance (Detert & Burris, 2007). To summarize, the role-modelling of voice behavior by leaders increases a team's psychological safety, and psychological safety leads to better team voice climate and team performance. Our statistical models consistently show that when the team's psychological safety is higher, there is a stronger team voice climate which, in turn, leads to better team performance. For this reason, the discussion focuses on how voice modelling behaviors by leaders affect psychological safety.

Hypotheses

In the voice literature, Morrison (2011) and others have argued that the focus is on the leader that is fully immersed at the team level, who in our study, is the audit manager. They and others (Detert, Burris, Harrison, and Martin, 2013; Liu et al., 2013 explain how the manager's behavior, as the team's direct supervisor, accounts for meaningful variance in voice. In addition, research shows that this impact of the leader's use of voice is influenced by the frequency of interaction with workers (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Zohar & Luria, 2005), as more interaction with the team is expected to strengthen the impact that leader has. Therefore, we posit:

Hypothesis 1: The manager's voice modeling behavior has a stronger positive relation with team psychological safety than the higher-level partner's voice modeling behavior in a dual leader audit team structure, and this effect will be stronger as the leader has more involvement (hours) with the engagement team.

Next, we examine mixed behavioral messages sent by a single leader when the leader is seen to engage both in positive voice modeling behaviors, while also being engaged in negative counterproductive audit behaviors (Burris et al., 2022). Building on Hypothesis 1, because the manager is expected to be more influential than the skip-level partner, due to their day-to-day supervisory responsibilities, we again focus attention on the manager's mixed behavioral messages. The inconsistency in the leader's behaviors diverts attention away from voice and raises team member fears. We expect a stronger effect for managers, and when the manager's involvement in the audit is greater. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationship between the manager's voice modeling behavior and team psychological safety is significantly reduced when the manager also engages in counterproductive audit behaviors.

Results

In Hypothesis 1 we find support for the notion that team psychological safety increases when the direct supervisor (manager) is higher on voice modeling behavior, and this effect is accentuated with greater manager involvement with audit team (based on hours). This finding is

consistent throughout our models. As anticipated, we do not find support for the effect of voice modeling behavior of the skip-level (partner) leader. While we do find that the main effect of the skip-level leader's voice modeling behavior is significant in a partner-only model, this effect fades when accounting for the manager too, underscoring the dominant influence of the manager as the day-to-day supervisor. These findings confirm our first hypothesis that the day-to-day manager's voice modeling behavior has the largest effect on team outcomes, and the more so when the manager is more involved in the team.

In Hypothesis 2, as expected, we find that when the manager is seen to be "cutting corners" in audit work, it is detrimental to the manager's voice modeling behavior's positive effect on team safety. In other words, when the manager sends "mixed signals" by exhibiting both voice modeling behavior and counterproductive acts at the same time, it leads the followers to question whether it is safe to speak up, and interferes with learning in ways that don't emerge when the manager's behavior is consistent (i.e., high voice, but low counterproductive behaviors).

Additional Analysis

In an additional analysis we do find that the partner's voice modeling behavior enhances team psychological safety, but only in the *absence* of the manager's voice modeling behavior, and that more partner involvement in the engagement has an accentuating effect on the partner's voice modeling behavior (just as it did for managers). The takeaway here is that voice modelling behaviors by *either* the manger alone, or by the partner alone, enhances the team's psychological safety.

However, a surprising finding is that when both the partner and the manager exhibit voice modelling behaviors, there is actually a negative effect on team psychological safety. Other studies in the OB literature have documented a similar effect. It seems that "too much" voice modelling behavior can lead to some suspicion by the team about the genuineness of the behaviors (Detert & Trevino, 2010; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison & Rothman, 2009; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974).

Implications for Practice

- Voice modelling behaviors by managers are important in creating psychological safety for the team, which is turn leads to a stronger team voice climate and stronger team performance.

- In the absence of such behaviors by managers, a partner's voice modelling behaviors can lead to the same positive outcomes.
- These positive effects are enhanced when managers (partners) are more involved with the engagement team.
- The training implication is that managers and partners both need to be trained in how to effectively demonstrate through their actions and leadership behaviors that they have a genuine commitment to psychological safety and a strong climate for team voice.
- Finally, the beneficial effects of voice modelling behaviors are negated if managers are perceived to be engaging in actions that reduce audit quality.

Appendix
Surveys and Measures Used in the Study

For each of the 10 audit largest Dutch firms we randomly selected one-third of the audit partners to participate in our study, and for each partner, we selected two of his / her teams based on the following criteria: the audits involved at least 250 hours of audit work, were from a variety of industries, and consisted of smaller and larger audit clients from listed Public-Interest-Entities (PIE) as well as private companies. We collected both survey and proprietary archival data from the selected partners, managers, and audit staff and teams from each of the 10 firms. Survey data was gathered through two consecutive online surveys, one focused on leader behaviors and the other on team climate and functioning. For our survey measures we used 5-point, Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree / rarely or never, 5 = strongly agree / very frequently or always). Items were slightly adapted to the audit team context where appropriate to ensure understanding by our participants. The final sample was 127 engagement teams with 754 auditors.

Leader Voice Modeling Behavior. In the leader survey, we asked respondents to rate the manager's and partner's usage of voice behaviors by responding to six-items adapted from the scale by Van Dyne and LePine (1998). Items assessed included: "This leader speaks up and encourages others in this team to get involved in issues that affect the team" and "This leader gets involved in issues that affect the quality of work life here in this team."

Team Psychological Safety. In the team survey, team members rated each team's favorability in feeling safe and secure. We used the seven-item team psychological safety scale of Edmondson (1999), and sample items included: "If members make a mistake on this team, it is often held against them" (reversed) and "No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that would undermine anyone else's work."

Team Voice Climate. In the team survey, team members rated the degree to which team members perceived a shared climate of team voice using six items adapted following Morrison et al. (2011) . Example items included: "Members of this team speak up and encourage others in this team to get involved in issues that affect the team" and "Members develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this team."

Team Performance. In the team survey, all team members assessed the overall performance of the audit team using Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount's (1998) five-item team performance scale. Sample items included: "This team makes sure that audit services meet or exceed service standards," and "This team completes its tasks on time."

Reduced Audit Quality Acts (Counterproductive Behavior). In the leader survey, we asked respondents to rate how often the leader engaged in audit quality threatening behavior by responding on a 14 items Reduced Audit Quality acts (RAQ acts) scale based on Otley and Pierce 1996, Herrbach 2001, and Pierce and Sweeney 2004. Items assessed comprise counterproductive behaviors like premature sign-off of audit steps, unsubstantiated altering of audit procedures, failure to pursue questionable items, and underreporting of time.

Leader Involvement. We measure the manager's and partner's involvement in the audit through proprietary archival data sources, by using the absolute total number of audit hours on the job as

recorded by each through the firms' time registration system (relative to the hours of the entire team). The managers reported an average of 205 hours (ranging up to 963 hours) and an average involvement of 12.83%, while partners reported an average of 85 hours worked on the engagement (ranging up to 394 hours) and an average involvement of 5.18%. The rest of the team spent an average of 1,477 hours in total on an audit (ranging up to 11,782 hours). The above reflects the general hierarchical build-up and fluidity of audit teams, where managers spend an average of 3.33 times the audit hours the partner spends on the team, reinforcing the argument that the manager was more frequently interacting with the team members.

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