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Voices Unleashed: How Paradoxical Leadership Sparks Employee Expression through Relational Energy and Proactive Personality Traits

Article Details

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ABSTRACT

Voicing behavior is paramount to ensure organizational sustainability through continuous challenge to the status quo. A number of antecedents of voicing behavior have been examined, especially, in leadership context. However, the effect of paradoxical leadership is still not investigated to a great deal. Paradoxical leadership is prevalent in todays' organizational landscape due to its ability to balance between contradictory situations. This study examines the effect of paradoxical leadership on voicing behavior. Moreover, the mediating role of relational energy and the moderating role proactive personality traits are also tested in this study. This quantitative study used surveys to collect data from 291 employees. Results show that paradoxical leadership positively affected voicing behavior of followers. Moreover, relational energy mediated the effect of paradoxical leadership on voicing behavior. Proactive personality traits are found to moderate the effect such that the relationship between paradoxical leadership and voicing behavior through relational energy strengthens when an employee is proactive. This study has important managerial implications that have been discussed at the end of the article.

INTRODUCTION

Paradoxical leadership is a style of leadership that has been contemporary and followed in situations that demand dynamic approach. This style combines and integrates contradictory demands, behaviors, and situations simultaneously and take into account what is most relevant to the organizational needs (Chen et al., 2024; Devi, 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2021; Niu, Meng, & Xiang, 2022; Pan, 2021; Rescalvo-Martin, Gutierrez-Gutierrez, & Llorens-Montes, 2021). Paradoxical leaders are flexible as well as strict; they are directive as well as autonomous; and they are distant and approachable. Paradoxical leaders think that there is no one way of leading and it depends on situation (Lee et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2021). This leadership style is especially relevant when organizations face requests for competing resources. In conflicting situations, it is not possible to take side of any one party. The leader has to integrate such that both parties feel win situation. Paradoxical leaders try to bring synergy in organizational processes and individual conflicting demands (Devi, 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025).

This style is most suited in situations where there is ambiguity, uncertainty, and dynamism. The world nowadays faces more uncertainties than ever before. This is due to technical advancements, fierce rivalry, and competitive pressures. There are expectations from regulators, customers, employees, and every stakeholder (Chen et al., 2024; Devi, 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023). The leader has to satisfy these competing demands in such a manner that without creating conflicts, these paradoxes are resolved. There are a number of paradoxical situations that a leader has to take care of (Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2021; Niu, Meng, & Xiang, 2022). For example, the option between serving one's own goals, values, desires, and interests and serving others' desires and interests is a paradoxical situation. The leader has to create a balance between these two. If the leader sticks to serving one's own goals and values only, it would demotivate subordinates and they might engage in negative behaviors (Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023).

On the contrary, if the leader only serves others' interests, it would also create an environment of toxicity and conflicting workplace. The optimal solution is to take both aspects simultaneously and serve them in a away so that no conflict is created. Another paradox is the level of closeness that a leader should allow (Pan, 2021; Rescalvo-Martin, Gutierrez-Gutierrez, &

Llorens-Montes, 2021). If employees are too close to the leader and if he/she is readily available and approachable, it becomes difficult to maintain authority, discipline, and strictness in organization. Employees might take such leaders as too friendly and hence they start exploiting such leaders. If a leader is too distant from subordinates, it becomes tough for employees to establish working relationships with others. There is an element of distrust that breeds when the distance among individuals increases. The leader has to create a balance between distance and approachability. Another paradoxical situation is between uniformity and individualization. There are individual differences that a leader should embrace (Guo et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2021). These differences are present in every individual. There are different personalities and each personality is unique. On the other hand, uniformity is also needed. A paradoxical leader should take care of both individual differences as well as uniformity.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of paradoxical leadership behavior on voice behavior. Moreover, the mediating role of relational energy and moderating role of proactive personality are also investigated. The current research makes three distinct contributions to the literature. First, the relationship between paradoxical leadership and employee voice is seldom studied. Although employee voice has been examined through leadership lens but mostly research has been on transformational, servant, authentic, and empowering leadership styles (; Niu, Meng, & Xiang, 2022; Pan, 2021; Rescalvo-Martin, Gutierrez-Gutierrez, & Llorens-Montes, 2021). Second, the mediating effect of relational energy adds an important psychological mechanism through which paradoxical leadership and employee voice can be better understood. Third, the boundary condition of proactive personality is another addition that this study offers. Proactive personality is an impetus that explains how paradoxical leaders influence employee voice.

This study suggests that the management should inculcate paradoxical style of leadership in order to raise voicing behavior of followers. Paradoxical leadership traits can be inculcated through training and psychological sessions. The management should also build strong bonding among employees. This can be done through arranging more formal as well as informal meeting among employees. Creating a culture of mutual trust and respect can also contribute towards better bonding. Managers should try to provide more psychological resources to employees. Having a greater feeling of psychological safety is regarded effective in improving voicing behavior.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Voice behavior is important for organizations in todays' landscape that is guided by increased use of artificial intelligence and changing dynamics of business. The management expects employees to raise their voice and proactively seek advice and give advice on making organizations successful, innovative, and sustainable in long run. Paradoxical leadership is considered to be critical when it comes to inculcating positive behaviors among employees. Voice behaviors are often taken as an indication of challenging the status quo (Li et al., 2020). Coworkers and the top management might feel offended if voice behavior is not channeled in the right way and at the right time. Therefore, employees need support from their leaders to raise voice. Paradoxical leader has to create a balance between these two. If the leader sticks to serving one's own goals and values only, it would demotivate subordinates and they might engage in negative behaviors. On the contrary, if the leader only serves others' interests, it would also create an environment of toxicity and conflicting workplace (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). The optimal solution is to take both aspects simultaneously and serve them in a away so that no conflict is created. Another paradox is the level of closeness that a leader should allow (Xue et al., 2020). If employees are too close to the leader and if he/she is readily available and approachable, it becomes difficult to maintain authority, discipline, and strictness in organization. Employees might take such leaders as too friendly and hence they start exploiting such leaders. If a leader is too distant from subordinates, it becomes tough for employees to establish working relationships with others. There is an element of distrust that breeds when the distance among individuals increases. The leader has to create a balance between distance and approachability (Chen et al., 2022). Another paradoxical situation is between uniformity and individualization. There are individual differences that a leader should embrace. Paradoxical leaders provide that support and guidance that is needed by employees to engage in voicing behavior. Voice is raised more frequently when subordinates find their leaders to display paradoxical behaviors. Therefore,

H1: Paradoxical leadership positively influences voice behavior.

Relational energy refers to psychological resourcefulness that one feels through interpersonal interactions (Grosser, Sterling, & Piplani, 2023). It is a positive energy that one derives by interacting with coworkers and leaders. It is not only motivation but extra energy that comes through interactions. It increases one's capacity to do work and perform beyond organization's expectations. Paradoxical leaders provide resources to employees and one such resource is psychological empowerment. Relational energy provides employees with energy that is derived

through interpersonal interactions and strong bonding that is developed among coworkers and leaders (Amah & Sese, 2018; Baker, 2019; Braha & Karabulut, 2023; Grosser, Sterling, & Piplani, 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). When there is a strong bond, employees feel more confident and efficacious to engage in voice behaviors. They know that their voicing behaviors would be taken positively by coworkers. They also feel hopeful and optimist that their behaviors are not targeted towards coworkers but they are for the betterment and continuous improvement of organizational processes and systems. When coworkers do not resist voice behaviors, such environments are considered convenient to raise voice (Baker, 2019; Braha & Karabulut, 2023; Grosser, Sterling, & Piplani, 2023). Usually employees do not raise voice when they think that their coworkers would not support their voice. In presence of strong relational energy, employees are not afraid of such negative repercussions. Employees feel psychologically safe when they are performing under paradoxical leaders. As a consequence, their positive energy increases. This energy is translated in frequent interpersonal interactions among coworkers and leaders. Therefore,

H2: Paradoxical leadership positively affects relational energy.

Relational energy is found to positively affect psychological safety, emotional stability, self-efficacy, and motivation. It is a positive psychological resource that helps employees to go beyond their job descriptions. Employees feel more motivated to perform extra-role activities and one such activity might be voice behavior. Relational energy provides employees with energy that is derived through interpersonal interactions and strong bonding that is developed among coworkers and leaders (Braha & Karabulut, 2023; Grosser, Sterling, & Piplani, 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). When there is a strong bond, employees feel more confident and efficacious to engage in voice behaviors. They know that their voicing behaviors would be taken positively by coworkers. They also feel hopeful and optimist that their behaviors are not targeted towards coworkers but they are for the betterment and continuous improvement of organizational processes and systems. When coworkers do not resist voice behaviors, such environments are considered convenient to raise voice. Usually employees do not raise voice when they think that their coworkers would not support their voice (Wu et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). In presence of strong relational energy, employees are not afraid of such negative repercussions. When employees feel psychologically safe and they understand that they have the ability and confidence to perform any action without worrying about coworkers' resistance, their level of voice behavior is expected to enhance. Relational energy also helps employees to build

stronger interpersonal bonds. These bonds then make employees confident that they can raise their voice without any fears or uncertainties. Therefore,

H3: Relational energy positively influences voice behavior.

H4: Relational energy mediates the effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behavior.

A proactive personality refers to a stable individual trait that captures the extent to which a person takes initiative to shape and influence their environment (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). Proactive individuals actively seek out opportunities, initiate action, and persist until they achieve meaningful change. In contrast, those with lower levels of proactivity are more inclined to maintain the status quo and respond passively to external circumstances rather than actively shaping them (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Hao & Han, 2022; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Sheng & Zhou, 2022; Wijaya, 2019; Xie et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2019; Zhang & Inness, 2019). Individuals with proactive personalities tend to act as change agents, naturally inclined to initiate and transform situations, whereas less proactive individuals often remain complacent and reactive. It is important to have a proactive personality while engaging in extra-role behaviors. Individuals who do not posses proactive personalities usually refrain from engaging in extra-role behaviors such as moral voice, innovative work behaviors, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Sheng & Zhou, 2022; Wijaya, 2019; Xie et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2019). If an employee has proactive personality, he/she engages more readily in new things or behaves for the betterment of the organization without worrying about what others would think. Proactive personalities are really critical for making positive contributions in organizational settings. These contributions are beyond one's call of duty. Since voicing behaviors are also part of going beyond call of duty, it is confirmed that if an employee has a greater degree of reactiveness, the effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behavior through relational energy would further strengthen.

Proactive individuals typically pursue change-oriented goals aimed at improving themselves, their surroundings, or their organizations. They embrace challenges and perceive them as opportunities for growth (Hao & Han, 2022; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Sheng & Zhou, 2022; Wijaya, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that those high in proactivity are more likely to engage in self-initiated changes, including altering their work routines (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Hao & Han, 2022; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Sheng & Zhou, 2022; Wijaya, 2019). Their motivation is largely intrinsic, driven by internal goals rather than external rewards, due to a higher degree of self-concordance compared to their less proactive counterparts (Xie et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2019; Zhang & Inness, 2019). When individuals align their personal goals with

those of the organization—i.e., exhibit self-concordant goals—they experience greater intrinsic motivation and are more likely to exert sustained effort. Proactive individuals are more adaptable, often adjusting their behavior to meet organizational needs (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Sheng & Zhou, 2022). They also experience a stronger sense of self-determination in their roles compared to less proactive individuals (Seibert et al., 2001). Given these characteristics, proactive personality can amplify the relationship between organizational identification and service innovative behavior, primarily by enhancing employee self-concordance. Therefore, it can be proposed that proactive personality moderates the effect of ethical leadership on service innovative behavior by strengthening the influence of organizational identification on employees' innovative contributions in service contexts. Therefore,

H5: The positive effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behavior through relational energy is stronger when an employee has high proactive personality.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This study collected data from employees working in tobacco companies. The reason to select tobacco companies was that usually managers do frequently face paradoxical situations in tobacco industry. There are pressures from the government agencies, suppliers, distributors, competitors, and employees themselves. These pressures make organizations to think and create a balance among all competing resources and stakeholders. That is why it is pertinent to study the conceptual framework in tobacco industry setting. In total, the researchers selected top three brands working in Pakistan. Head offices of these brands were contacted. They were briefed about the research objectives. In total, five meetings were conducted with the human resource departments of these companies. They agreed to provide data of employees working in their head offices. A total of 1980 employees were working in the head offices. The next task was to select dample size. By using previous studies and online formulas, a sample size of 280 was considered to be enough to represent the characteristics of the population. Because of low response rate, we decided to distribute surveys to 700 respondents. The surveys contained questions pertatining to the four key constructs along with some demographic details. The respondents wree aksed to rate their opinions on a five point scale in which one stood for strongly disagree and 5 stood for strongly agree. Initially, two weeks were given to the respondents to record their opinions. Some respondents requested online surveys. So we sent online surveys to them. In total, 291 responses complete in every way were gathered. The sample that we collected had 72% male and the

average age was 28.8 years.

MEASURES

This study utilized a 22 item paradoxical leadership scale designed by Zhang et al. (2015). A five-item scale developed by Owens et al. (2016) was used to measure relational energy. For measuring employees' voice behavior, this study adopts three item scale developed by Schaubroeck et al. (2016).

RESULTS

Data analysis was conducted using AMOS 20 and SPSS 20. Initially, the measurement model was assessed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to evaluate the distinctiveness of the study constructs. Paradoxical leadership traits help subordinates to feel confident to raise their voice whenever they need to. They are not afraid of any negative consequences related with raising voice within the organizational setting. Relational energy is the mediating mechanism through which paradoxical leadership explains voice behaviors of subordinates. Relational energy provides employees with energy that is derived through interpersonal interactions and strong bonding that is developed among coworkers and leaders. When there is a strong bond, employees feel more confident and efficacious to engage in voice behaviors. They know that their voicing behaviors would be taken positively by coworkers. They also feel hopeful and optimist that their behaviors are not targeted towards coworkers but they are for the betterment and continuous improvement of organizational processes and systems. When coworkers do not resist voice behaviors, such environments are considered convenient to raise voice. Usually employees do not raise voice when they think that their coworkers would not support their voice. In presence of strong relational energy, employees are not afraid of such negative repercussions. The effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behaviors through relational energy is moderated by proactive personality. It is important to have a proactive personality while engaging in extra-role behaviors.

Individuals who do not possess proactive personalities usually refrain from engaging in extra-role behaviors such as moral voice, innovative work behaviors, and organizational citizenship behaviors. If an employee has proactive personality, he/she engages more readily in new things or behaves for the betterment of the organization without worrying about what others would think. Proactive personalities are really critical for making positive contributions in organizational settings. These contributions are beyond one's call of duty. Since voicing behaviors are also part of going beyond call of duty, it is confirmed that if an employee has a

greater degree of reactiveness, the effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behavior through relational energy would further strengthen. It was hypothesized that all items would load exclusively onto their respective constructs. To determine the model's goodness-of-fit, several conventional fit indices were employed: Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Research shows that GFI, AGFI, and NFI values between 0.80 and 0.90 are acceptable, while values above 0.90 indicate an excellent fit. Item parceling was utilized to maintain an optimal indicator-to-sample-size ratio.

CFA results demonstrated a satisfactory fit for the hypothesized four-factor model. In contrast, alternative models (three-factor, two-factor, and one-factor) exhibited inferior fit indices, supporting the discriminant validity of the constructs. The results showed that no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the variance, with the highest variance explained being 46.37%, indicating that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations, are reported in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.73 (relational energy) to 0.93 (proactive personality), exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, thus confirming the internal consistency of the measures. Correlation analysis revealed that paradoxical leadership was positively associated with employee voice behavior ($r = .42$, $p < .01$). Relational energy was also positively related to employee voice behavior ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), and paradoxical leadership showed a positive relationship with relational energy ($r = .23$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, RELIABILITIES, AND CORRELATIONS

	Variables	Mean (SD)	α	1	2	3	4
1	Paradoxical Leadership	3.27(.31)	.87	1			
2	Relational Energy	4.02(.44)	.73	.23***	1		
3	Voice Behavior	3.83(.37)	.86	.42**	.34**	1	
4	Proactive Personality	3.62(.31)	.93	.11	.14	.21*	1

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 2 demonstrates the results for hypotheses. Paradoxical leadership was found to be strongly and positively related to voice behavior (B=0.258, t=6.832, p< 0.001), supporting H1. Direct effect of relational energy on paradoxical leadership was 0.416 (P<.01), and relational energy on voice behavior was 0.297 (P<.001), supporting H2 and H3, respectively. When voice behavior was regressed on relational energy, controlling for paradoxical leadership, the value of B was

0.284. When voice behavior was regressed on paradoxical leadership, controlling for relational energy, the value of beta coefficient was 0.062. A simple analysis of the slope was performed. The slope of the relationship between relational energy and voice behavior was steep for employees with stronger proactive personality (simple slope = 0.325, t = 11.732, p=0.000), whereas the slope was relatively shallow for employees with weaker proactive personality (simple slope = 0.036, t = 0.842, p= 0.005). Thus, hypothesis 5 is supported.

TABLE 2. REGRESSION RESULTS OF MEDIATION ON PARADOXICAL LEADERSHIP

Variable	B	SE	t	p
Direct and total effect of voice behavior on				
Paradoxical leadership	0.258	0.025	6.382	0.000
Education	0.021	0.619	0.284	0.327
Job tenure	-0.028	0.527	-0.216	0.493
Direct and total effect of relational energy on				
Paradoxical leadership	0.422	0.082	12.632	0.000
Education	0.031	1.978	0.732	0.527
Job tenure	-0.074	1.424	-0.274	0.872
Voice behavior regressed on				
Relational energy, controlling for paradoxical leadership	0.221	0.069	8.482	0.000
Paradoxical leadership, controlling for relational energy	0.062	0.013	2.985	0.002
Education	0.037	1.473	0.703	0.387
Job tenure	-0.083	1.184	-0.099	0.729
Variable	**Value**	**SE**	**Z**	**p**
Indirect effect and significance using normal distribution				
Sobel	0.108	0.016	6.857	0.000
Variable	**M**	**SE**	**LL 95% CI**	**UL 95% CI**
Bootstrap results for indirect effect				
Effect	0.108	0.017	0.068	0.127

Note: Bootstrap sample size = 5000

DISCUSSION

This study has three findings to report. First, paradoxical leadership positively affects voice behavior of subordinates. When organization is lead by managers who display paradoxical leadership traits, their subordinates feel confident to raise their voice whenever they need to. They are not afraid of any negative consequences related with raising voice within the organizational setting. This finding is in line with previous studies that found that paradoxical leadership does positively affect organizational citizenship behaviors, extra-role behaviors, and positive outcomes of subordinates (Devi, 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2021). Second finding of this study is that relational energy is the mediating mechanism through which paradoxical leadership explains voice behaviors of subordinates. Relational energy provides employees with energy that is derived through interpersonal interactions and strong bonding that is developed among coworkers and leaders. When there is a strong bond, employees feel more confident and efficacious to engage in voice behaviors. They know that their voicing behaviors would be taken positively by coworkers. They also feel hopeful and optimist that their behaviors are not targeted towards coworkers but they are for the betterment and continuous improvement of organizational processes and systems. When coworkers do not resist voice behaviors, such environments are considered convenient to raise voice. Usually employees do not raise voice when they think that their coworkers would not support their voice. In presence of strong relational energy, employees are not afraid of such negative repercussions.

Third finding is that the effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behaviors through relational energy is moderated by proactive personality. It is important to have a proactive personality while engaging in extra-role behaviors. Individuals who do not possess proactive personalities usually refrain from engaging in extra-role behaviors such as moral voice, innovative work behaviors, and organizational citizenship behaviors. If an employee has proactive personality, he/she engages more readily in new things or behaves for the betterment of the organization without worrying about what others would think. Proactive personalities are really critical for making positive contributions in organizational settings. These contributions are beyond one's call of duty. Since voicing behaviors are also part of going beyond call of duty, it is confirmed that if an employee has a greater degree of reactiveness, the effect of paradoxical leadership on voice behavior through relational energy would further strengthen.

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This study suggests that the management should inculcate paradoxical style of leadership in order to raise voicing behavior of followers. Paradoxical leadership traits can be inculcated through training and psychological sessions. The management should also build strong bonding among employees. This can be done through arranging more formal as well as informal meeting among employees. Creating a culture of mutual trust and respect can also contribute towards better bonding. Managers should try to provide more psychological resources to employees. Having a greater feeling of psychological safety is regarded effective in improving voicing

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