RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE SILENCE[*]

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes harmony and loyalty, and enterprises are deeply influenced by traditional cultural values. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture which emphasizes collectivism, Chinese employees choose to remain silent in order to take the overall situation into consideration and to avoid being regarded as destroyers of organizational harmony due to their voice. To break employee silence and to encourage employees to give suggestions has become a key to organizational reform and innovation. That is why this paper aimed to investigate the mechanism of servant leadership as well as its effects on employee silence based on theories of voice efficacy and to construct a theoretical model of servant leader-voice efficacy and employee silence.

The results revealed a negative correlation between servant leadership and employee silence in three dimensions. Voice efficacy was found to play a partially mediating role in such relationship. Organizational support positively moderated the positive correlation between service-oriented leadership and voice efficacy. Traditionality moderated the negative correlation between voice efficacy and employee silence.

Keywords: service-oriented leadership; Silence of employees; Sense of organizational support; The sense of efficacy of advice; Tradition

Introduction

China is a country with a wide range of power gaps and a tendency towards collectivism. In this situation, in public organizations, it is very common for employees to keep their heads above water and keep silent. This social situation seriously hinders the main exploration and practical application of personnel management, and has a negative impact on both employees and organizations. Employees' silence affects their work behavior, job-fitting degree and job-completion degree. Therefore, we should pay more attention to employees' silence, which hinders the efficient use of human resources in organizations, especially in the era of knowledge economy. To sum up, based on both practical and theoretical needs, this study focuses on the definition of the mechanism of employees' silence in enterprises. Taking employees' silence as the research objective and service-oriented leadership as the independent variable, this study explores how the influencing mechanism between the two is carried out through empirical research.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between service-oriented leadership and employees' silence in enterprises through empirical research. In this paper, the traditionality of employees and the sense of organizational support are taken as the moderating variables, and the advice potency of employees is taken as the intermediary variable, so as to organically combine all the factors as a whole such as organization, culture and individual. Based on the basic principles and the propositions of social exchange theory, this paper

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explores how service-oriented leadership influences employees' silence and what the mechanism of this influence is, so as to deepen people's theoretical understanding of the relationship between them.

Material and Method

1. Literature review

The concept of service-oriented leadership was first proposed by Professor Greenleaf of MIT (1977), that is, the primary motivation of leaders is to serve others. They play the role of a servant in an organization and have the willingness to serve actively to meet the needs of employees and inspire their trust. Since the theory of service-oriented leadership was put forward, although there is no unified definition of its concept in the academic circle, it contains three core views: service, full authorization and attention to the needs of subordinates. Therefore, this paper argues that the key of service-oriented leadership lies in providing services, taking helping employees realize their needs, desires and interests as the primary goal, and realizing their value through creation and sharing.

Pinder and Harlos (2001) argues that employees' silence behavior refers to the employees in the workplace has met some disadvantages that exist in the organizational environment. What's more, the employees themselves in work have found the appropriate solution or employees through practice have accessed the methods to improve the situation. However, it is just a workplace situation in which employees fail to express their ideas and put forward the mistakes in the organization to the leaders and bravely propose solutions due to various situations. In this study, employee silence mainly refers to the behavior of grassroots employees who have their own ideas and suggestions on improving work or organizational status but deliberately conceal problems when they find them, instead of communicating with their direct leaders about relevant information (upwardsilence).

In addition, relevant researchers explained the influence of team atmosphere on employees' silence from the perspective of social learning. Researchers named Bowen and Blackmon (2003) put forward the spiralofsilence effect of employees' silence, in which employees' behaviors are influenced by the opinions of team members. When employees find themselves in the minority, they choose to keep their own opinions in order to avoid being isolated and excluded, which gradually leads to the occurrence of silence behavior. Kish-Gephart and Detert (2009) put forward the concept of "voice efficacy" according to individuals' belief about whether they can get achievements on voice behavior. Specifically, it refers to a person's comprehensive evaluation of the effect of voice behavior during working. Similar to psychological security, it is an individual's expectation of confidence in his own behavior and his own judgment about his ability to achieve a given goal.

2. Research Hypothesis

2.1 The relationship between service-oriented leadership and employees' silence

In the process of interaction with employees, managers can give them full support and personal demonstration behaviors, so that employees can experience higher psychological authorization in the process of interaction, and repay managers by actively speaking, so as to reduce silence. Morrison and Milliken(2000) believe that service-oriented leaders, by establishing a good interactive relationship with subordinates at work, put the interests of subordinates before themselves and fully empower them to achieve their goals. The service motivation and purpose reflected in them are examples for subordinates to learn from. By communicating with employees on tasks, values and beliefs, service-oriented leaders

understand what employees need to do and make their vision consistent with the organization. After that, employees will show positive work attitudes and behaviors and reduce defensive silence behavior. To sum up, based on previous research results, it is assumed that the influence of service-oriented leadership on employees' silence and various dimensions is as follows:

H1: Service-oriented leadership is negatively correlated with employee silence;

H1a: Service-oriented leadership is negatively correlated with acquiescent silence;

H1b: Service-oriented leadership is negatively correlated with indifferent silence;

H1c: Servant leadership is negatively correlated with defensive silence;

2.2 The relationship between voice efficacy and employee silence

Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) point out that voice efficacy comes from the successful experience of voice behavior in the past. Through the experience of previous voice behavior results and the behavioral experience of others, employees can gain some good experience, establish their own psychological defense line and dare to voice behavior. Employees with a high sense of voice behavior efficacy usually have strong ability of interpersonal relationship processing and can handle interpersonal relationship with colleagues well. Through good communication with other members of the organization, they will be willing to communicate their ideas with leaders, which will help the organization grow, further win the trust of leaders, and effectively avoid the occurrence of indifferent silence. On the contrary, employees with low voice efficacy will choose to remain silent due to lack of judgment on their voice ability.

To sum up, it can be inferred that the correlation between voice behavior efficacy and employees' silent behavior and various dimension is as follows:

H2: Voice efficacy is negatively correlated with employees' silence

H2a: Voice efficacy is negatively correlated with acquiescent silence

H2b: Voice behavior efficacy is negatively correlated with indifferent silence

H2c: Voice efficacy is negatively correlated with defensive silence

2.3 The mediating role of voice behavior efficacy

The study of Walumbwa et al. (2010) found that servant leadership can positively influence employees' self-efficacy, and employees with high self-efficacy will show more voice behavior (Detert&Burris,2007). From the perspective of employees' self-perception, this paper assumes the mediating role of voice efficacy in the relationship between service-oriented leadership and employee silence. In summary, the research hypothesis of this paper is proposed as follows:

H3: Voice efficacy mediated the relationship between service-oriented leaders and employees' silence;

2.4 The moderating effect of organizational support

Service-oriented leaders recognize their subordinates and encourage employees to achieve their own goals to enhance their sense of work meaning (Shamiretal.,1993), so that employees can integrate the vision and goals of the organization with their own interests so that they can work hard for the vision and goals of the organization (Zhou Hao, Long Lirong, 2012). This form of positive communication between leaders and subordinates can be regarded as positive attention to subordinates, and the supply of organizational resources can be realized through timely delivery of encouraging content, so that employees can feel more sense of organizational support and thus break the silence. In general, service-oriented leadership will influence employees' silence by improving their sense of organizational support. Based on the above analysis, the research hypothesis of this paper is proposed:

H4: Perceived organizational support plays a positive moderating role in the relationship between service-oriented leaders and voice behavior efficacy.

    2.5 Traditional regulation

       Cai Ningwei and Zhang Lihua (2013) pointed out that it is impossible to get rid of the influence of social and cultural environment when discussing employees' silence in organizations. In China's traditional society, Chinese people stress peace, they think the collective interests above everything, take a step back. In order to achieve the final victory, they ignore the temporary humiliation and pressure. When they encounter setbacks, they will keep a good attitude and never give up on themselves. Such a view of the overall situation and pattern has a profound influence on every Chinese. Employees with high traditionality are less affected by the environment and more inclined to follow their own inner value orientation, while employees with low traditionality are more dependent on the influence of the environment and form their own attitudes and behaviors by adapting to environmental changes. Based on the above analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

    H5: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between voice efficacy and silence.

    H5a: Traditionality moderates the negative relationship between voice efficacy and acquiescent silence.

    H5b: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between voice efficacy and indifferent silence.

    H5c: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between voice efficacy and defensive silence.

    H6: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between service-oriented leadership and silence.

    H6a: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between service-oriented leadership and acquiescent silence.

    H6b: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between service-oriented leadership and indifferent silence.

    H6c: Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between service-oriented leadership and defensive silence.

       The employees' silence in enterprise organizations refers to that employees can find the potential problems in the organization, but for various reasons, they consciously retain their opinions and ideas to improve the status of the organization, which is a universal phenomenon in organizations. Wei Xin and Zhang Zhixue (2010) found that employees usually attach more importance to superficial harmony and have a greater perception of power distance. When they think that they disagree with their superiors, they will perceive that voice behavior will lead to negative expectations, thus leading to silence.

       To sum up, this study intends to explore the roots of employees' silence in the context of Chinese organizations from the perspective of traditional culture. The research framework is shown in Picture 3.1.

Empirical analysis

    1. Descriptive statistical results

    In this paper, a total of 353 valid questionnaires were collected except that the survey subjects were mainly internal employees. Male respondents accounted for 47.6% of the total

respondents; Women accounted for 52.4%, and the overall gender ratio of the sample was relatively balanced. The respondents were mainly between the ages of 26 and 40, accounting for 77.3 percent in the three subgroups. It shows that employees of this age group are the core force of the organization, the representative group with the most active thinking and higher work participation, and the study of their silent behavior is more representative and realistic.

The specific distribution characteristics are shown in the table.

Table 1 Description of Demographic Variables of the Survey Sample

Variable, characteristic, frequency	Percentage
Male 168	47.6
Female 185	52.4
< 25years old 25	7.1
26--30 yeas old 118	33.4
31--35 years old 111	31.4
36--40 years old 44	12.5
41--45 years old 27	7.6
> 46 years old 28	7.9
Under senior high school or technical secondary school 17	4.8
Junior college 47	13.3
Bachelor's Degree 220	62.3
Master's Degree 69	19.5
Under 1 year 30	8.5
1.--3 years 82	23.2
Length of employment: 3.-- 5 years 64	18.1
5---10 years 109	30.9
More than 10 years 68	19.3
Average employees 246	69.7
Position: grassroots managers 86	24.4
Middle and senior managers 21	5.9
Investigators of level 4 or above 9	2.5
Chief clerks of level 1 or 2 39	11.0
Position level: chief clerks of level 3 or 4 76	21.5
Clerks of level 1 or 2 90	25.5
others 139	39.4
Under 1 year 106	30.0
1.--3 years 138	39.1
Leading period: 3.-- 5 years 60	17.0
5---10 years 34	9.6
More than10 years 15	4.2
Leading roles of department or equivalent 33	9.3

Table 1 Description of Demographic Variables of the Survey Sample	
Variable, characteristic, frequency	Percentage
Assistant department level 25	7.1
Leading role of divisions or equivalents 49	13.9
Assisting role of divisions or equivalents 54	15.3
Leading role of sections or equivalents 75	21.2
Others 117	33.1

2. Reliability and validity analysis

All measurement tools in this study come from mature scales and have good reliability and validity after repeated verification. The servant leadership scale adopted the servant leadership measurement questionnaire developed by Gao Zhonghua and Zhao Chen (2014) on the basis of Liden research scale, with an internal consistency coefficient of 0.71. The sense of organizational support scale was modified by Liu Zhiqiang, Deng Chuanjun, Liao Jianqiao and Long Lirong (2015) based on Eisenbergeretal.(1986), and the internal consistency coefficient of the volume was 0.88. The employees' silence scale adopts the employee silence questionnaire developed by Zheng Xiaotao et al. (2008) under the Chinese background. The internal consistency coefficients of the employee body scale are 0.81, 0.77, 0.84 and 0.89 respectively. The voice efficacy scale is a single-dimension scale compiled by Duan Jinyun and Wei Qiujiang (2012) in combination with the scale of self-efficacy (Bandura,1986) and voice behavior (vanDyne&LePine,1998). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale is 0.89. The traditional scale adopts Farh et al. (1997) to select 5 items from the traditional scale developed by Yang Guoshu et al. (1989) to measure the traditionality, which has been widely used in existing studies (Hui et al., 2004; Liu Jun et al., 2009), with good reliability and validity.

3. Correlation analysis

In descriptive statistics, Pearson product difference correlation analysis was used for correlation analysis of all variables, and the results are shown in Table 2

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Each Variable (N=353) Pearson related inspection

Number	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Service-oriented leaders	3.15	.79													
2	The sense of voice efficacy	3.20	.78	.69**												
3	The sense of organizational support	3.26	.91	.72**	.69**											
4	traditionality	2.98	.70	.26**	.27**	.14**										
5	Employees' silence	3.03	.79	-.33**	-.32**	-.37**	.23**									
6	Acquiescent silence	3.35	.89	-.28**	-.31**	-.29**	.19**	.81**								
7	Defensive silence	3.09	.93	-.30**	-.24**	-.29**	.23**	.89**	.59**							
8	Indifferent silence	2.64	.94	-.27**	-.29**	-.37**	.18**	.87**	.52**	.70**						
9	Gender	1.52	.50	-.09**	-.17	-.07*	-.23**	.05	.11*	.06	-.04					
10	Age	3.04	1.33	-.05	.10	.02	.15**	-.07	-.04	-.07	-.067	-.07				
11	Postion level	1.36	.59	.08	.24**	.08	.10	-.16**	-.22**	-.11**	-.09	-.23**	.27**			
12	Unit level	4.31	1.65	.03	.01	.11*	-.03	-.12*	-.02	-.17**	-.12*	.17**	.12*	-.10		
13	Length of employment	3.29	1.25	-.11*	-.02*	-.13	-.07	-.04	-.05	-.04	-.02	-.07	.53**	.21**	-.12*	
14	Degree	2.97	.72	-.07	-.03	-.10	-.06	.06	-.04	.14**	.04	-.07*	-.17**	.14*	-.40**	.01

Note：*p<0. 05，**p<0. 01，***p<0. 001

The person correlation coefficient is used to explore the close relationship between mindful leadership and knowledge workers' sense of organizational justice, psychological contract, and work enthusiasm. The table above shows that mindfulness leadership, organizational justice, psychological contract, the knowledge staff's work enthusiasm of average were 3.61, 3.92, 3.83, 3.89, higher than the median level 3. It shows that knowledge workers have higher awareness of mindful leadership, organizational justice, psychological contract and work initiative. The four variables of mindful leadership, perceived organizational justice, psychological contract, and knowledge workers' work initiative are significant. What's more, there is a significant positive correlation between mindful leadership and the sense of organizational justice, psychological contract, and knowledge workers' work initiative (R =0.468, P<0.01; R = 0.448, P < 0.01; R =0.328, P<0.01).

3. Regression analysis

The regression analysis of service-oriented leadership and employees' silence is shown in Table 3

Table 3 Regression analysis and test results of three dimensions of employee silence on service-oriented leadership

	Variable	Employees' silence (β)	
		Model 1	Model 2
First step	Position level	-0.18**	-0.15**
	Unit level	-0.14	-0.16
Second step	Service-oriented leaders		-0.32***
F		8.26***	19.96***
ΔR^2		0.05***	0.10***
R^2		0.14	

Note：*p<0. 05，**p<0. 01，***p<0. 001

The results of regression analysis showed that service-oriented leader could independently explain 10% (β= -0.32, P<0.001) variation of employee silence behavior. Hypothesis 1 that the negative correlation between servant leadership and employee silence behavior is confirmed. The same method is used to analyze the relationship between the three dimensions of service-oriented leadership and employee silence, as shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.4 Regression analysis and test results of three dimensions of employee silence on service-oriented leadership

	Variables	Acquiescent silence(β)		Defensive silence(β)		Indifferent silence(β)	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model2
First step	Postion	-0.23**	-0.21***	-0.13	-0.10	-0.10	-0.08
	Unit level	-0.04	-0.03	-0.18*	-0.17*	-0.13	-0.12
Second step	Service-oriented leaders		-0.27***		-0.29***		-0.26***
F		9.49***	16.59***	8.36***	17.03***	4.37*	11.97***
ΔR^2		0.05***	0.07***	0.05***	0.08***	0.02*	0.07***
R^2		0.13		0.13		0.09	

Note：*p<0. 05，**p<0. 01，***p<0. 001

The results of regression analysis showed that there was a significant negative correlation between service-oriented leaders' three dimensions of employee silence: acquiescent silence (β=-0.27, P<0.001), defensive silence (β=-0.29, P<0.001) and indifferent silence (β=-0.26, P<0.001).

Conclusions and enlightenment

1. Research Conclusions

1) Service-oriented leadership is negatively related to the employees' silence. Service-oriented leadership puts the interests of employees in the first place by providing quality services to employees, and realizes the goals of employee development by respecting and meeting the needs of employees. According to social exchange theory, employees will go the extra mile to reward their leaders. In the enterprises, when getting more support and encouragement from the leaders, the employees will keep the realization of their own goals consistent with the realization of the organization's goals. Once they think about reform suggestions beneficial to the organization or find problems in the organization's system or working procedures, they will not choose to turn a blind eye, so as to reduce the occurrence of indifferent silence.

2) Voice efficacy mediated the relationship between servant leader and employee silence. Only when the behavior of the leader truly affects the implicit beliefs of employees or reconstructs the cognition of employees, can the employees' silence be avoided.

3) Perceived organizational support had a positive moderating effect on the positive relationship between service-oriented leaders and voice behavior efficacy. When employees perceive low organizational support in the organization, compared with employees with high sense of organizational support, they will have stronger expectations of the organization and are more willing to regard support from the organization as a manifestation of service-oriented leadership, even though the service-oriented leadership is the same. Therefore, if the behaviors of service-oriented leaders for employees such as support, service and recognition are strengthened, based on social exchange, employees will actively report to the organization, combine the interests of the organization with their own, and show more voice behavior. Through sound voice feedback, the sense of voice efficacy can be further strengthened.

4) Traditionality has a negative moderating effect on the negative relationship between voice efficacy and silent behavior

The authority perception of the leader weakens the stable hierarchical relationship between the obligations of different positions and the responsibilities of the leader. The higher the traditionality of employees is, the stronger the awareness of obeying the overall situation is. While facing adversity or injustice, employees are more likely to take the initiative to make themselves consistent with the organization through self-digestion and always put the interests of the organization and the collective first. They will act in accordance with the relevant rules of the organization and recognize the treatment and welfare of the organization. This way of working as if there is nothing wrong with it virtually exacerbates the silent behavior of employees.

2. Research Implications

1) Theoretical contribution

First of all, starting from the classification of research leaders, this paper strengthens the research on relevant antecedent variables of silence. At the same time, this study found that the employee's job level and unit level showed a significant negative correlation with service-oriented leadership and employee silence, and there were significant differences. This study expands the research scope of service-oriented leadership and employees' silence, and can provide some reference for further related research. Secondly, based on the characteristics of local culture, this study explores the influence of service-oriented leadership on employees' silent behavior, which is conducive to further enrich the localized research on leadership

behavior theory, provide a new perspective for the occurrence of employees' silence, and attract the attention of scholars on silence behavior research. Thirdly, it enriches the localization research on silence behavior. Fourthly, it can enrich the research on the influence path of voice efficacy on employees' silence.

      2) Practical enlightenment

      Firstly, attach importance to the concept of "service" and implement and promote service-oriented leadership. Leaders should have high leadership quality and ability, be good at observation and analysis, and be able to provide differentiated support and help for employees so as to achieve real "service". Secondly, create a positive voice behavior environment and improve the perception of voice behavior effectiveness. First of all, managers at all levels of the organization should attach importance to and encourage their employees to make positive voice, be open-minded , listen to different ideas of employees carefully, and give timely and effective feedback and reply to employees, so as to stimulate employees' enthusiasm of making active voice voice. Even if the employee's voice behavior is not practical and reasonable, the manager should give it full respect and understanding. The reason is that the attitude and behavior of the manager will affect the employee's acquisition of voice effectiveness to a large extent and determine whether the employee will make decision to voice again. Secondly, employees should shape and establish a correct view of their career, enhance their sense of responsibility, belonging and identity to the organization, and organically integrate their personal development with the interests of the organization to achieve a "win-win" goal. Thirdly, increase employees' sense of organizational support through multiple ways. The sense of organizational support plays a moderating role in the influence of service-oriented leadership on employee voice efficacy. First of all, managers can explore all aspects of organizational support. They should not only provide employees with material support such as tangible assets and resources so that employees can get timely help from the organization when they need, but also provide all kinds of information and various forms of care and welfare measures for civil servants, so as to reduce the uncertainty in work. According to Maslow's theory about hierarchy of needs, when employees are liberated from physiological needs, higher-level social needs (such as social needs, respect needs, etc.) appear immediately. Therefore, managers need to communicate more with employees to meet their emotional needs. If the employees had some difficulties in work or life, managers should give them a timely hand, thus to some extent, can improve employee's trust on the organization, which is conducive to enhancing employees' sense of identity and loyalty to the organization and seeing leaders as a community of organization interests, so that they are willing to take risks and actively express their views in order to improve organizational performance.

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