Are You Hiding from Your Boss? Leader's Destructive Personality and Employee Silence

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Employee silence is increasingly prevalent within modern organizations and has been considered a significant issue linking to a number of important organizational outcomes, hence attracting academic interest. In this study, we developed and tested a model of leader’s destructive personality, trust in leader, and employee silence with a sample of 205 supervisor–subordinate dyads. We found that (a) leader’s destructive personality was positively related to employee silence, and (b) trust in leader mediated the relationship between leader’s destructive personality and employee silence. Implications of these results for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: leader’s destructive personality, employee silence, trust in leader.

Historically, silence has been regarded as the opposite of voice (Morrison, 2014). However, employee silence is not necessarily an absence of voice (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Recently, scholars have stressed the notion that employee silence is not merely a lack of speech (Morrison, 2014), as an individual may remain speechless when he or she has nothing meaningful to say. Rather, *employee silence* refers to the intentional withholding of ideas, information, or opinions about potential improvements in organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Based on employees’ motivation, Van Dyne et al. divided employee silence into two
types: defensive silence, that is, disengaged behavior based on resignation and self-protective behavior based on fear, and proactive silence, which is proactive and other-oriented silence based on altruism and cooperation. In the present study we focused on defensive silence. This is because defensive silence could serve as a form of self-protection that may include hiding personal mistakes, omitting facts about problems, or avoiding being held responsible for a problem (Van Dyne et al., 2003). As such, defensive silence would negatively affect the performance of organizations and may impede the development of individuals. Indeed, employees may use defensive silence as a strategy to protect themselves when they face a series of problems and challenges in organizations, such as possible job loss, uncertainty about a new manager and team members, and loss of situational control. Researchers have identified several antecedents that could result in employee silence in organizations (see the review by Morrison, 2014), such as neuroticism (Brinsfield, 2013), the perceived lack of top management/supervisor’s openness to voice (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005), psychological safety (Brinsfield, 2013), and negative core affect (Madrid, Patterson, & Leiva, 2015).

In past research on the leader’s personality, until recently the focus has been on a wide range of desirable personality characteristics, such as intelligence, dominance, self-confidence, and high energy level (Yukl, 2006). However, researchers have now begun to investigate the dark side of leaders’ personalities. Leader’s destructive personality refers to the typical personality characteristics of a destructive leader, such as arrogance, laziness, extreme stubbornness, and being self-centered (Shaw, Erickson, & Harvey, 2011). Leaders who have a destructive personality could have a significant negative impact on employees (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007), such as laying blame on others, providing destructive feedback (Schaubroeck, Walumbwa, Ganster, & Kepes, 2007), and demonstrating negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, scorn, guilt, fearfulness, and depression (Watson & Clark, 1984). Researchers have suggested that destructive leaders have devastating effects on individuals and the organization, and have demonstrated the impact on a variety of work outcomes (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), such as increased levels of psychological stress (e.g., Erickson, Shaw, Murray, & Branch, 2015), lower levels of job satisfaction (e.g., Erickson et al., 2015), damaged employee well-being (e.g., Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008), and an overall decline in employee performance (see reviews by Erickson et al., 2015; Kraskova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Montano, Reeske, Franke, & Hüffmeier, 2016).

In the present study, we proposed leader’s destructive personality as an antecedent to employee silence. Researchers have suggested that certain characteristics of leaders could contribute to the creation and development of employee silence (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). It is safe and natural for employees to remain silent when leaders lack openness in voicing their thoughts and regard their subordinates as self-interested and untrustworthy individuals (Morrison
& Milliken, 2000; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). For example, Xu, Loi, & Long, (2015) found that remaining silent is used as a passive coping strategy for employees to deal with leaders’ abusive supervision.

Leaders who are destructive typically adopt the personality traits of being arrogant, extremely stubborn, self-centered, and lazy. (Shaw et al., 2011). They lay blame on others and provide destructive feedback when they are disappointed, for example, by expressing their anger outwardly to their subordinates (Tepper, 2000). Destructive leaders create an impression among their employees of being a threat, which makes the employees more cautious in their work. In this situation, the employees are likely to remain silent to protect themselves and to avoid being characterized as troublemakers by a destructive leader (Richards, Hof, & Alvarenga, 2000; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

In addition, scholars have called for the identification of the effect of trust in leader on employee silence behaviors (Khalid & Ahmed, 2016); thus, in the current study we explored trust in leader as a mediator in the destructive personality–employee silence relationship. Trust in leader refers to a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of the leader (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In empirical studies, researchers have employed trust in leader as an important underlying mechanism to explain a leader’s influence on subordinates. For example, Wong, Spence Laschinger, & Cummings (2010) examined the mediating role of trust in leader on the relationship between authentic leadership and nurses’ voice behavior and perceived unit care quality. Agote, Aramburu, & Lines (2015) explored the mediating role of trust in leader on the relationship between authentic leadership and followers’ emotions. Leaders with a destructive personality lose their subordinates’ trust in them, which, in turn, promotes employee silence at work. Leaders can gain or lose subordinates’ trust depending on their words and actions (Agote et al., 2015). Destructive leaders are likely to lose the trust of their subordinates because of their unpleasant personality. For example, leaders with destructive personality traits are arrogant and self-centered. They typically lay blame on employees and regard their subordinates as self-interested and untrustworthy individuals. This will drive employees to lose trust in them through their interpersonal interactions. When employees lose trust in their leaders, they may perceive that their leaders would penalize them directly or indirectly for proposing new ideas or revealing mistakes. In this regard, destructive leaders create a climate of silence and employees are more likely to keep silent (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Therefore, in the present study, we hypothesized the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** A leader’s destructive personality will relate positively to employee silence.

**Hypothesis 2:** Trust in leader will mediate the relationship between a leader’s destructive personality and employee silence.
**Method**

**Participants**
Participants in our study were 388 full-time employees and their leaders employed by a high-technology communications company in northern China. We received back 205 survey forms (subordinate–supervisor dyads) in this study, for a response rate of 52.8%. On average, the age of the participants was 33.86 years ($SD = 7.48$), ranging from 23 to 56 years, and 68% of the participants were men. Most participants (68.3%) held a bachelor’s degree, 15.6% held a postgraduate qualification, 14.6% held a polytechnic diploma or associate’s degree, and 1.5% held a high school diploma. Participants’ average company tenure was 8.06 years ($SD = 6.54$).

**Procedure**
We delivered survey packets to participants at a company-wide meeting. Participation in the study was voluntary. To guarantee participants’ confidentiality, we provided an envelope with tape for sealing in the survey form after the participants had completed the survey.

Participants were asked to complete the survey and to return the form at the upcoming meeting 2 weeks later. During this period, two short messages were sent to the participants to encourage their involvement and to remind them to bring the form with them to the meeting. The first message was sent to the participants 3 days after the survey form was distributed, and the second was sent to the participants on the day before the second meeting. At the second meeting, we placed a box outside the meeting venue and instructed participants to put their completed and sealed survey forms in the box, so that the envelopes were returned anonymously.

**Measures**
**Leader’s destructive personality.** We used the 19-item Leader’s Destructive Personality Questionnaire (Shaw et al., 2011) to measure the leaders’ destructive personalities. Respondents rated items on a 6-point scale. Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .84.

**Employee silence.** We measured employee silence by using the 10-item Employee Silence Behavior Scale (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .74.

**Trust in leader.** We measured employees’ trust in leader using McAllister’s (1995) 11-item scale. Employees rated the extent to which they agreed with the statements using a 7-point response format. Response options ranged from 1 =
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**Results**

In Table 1 the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among the variables in this study are depicted. Leader’s destructive personality was positively correlated with employee silence, and negatively correlated with trust in leader. Trust in leader was negatively correlated with employee silence. These results provide preliminary support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Destructive personality</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employee silence</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trust in leader</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.51**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>(.89)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 205; Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal; * p < .05, ** p < .01*

The results of regression analysis are presented in Table 2. Leader’s destructive personality was positively related to trust in leader and employee silence after controlling for age, gender, years of education, and company tenure. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, fully supported. Additionally, trust in leader was significantly related to employee silence when we controlled for destructive personality as well as for the demographic variables. Furthermore, the results also supported the mediating effect of trust in leader in our model.

Table 2. *Results of Regression Analysis for Mediation Effect Between Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Trust in leader</th>
<th>Employee silence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company tenure</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive personality</td>
<td>-.50 **</td>
<td>.16 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mediating effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive personality</td>
<td></td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in leader</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 205; * p < .05. ** p < .01.*
As shown in Table 2, the relationship between destructive personality and silence ceased to be significant when trust in leader was present. We concluded that trust in leader fully mediated the relationship between leader’s destructive personality and silence. Hypothesis 2 was, therefore, fully supported.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications
The present study has some important theoretical implications. First, to our knowledge, our study is the first attempt to explore the relationship between destructive personality and employee silence. By identifying the role of destructive personality in generating employee silence, our findings advance research into the dark side of the leader’s personality. Second, trust in leader has been examined as an important underlying mechanism to explain the impact of leaders on subordinates in a number of studies (e.g., Agote et al., 2015; Khalid & Ahmed, 2016). We extended this line of research by examining the mediating effect of employees’ trust in leader on the relationship between destructive leader personality and employee silence. Third, as we have identified the mediating role of trust in leader, our findings could also help establish how a leader’s destructive personality generates employee silence in organizations.

Practical implications
Our findings in the present study provide implications for managerial practices. First, in the face of realizing that the leader’s destructive personality is an antecedent to employee silence, those responsible for hiring individuals for managerial positions in organizations should pay extra attention to applicants’ personality traits when doing so. Specifically, managers in organizations are expected to be selective in their hiring and promotion practices and to model and state clearly positive leader values and personality traits in the organization (Erickson et al., 2015). For example, selection of managers can be carried out by using the cluster analysis procedure proposed in the research of Shaw et al. (2011), or by including in the hiring procedure assessments of applicants’ moral and ethical standards, as well as dark-side personality factors (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007), to measure the level of destructiveness of candidates’ personalities. Second, given our findings that enhancing employees’ trust in leader can serve as a strategy to reduce employee silence, managers in organizations should make great efforts to build their employees’ trust in their leaders at work. Specifically, managers could encourage those in leadership roles to behave more transparently and truthfully, such as openly sharing information with employees, proactively asking employees for feedback, and encouraging voice behavior (Wong & Cummings, 2009).
Limitations

The present study has some limitations. First, because of the disadvantages of cross-sectional design, we cannot ensure the causality of the destructive personality–silence relationship. We therefore call for future researchers to investigate this aspect of the relationship further by applying a longitudinal research design or behavioral experiments. Second, we focused only on a mediator in the relationship from the subordinates’ perspective. Future researchers could investigate mediators from the supervisors’ perspective, for instance, supervisors’ trust in their subordinates as a potential mediator in the destructive personality–employee silence relationship. Finally, we did not consider the potential moderating effects in the present model. Therefore, to extend our model, future researchers may explore potential moderators, such as power distance (e.g., Lin, Ma, Zhang, Li, & Jiang, 2016) and perceived organizational support (e.g., Perrot et al., 2014).

References


