

The Importance of Ethical Leadership and Personal Control in Promoting Improvement-Centered Voice among Government Employees

*Shahidul Hassan**

**The Ohio State University*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide insight about the conditions in which government employees are more likely to engage in voice to improve performance of their organization. In this effort, the current research examines the direct and interactive effects of ethical leadership and perceptions of personal control on improvement-centered voice among government employees. These relationships are examined with data that were collected through two separate surveys from 477 employees and 161 managers working in a large state agency. The results indicate that ethical leadership and personal control, after controlling for employee characteristics, job satisfaction, procedural fairness, and performance monitoring, are related positively with supervisor ratings of subordinate voice behavior. The results also show that the effect of ethical leadership on voice becomes significantly stronger when employees perceive that they have higher levels of discretion over work behaviors and influence on decisions in their workgroup. Implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed.

Government organizations around the globe are under increased pressure to reduce costs and find more efficient ways of providing public service. At the same time, the environments in which government organizations operate are becoming increasingly complex, dynamic, and interdependent (O'Toole and Meier 2011; Rainey 2009). There also is an increased demand from citizens for more responsive, transparent, and accountable government (Behn 2001; Kettl 2005; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). In such conditions, managers alone cannot tackle all the challenges. Employees working in government organizations also need to play a proactive role. Specifically, public sector employees not only need to perform their work duties diligently but also go above and beyond their formal job roles and requirements through engaging in extra role or citizenship behavior (Vigoda-Gadot and Golembiewski 2001).

One particular form of extra-role employee behavior that is drawing considerable attention from organizational scholars and has been shown to improve organizational

Address correspondence to the author at hassan.125@osu.edu.

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performance is voice (Morrison 2014). It includes speaking up about critical work issues and problems, providing constructive ideas and suggestions, and taking personal initiatives to get others involved in addressing the issues and problems that affect the organization (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Van Dyne and LePine 1998; Van Dyne, Graham, and Dienesch 1994; Van Dyne, Cummings, and Parks 1995). Such proactive efforts may help government organizations to improve performance and “compensate for bureaucratic red-tape, slow and unbendable procedures, and insensitivity and inflexibility in the provision of services” (Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012, 573).

Being proactive and speaking up requires taking risks as such behavior may challenge the status quo or standard way of doing things (Detert and Burris 2007; Detert and Trevino 2010; Grant 2013; Grant and Ashford 2008; Morrison and Milliken 2000). An employee also can potentially upset her interpersonal relationship with others in the workplace by engaging in voice. For example, an employee who highlights a problem or offers a suggestion that runs counter to existing norms and work practices or affects others in the workgroup in a negative way may be viewed as “a complainer,” “a troublemaker,” or “not a team player” (Detert and Burris 2007; Detert and Trevino 2010; Grant 2013; Morrison and Milliken 2000). Employees working in government organizations, therefore, may choose to not “rock the boat” and speak up unless conditions that facilitate such behavior are created and nurtured.

Although a variety of factors may influence an employee’s decision calculus, one that is likely to be critical for her willingness to speak up is her concerns for safety (Miceli, Near, and Dworkin 2008). The likelihood that the employee will remain silent is high when she fears that speaking up will lead to negative consequences (Morrison and Milliken 2000). The current research suggests that ethical leadership may play a critical role in lowering safety concerns that often discourage government employees from engaging in voice. Because ethical managers¹ are transparent, honest, and trustworthy and act in the best interest of the organization and society, they are likely to be respected and trusted by employees (Brown and Treviño 2006; Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003). Such managers also are likely to be more receptive to employee concerns, opinions, and suggestions. Moreover, subordinates of ethical managers are likely to be less concerned about the negative repercussions of speaking up because these managers are fair decision makers and emphasize doing what is morally right and beneficial for others both within and outside of the organization.

Lowering safety concerns is important but may not be sufficient to encourage public employees to engage in voice. The effectiveness of ethical leadership in promoting voice may actually depend on the favorability of certain conditions in the workplace. An important situational factor that is likely to moderate the influence of ethical leadership on voice is personal control; that is, the level of discretion that employees perceive to have over work behaviors and their perceived influence on decisions or outcomes in the workgroup (Ashforth and Saks 2000; Brockner et al. 2004; Greenberger et al. 1989). Unless an employee believes that she has discretion over her work behaviors and is able to influence others to initiate and sustain meaningful

¹ The terms “manager” and “leader” in this article are used interchangeably, though some scholars have argued that managers are not necessarily leaders, whereas others have suggested that leadership is one several roles that managers need to perform in organizations (Yukl 2013).

change in her workgroup, she may not feel compelled to voice even when she has an ethical manager. In other words, speaking up may appear futile if she is not able to bring the necessary change or improvement in the workgroup. Accordingly, this study proposes and tests a situational/contingency model of voice in which ethical leadership and perceived control are expected to affect public employees' voice behavior in both direct and indirect ways.

This article aims to contribute to public administration (PA) scholarship in several ways. Extant research shows that speaking up in a constructive manner about work issues and problems can improve performance in organizations (Detert et al. 2013; Edmondson 2003). Few studies in PA, however, examined factors that promote such behavior among government employees (Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012). Prior research on voice focused primarily on whistle-blowing (Miceli and Near 1984, 1985, 1988), bureaucratic resistance (Brower and Abolafia 1995), principled-dissent (O'Leary 1994, 2006) and citizen voice-orientations (Vigoda-Gadot 2007). Although there is some evidence from private sector samples that ethical leadership and personal control are related positively with improvement-centered voice (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008; Venkataramani and Tangirala 2010; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Walumbwa, Morrison, and Christensen 2012), no prior study examined the interplay of ethical leadership and personal control on such behavior. This study aims to provide insight about conditions in which ethical leadership is likely to be more effective in promoting voice among government employees.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Employee Voice

The recognition of voice as a key concept in research in PA can be traced back to Albert Hirschman's (1970) seminal book: *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Declining Firms, Organizations, and States*. Hirschman (1970) suggested that deterioration in the performance of an organization sometimes is inevitable, but the activities that individuals engage in response to the deteriorating conditions can be an opportunity for the organization to learn about its failures and prevent such occurrences in the future. Hirschman (1970, 30) developed a typology of responses to dissatisfaction in which an alternative to exit was voice. He defined voice as "any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from objectionable state of affairs...to make an attempt at changing the practices, policies, and outputs of the firm from which one buys or of the organization to which one belongs" (Hirschman 1970, 30). According to this perspective, voice is constructive employee efforts that are aimed at improving conditions that are unsatisfying. Influenced by this initial conceptualization, researchers later extended the focus by suggesting that dissatisfied employees may also engage in principled-dissent (Graham 1986; O'Leary 1994) and whistle-blowing (Miceli and Near 1984, 1985, 1988) when they experience or observe wrongdoing. Early studies showed a positive correlation between self-reported voice and employee job satisfaction, job investment and job alternatives (Daley 1992; Rusbult and Lowery 1985). Further, research on principled-dissent and whistle-blowing indicated that a variety of personal, job, and organization-related factors may influence public employees'

willingness to engage in such behavior (Miceli and Near 1984, 1985, 1988; O'Leary 1994, 2006).

Subsequent research expanded the conceptual boundary of voice from a response to unsatisfactory conditions to an important extra-role employee behavior (Van Dyne and LePine 1998; Van Dyne, Graham, and Dienesch 1994; Van Dyne, Cummings, and Parks 1995; Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero 2003). The key idea that was put forward in these studies is that employees may engage in voice even when they are not dissatisfied; that is, employees may engage in voice in order to improve rather than to just criticize or point out problems. The development of this broader perspective was influenced by research on related constructs including "issue selling" (Dutton and Ashford 1993) and "taking charge" (Morrison and Phelps 1999). These studies suggested that voice involves communicating ideas, suggestions, concerns, and information about issues and problems to someone who might be able to take appropriate actions to bring about the necessary change (Morrison 2014).

Voice is an extra-role behavior because it is typically not specified as required in an employee's formal job description (Van Dyne and LePine 1998). However, voice is distinct from cooperative type of extra-role employee behavior (e.g., helping coworkers when they have a heavy workload or sharing knowledge/information with others) as those behaviors generally do not require challenging the status quo or communicating ideas that others may oppose or disagree with (Morrison and Phelps 1999; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). The content of voice may range from providing information about a pressing work issue and suggestions about how to resolve it to reporting a serious organizational problem (e.g., an ethical violation or wrongdoing). The former is known as improvement-centered or suggestion-focused voice, whereas the latter is referred as problem-focused voice (Morrison 2014). Although the intent behind both types of voice is positive, the latter from an organization's perspective may be less desirable because it can have negative implications (financial and reputational) for the organization. Further, the target of a voice message can vary from someone working within the organization (e.g., the direct supervisor or a senior team member) to someone outside the organization (e.g., media or police).

Research on factors that may encourage or discourage government employees to voice about serious organizational problems (e.g., misuse of public resources, embezzlement, bribery, or mistreatment of certain groups) is critical due to the trust that citizens bestow upon government officials in doing what is morally right but also to prevent such occurrences in the future. There already has been some progress in research on problem-focused employee voice. For example, many studies in PA examined antecedents of whistle-blowing in government organizations (for a detail review of these studies, see Miceli, Near, and Dworkin 2008). Yet, relatively few studies in PA have focused on employee voice that is intended to improve performance of workgroups in government organizations (Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012).

This study focuses on determinants of improvement-centered voice among public employees for several reasons. First, such behavior may increase the effectiveness of public organizations. Frontline employees due to their proximity to service delivery have access to information that is not readily available to managers. Suggestions, ideas, and information from frontline employees can help public managers to identify inefficient procedures, opportunities for service improvement, how to better use a new

technology or to implement a new policy. Extant research suggests that improvement-centered voice is an important source of learning and that it can improve organizations' performance (Detert et al. 2013; Edmondson 2003). A recent study also found that managers' reluctance to take actions about issues raised by employees increased turnover in workgroups (McClellan, Burris, and Detert 2013). Second, considerable research indicated that divergent views and competing opinions from members lead to more informed decisions, whereas the absence of such views and opinions can lead to "groupthink" and poor decisions (Esser 1998; Janis 1982). Third, speaking up has salutary effects on employees including reduced stress, cynicism, and feeling that one is valued (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Perlow and Repenning 2009). There is considerable empirical evidence that expressing one's feelings rather than keeping them inside improves mental and physical health (Pennebaker 1997). Fourth, employee silence can become self-reinforcing and produce norms of silence within organizations, which can be dysfunctional and lead to organizational inertia and resistance to change (Morrison 2014).

A Situational Model of Improvement-Centered Voice

When an employee in a government organization is aware of an issue or sees an opportunity to offer a novel idea, suggestion, or information that may be useful to the manager or improve the workgroup's performance, she may choose to either voice or remain silent. This starting point is known as the latent voice episode (Detert and Edmondson 2011). Although a variety of factors may influence the employee's decision calculus about whether to voice, two that are likely to be critical are her concerns for safety and level of motivation with regard to voice (Morrison 2014).

Engaging in voice, regardless of whether it is problem-focused or improvement-centered, carries some risks for the voicer. As noted before, when an employee highlights deficiencies in a past decision, offers an opinion that is divergent from others or provides a suggestion that runs counter to existing norms, she may fear losing her social standing in the workgroup, getting a negative performance review or an uninteresting job assignment or even jeopardize her chances for promotion (Detert and Treviño 2010; Grant 2013). These safety concerns are likely to be heightened especially when the employee considers speaking up directly to her manager due to their status differences and the manager's formal authority over rewards, resources, and assignments (Edmondson 2003). Morrison (2014) noted that, even when a manager is receptive to employee inputs and suggestions, power and status differences between the two can stifle honest and open communication. Consistent with this view, high levels of interpersonal trust in the manager will be critical in a public employee's consideration about whether to speak up or remain silent (Rousseau et al. 1998).

Ethical leadership may play an important role in reducing safety concerns that often prevent public employees from engaging in voice. Ethical leadership refers to "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making (Brown et al. 2005, 120)." Three essential attributes of ethical leadership are as follows: (1) being an ethical role model to others, (2) treating people fairly, and (3) actively managing ethics in the

organization. The first two attributes refer to the moral person aspect of ethical leadership, whereas as the last component focuses on the moral manager aspect of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders demonstrate honesty, integrity, and altruism and conduct themselves in an ethical manner even in the midst of adversity or pressure (Brown and Treviño 2006; Brown et al. 2005; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003). They also serve as ethical role models for others by showing normatively appropriate behaviors and treating others with consideration and respect (Brown and Treviño 2006; Brown et al. 2005; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003). Ethical leaders take into account the implications of their choices when they make decisions that may affect the well-being of others both within and outside the organization. In addition, ethical leaders are not only fair decision makers, they also actively promote normatively appropriate behavior among followers by communicating clearly about ethical expectations, providing guidance, and holding followers accountable for ethical and unethical behavior (Brown and Treviño 2006).

Ethical leadership has been shown to improve willingness of government employees to report unethical conduct of others (i.e., problem-focused voice, Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014). Ethical leadership may also encourage public employees to engage in improvement-centered voice in several ways. Because ethical managers are honest and value open and transparent communication with their followers, they are more likely to be receptive to employee inputs and pay close attention to concerns raised by employees (Brown and Treviño 2006; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003). Employees are likely to respect such managers and perceive them as trustworthy. Employees also are likely to feel more comfortable in bringing issues to such managers because of their openness to different ideas and suggestions (Brown and Treviño 2006; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003). Further, because ethical managers are fair decision makers, subordinates of such managers are likely to be less concerned about the potential negative consequences of voice.

Although ethical leadership is likely to reduce employee concerns about the consequences of voice, it alone may not be sufficient to elicit high levels of voice. Employees working in public organizations should also feel sufficiently motivated to bring about the necessary change (Morrison 2014). An important source of such motivation is likely to be employee perceptions of personal control. The concept of personal control has a long history in research on bureaucracy (Gouldner 1954; Hall 1963; Miller 1975) and is considered a key factor in theories of work motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Hackman and Oldham 1976; Kanungo 1982; Locke and Latham 1990; Spreitzer 1995, 1996; Thomas and Velthouse 1990; Vroom 1964). Personal control has two components: (1) autonomy and (2) impact (Ashforth and Saks 2000; Brockner et al. 2004; Greenberger et al. 1989). Autonomy refers to the level of discretion that employees perceive to have over work behaviors, whereas impact is the extent to which employees believe they are able to influence decisions or outcomes in their workgroup. Personal control is high when employees believe that they have considerable discretion in determining their work behavior and influence on decisions in their workgroup, and it is low when employees have limited freedom in determining their work behavior and little influence on decisions in their workgroup (Ashforth and Saks 2000; Brockner et al. 2004; Greenberger et al. 1989).

Given that personal control is a basic psychological need, lower personal control increases dissatisfaction and leads to a sense of helplessness, whereas higher personal control increases satisfaction and leads to a sense of empowerment (Spreitzer 1995,

1996; Thomas and Velthouse 1990).² Theories of work motivation suggest that perceptions of higher personal control make the connection between work efforts and outcomes more salient and lead to greater expectancies about the likelihood of success or goal attainment (Deci and Ryan 1985; Hackman and Oldham 1976; Kanungo 1982; Locke and Latham 1990; Spreitzer 1995, 1996; Thomas and Velthouse 1990; Vroom 1964). This higher expectancy of success, in turn, may motivate public employees to take personal initiatives, communicate about work issues and offer constructive ideas and suggestions about how to solve the issues (Fuller, Marler, and Hester 2006).

Studies by Edmondson (1999, 2003) on organizational learning and innovation showed that one of the main reasons why employees do not speak up is their lack of conviction that their efforts will make a difference and that their inputs will be valued by others in the team. Studies on employee participation indicated that an important necessary condition for engagement is that employees have higher levels of personal control (Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford 1995). In addition, extensive research on job enrichment showed that, when employees perceive that they have higher levels of autonomy and influence, they not only feel a sense of independence in personally initiating actions at work but also feel a heightened sense of responsibility about contributing positively towards their workgroup (Hackman and Oldham 1976). These findings suggest that higher personal control may motivate public employees to engage in improvement-centered voice by engendering such feelings that they are obligated or personally responsible for bringing positive change in their organization (Fuller, Marler, and Hester 2006; Morrison and Phelps 1999).

Perceptions about personal control may also moderate the influence of ethical leadership on voice among public employees. As noted before, an employee's consideration about whether to voice depends partly on her assessment of the possible consequences for herself and others in the organization (Morrison 2014). When an employee perceives that her manager is transparent, fair, and acts—as well as emphasizes acting—in the best interest of the organization and society, she will be less concerned about the repercussions of speaking up (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Walumbwa, Morrison, and Christensen 2012). However, ethical leadership alone may have only a modest influence on voice unless the employee perceives that she can take initiatives on her own and influence others to get involved in bringing the necessary change in the workgroup. Specifically, without sufficient autonomy and influence, speaking up may appear futile even when there is minimal risk. This issue is likely to be more salient in government work settings due to the prevalence of formal rules and procedures that often constrain public employees' behavior and engender a sense of alienation or helplessness (DeHart-Davis and Pandey 2005).

There has been limited research in PA on the influence of leadership on employee voice. One study by Vigoda-Gadot and Beeri (2012) found improvement-centered voice to have an unexpected negative connection with transformational leadership but a positive connection with transactional leadership among Israeli public sector employees. Another study, also in Israel, showed that citizen perception of ethical behavior of public administrators was related positively with citizen satisfaction with

2 Personal control is a narrower concept than psychological empowerment. In addition to autonomy and impact, psychological empowerment includes two other components/dimensions: meaningfulness and self-efficacy (Spreitzer 1995; Thomas and Velthouse 1990).

government services, trust in the government, and voice-orientations (i.e., political efficacy and participation, Vigoda-Gadot 2007). In addition, research by Fernandez and associates (Fernandez and Pitts 2011; Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2013a, 2013b) found a positive correlation between empowerment practices and willingness of government employees to generate new ideas. Although there is evidence from research in business work settings that ethical leadership relates positively with improvement-centered voice (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Walumbwa, Morrison, and Christensen 2012) and that employees are more likely to engage in such behavior when they have higher personal control (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008, Venkataramani and Tangirala 2010), the joint influence of ethical leadership and personal control on voice has not been examined in earlier research. A single study in a telecommunications firm found that participative leadership moderated the effect of manager trustworthiness on employee voice (Gao, Janssen, and Shi 2011), but the study did not examine the influence of ethical leadership.

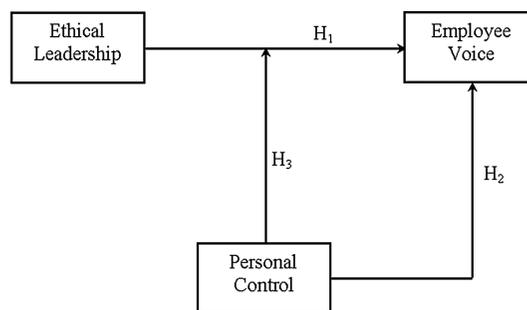
Based on the theoretical arguments presented previously, this study tests a moderation model of improvement-centered voice that is shown in figure 1. The model suggests that ethical leadership will have a positive relationship with voice among public sector employees (Hypothesis 1), that employee perceptions of personal control will have a positive relationship with their voice behavior (Hypothesis 2), and that perceptions of personal control will moderate the connection between ethical leadership and voice; that this connection will be stronger when public employees believe they have higher levels of personal control (Hypothesis 3).

DATA AND METHODS

Sample and Procedures

The research model was tested with survey data that were collected from employees working in six divisions in a large Midwest state agency. The state agency was responsible for providing procurement, human resources, information technology, and other general administrative services to other agencies, commissions, and boards in the state government as well as to local government organizations. Research shows that measuring both the predictor and criterion variable using survey data collected

Figure 1
The Research Model



from a single source can lead to overestimating the strength of their relationship and, thus, misleading conclusions (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). Methodologists suggested a number of statistical remedies to this problem known as the common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003), but recent studies suggest the only reliable solution may be using independent data sources for the predictor and the criterion variable (Favero and Bullock 2014; Meier and O'Toole 2013a, b). Data in the current study were gathered using two separate surveys in different times from employees and supervisors specifically to avoid common method bias problems.

The employee and supervisor questionnaires were administered in the summer of 2012 as part of a long-term project undertaken by the agency for leadership development. The questionnaires were distributed and collected electronically and were matched using a four-digit unique identifier. During the data collection procedure, the participants were assured repeatedly that no identifying information would be shared by the researchers with anyone inside or outside the state agency. Only aggregate results at the division level were included in a final report shared with the agency head and division managers.

The purpose of the employee survey was to collect data regarding ethical leadership and employee perceptions about their work climate including their personal control. First, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of employees ($n = 9$) working in the agency's division of human resources to obtain feedback on the questionnaire as well as to test the electronic survey distribution tool. Next, the agency head and division managers sent an e-mail to all employees to communicate the purpose of the study and to explain that participation was voluntary and that all responses would remain confidential. Then, the research team contacted all 820 employees by sending an e-mail that repeated the explanation of the study and explained that the electronic survey administration tool allowed participants to complete the survey at a time convenient to them during their normal work hours. The survey remained open for 3 weeks, during which time up to three e-mail reminders were sent to boost the response rate. Altogether, 477 usable responses were returned for an overall response rate of 59%.

Data for employee voice behavior were collected through a separate survey of 176 supervisors. The 477 respondents who completed the first survey were direct reports of this group. Each supervisor rated voice behavior of a maximum of five of his or her direct reports. For supervisors who had more than five direct reports, to minimize the time it took to complete separate surveys, five were randomly selected for whom they were asked to provide information. This resulted in a small reduction in the employee sample size from 477 to 443 respondents, a retention rate of approximately 93%. The supervisors were given 2 weeks to complete the surveys. The supervisors had the option to complete the surveys at different periods for different subordinates. Similar to the employee survey, up to three individualized e-mail reminders were sent to the supervisors to boost the response rate. A total of 161 supervisors (91%) returned completed surveys about subordinate voice behavior.

A vast majority of the sample (78%), as shown in table 1, identified themselves as Caucasian.³ Approximately, 16.4% identified themselves as African American, 2.4%

³ Given the first survey was distributed to all 820 employees (i.e., both managers and employees in the agency), demographic characteristics for the subordinates and managers who participated in the study are not reported in separate tables.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	%
Ethnicity	
Asian	2.4
African American	16.4
Hispanic	1.0
Native American	0.4
Caucasian/white	78.0
Other	1.8
Gender	
Female	45.2
Male	54.8
Nature of position	
Clerical/support	15.0
Professional/technical	55.7
Managerial	29.4
Age, years	
<20	0.2
21–30	5.2
31–40	11.9
41–50	37.3
51–60	32.1
>60	9.2

identified themselves as Asian, and 1% identified as Hispanic. Forty-five percent of the respondents were women, which is comparable to the total percentage of women working in the agency (42%), indicating our sample is representative of the population with respect to gender. Further, 15% of the sample identified themselves as clerical employees, 56% identified themselves as professional employees, and about 29% identified as supervisors. The average age of the participants was between 41 and 50 years. The tenure of the sample in their current position ranged widely from 1 to 35 years with a mean of 6.1 years and a standard deviation (SD) of 6.2 years. The tenure of the sample in their current agency ranged from 1 to 38 years with a mean of 10.9 years and a SD of 9.1 years.

Measures

Voice was measured in the supervisor survey using four items that were developed and validated by [Van Dyne and LePine \(1998\)](#). The four items were as follows: This employee (1) speaks up and encourages other employees to get involved in issues that affect the unit; (2) communicates his/her opinions and suggestions even when other employees in the unit disagree with him/her; (3) develops and makes recommendations about issues concerning the unit; and (4) gets involved in issues that affect the quality of work life in the unit. Although the four items do not focus on employee voice efforts aimed at resolving a specific work issue or problem, they capture supervisor perceptions about employee extra-role efforts targeted to bring positive change in the workgroup. Each voice item had a five-point response choice (1 = Never, 5 = Always). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was 0.84.

Ethical leadership was measured with nine items from the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) developed and validated by Yukl et al. (2013). The ELQ items capture different aspects of ethical leadership and include both values and behaviors. Respondents rate their leader's honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, integrity, and ethical guidance. All ELQ items had a six-point Likert-style response format (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Sample items include the following: (1) Holds members accountable for using ethical practices in their work; (2) Communicates clear ethical standards for members; (3) Can be trusted to carry out commitments that he or she makes; and (4) Keeps actions consistent with stated values ("walks the talk"). The Cronbach's alpha for the ethical leadership measure was 0.96.

Perceptions of personal control were measured with four items in the employee survey that were taken from the autonomy and impact subscales of Spreitzer's (1996) psychological empowerment questionnaire. The two subscales have been combined in many studies to measure employee personal control (Brockner et al. 2004; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008; Venkataramani and Tangirala 2010). A sample autonomy item was: I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job and a sample impact item was: My impact on what happens in my work unit is large. The four items had a six-point Likert-style response format (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was 0.84.

To account for the possibility that voice may be influenced by an employee's personal characteristics, age, race, gender, job tenure, and tenure with supervisor were included as controls in the analyses. Age was measured with a single item (What is your current age?) from the employee survey; the five response choices were: 1 = 21–30 years; 2 = 31–40 years; 3 = 41–50 years; 4 = 51–60 years; and 5 = over 60 years. To assess the unique effect of each age group on voice, four separate dummy variables (1 = yes, 0 = no) were created. The reference category in the regression analyses was 41–50 years. Employee gender and race each was measured with a dummy variable (female: 1 = yes, 0 = no; minority status: 1 = non-white, 0 = white) that was created based on the information related to employee sex and race that were collected in the employee survey. Employee job tenure and tenure with supervisor were each measured with a single item from the employee survey: How long in number of years have you worked in your current agency and How long have you worked under your current supervisor.

In addition to personal characteristics, other factors may also influence voice. Research shows that employees who are generally satisfied with their work but are unhappy with certain aspects of their work context choose to voice (Rusbult and Lowery 1985). Therefore, a three-item measure of employee job satisfaction was included in the analysis. The items were taken from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al. 1979) and had a six-point Likert-style response format (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The items are as follows: (1) All in all I am very satisfied with my current job; (2) At the end of the day, I feel good about the work I do in my job; and (3) At least for now, my current position is well suited to my needs. The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was 0.87.

A four-item measure of procedural fairness was included as a control because previous studies found a positive connection between procedural fairness and ethical leadership (Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014) and between procedural fairness and

voice (Ng and Feldman 2012). The items were included in the employee survey and were adapted from the Procedural Justice Scale developed and validated by Colquitt (2001). The items asked respondents to indicate the extent to which formal procedures used in making job-related decisions in their agency were free of bias, applied consistently, based on accurate information and allowed employees to express their views and concerns. The four items had a five-point response format (1 = not at all, 5 = to a great extent). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was 0.93.

Although perceptions of higher personal control are likely to promote voice by enhancing a sense of ownership and responsibility among workers (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008), excessive performance scrutiny may actually inhibit such behavior. Thus, a three-item measure of performance monitoring was included as a control. The items were included in the employee survey and were taken from the Managerial Practices Survey developed by Yukl and colleagues (Kim and Yukl 1995; Yukl, Gordon, and Taber 2002). The items are as follows: (1) Evaluates how well an important task or project is being performed; (2) Asks for a report on progress in carrying out a task or assignment; and (3) Checks on the progress of the work to see if it is on target. The items had five response choices (1 = not at all, 5 = almost always). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was 0.81.

FINDINGS

Psychometric Properties of the Measures

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess psychometric properties of the measures before testing the research model. Following recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999), multiple indices—Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error or Approximation (RMSEA)—were used to assess the fit of the measurement model. The CFA results indicated that the six-factor measurement model had an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2(309) = 939.40$, CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, and RMSEA = 0.07). As shown in table 2, the standardized factor loadings (λ s) ranged from 0.64 to 0.94; most items had a loading above 0.70. The CFA results also provided evidence for convergent and discriminant validity. The average variance explained (AVE) for each construct was above 0.50 (ranging from 0.56 to 0.74) and the square root of the AVE was greater than the correlation between each latent construct and the other latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Given the strong bivariate correlation found between ethical leadership and procedural fairness ($r = 0.68$), an additional test was performed to examine whether these measures captured the same variation and should be combined. However, the CFA results showed that the alternative five-factor model in which the correlation between the two variables was set to one fitted the data much worse (CFI = 0.85, IFI = 0.85, TLI = 0.83, RMSEA = 0.10) than the proposed six-factor measurement model. These results indicated that the measures had sufficient convergent and discriminant validity.

Univariate and Bivariate Analysis

Table 3 reports univariate statistics and bivariate correlation coefficients between the measures. Although the mean scale scores for ethical leadership, personal control, and voice were skewed in a slightly negatively way, the differences between the average

Table 2
Means, SDs, and Correlation Coefficients

Measures	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	4.29	1.00	—									
2. Female	0.45	0.50	-0.09*									
3. Minority	0.21	0.40	-0.01	0.11*								
4. Job tenure	6.15	6.19	0.26**	0.02	0.12*							
5. Supervisor tenure	3.26	1.41	0.20**	-0.03	0.01	0.28**						
6. Job satisfaction	4.70	1.28	-0.01	-0.07	-0.03	-0.07	-0.07					
7. Procedural fairness	3.28	1.20	0.01	-0.09	-0.07	-0.16**	-0.09	0.55**				
8. Performance monitoring	3.36	1.00	-0.08	-0.05	-0.03	-0.10	-0.04	0.33**	0.51**			
9. Ethical leadership	4.85	1.31	0.06	-0.07	-0.15**	-0.07	-0.10*	0.57**	0.68**	0.52**		
10. Personal control	4.48	1.46	-0.01	-0.06	-0.11*	-0.06	-0.08	0.65**	0.62**	0.30**	0.60**	
11. Voice	3.64	0.78	-0.02	0.10*	-0.11*	-0.17**	-0.01	0.20**	0.20**	0.07	0.25**	0.29**

Notes: $N = 415$.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Standardized Factor Loadings (λ) from CFA

Items	Ethical leadership	Job satisfaction	Procedural fairness	Performance monitoring	Personal control	Voice
1	0.83					
2	0.65					
3	0.88					
4	0.88					
5	0.92					
6	0.77					
7	0.89					
8	0.94					
9	0.93					
10		0.75				
11		0.84				
12		0.90				
13			0.84			
14			0.87			
15			0.91			
16			0.86			
17				0.67		
18				0.71		
19				0.86		
20					0.74	
21					0.64	
22					0.81	
23					0.80	
24						0.78
25						0.64
26						0.82
27						0.72

scores and the scale midpoints were not very large. The SDs for each of the measures were relatively high, indicating adequate variability in the data sufficient for further analysis. Ethical leadership and personal control were found to have significant positive correlations with voice ($r_s = 0.25$ and 0.29 , respectively, $p < .01$). Procedural fairness and job satisfaction also had positive associations with voice ($r_s = 0.20$ and 0.20 , respectively, $p < .01$). However, employee job tenure and race had a negative correlation with voice ($r_s = -0.17$ and -0.11 , respectively, $p < .05$).

Tests of the Hypotheses

The research model was tested using hierarchical or stepwise regression analyses with mean scale scores for ethical leadership and personal control as the predictor and mean scale score for voice as the criterion measure. The control variables were included in the first step of the analysis. In the second step, the two main predictor variables—ethical leadership and personal control—were added and the effect of their interaction on the criterion variable was assessed in the third step of the regression analysis. All of the measures, except age, gender, and race, were standardized before

conducting regression analyses. To assess whether multicollinearity adversely affected the results, variance inflation factor (VIF) scores for all predictor measures were estimated. The VIF scores for all measures were lower than the typical threshold value of four indicating multicollinearity did not adversely influence the results. To minimize any problems of heteroskedasticity, robust standard errors were used while assessing the statistical significance of the regression coefficients reported in [table 4](#).

As shown in [table 4](#), the control variables included in the first step of the regression analysis accounted for 16% of the total variance in voice ($F = 4.42, p < .01$). Female employees were found more likely to voice than male employees ($\beta = 0.19, t = 3.11, p < .01$). Minority employees (i.e., non-whites) were found less likely to voice than white employees ($\beta = -0.16, t = -2.48, p < .01$). Employees with longer job tenure were found less likely to engage in voice than those with shorter job tenure ($\beta = -0.18, t = -2.63, p < .05$). Although higher performance monitoring had a negative influence on voice ($\beta = -0.13, t = -1.90, p < .10$), higher procedural fairness had a positive influence on voice ($\beta = 0.22, t = 3.09, p < .01$).

When the two main predictor variables were added in the second step of regression analysis, the effects of gender, race, job tenure, and performance monitoring slightly changed but remained statistically significant. However, procedural fairness was no longer a significant predictor of voice ($\beta = 0.08, t = 0.48, p > .10$). Both ethical leadership and personal control were found to have significant positive linkages with voice. The standardized regression coefficients for the two variables were 0.26 ($t = 2.75, p < .01$) and 0.19 ($t = 2.35, p < .05$), respectively, and they explained an additional 6% of the total variance in voice ($\Delta F = 7.44, p < .01$). These results provided support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

The results also provided support for Hypothesis 3, which suggested that personal control would accentuate the positive relationship between ethical leadership and voice. As shown in [table 4](#), both ethical leadership and personal control remained significant predictors of voice when the interaction term was added in the model. The connection between ethical leadership and voice also became stronger ($\beta = 0.38, t = 3.69, p < .01$) and the coefficient for the interaction term was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.20, t = 2.41, p < .05$). The interaction term explained three additional percent of the total variance in voice ($\Delta F = 5.81, p < .05$). Altogether the regression model accounted for 25% of the total variance in voice. [Figure 2](#) provides a graphical illustration of the interaction effect. As shown in [figure 2](#), when personal control was perceived to be high (i.e., mean + 1 SD), the effect of ethical leadership on voice was much stronger than that when personal was perceived to be low (i.e., mean - 1 SD).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Public organizations are facing an increased pressure to reduce costs and provide services in a more efficient manner, while demands for more responsive, transparent, and accountable government are increasing around the world ([Behn 2001](#); [Kettl 2005](#); [Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011](#)). Successfully addressing these challenges requires government employees to go above and beyond their formal job roles and engage in extra-role efforts that can directly improve their organization's performance. One particular type

Table 4
Results of Hierarchical/Stepwise Regression Analyses on Voice

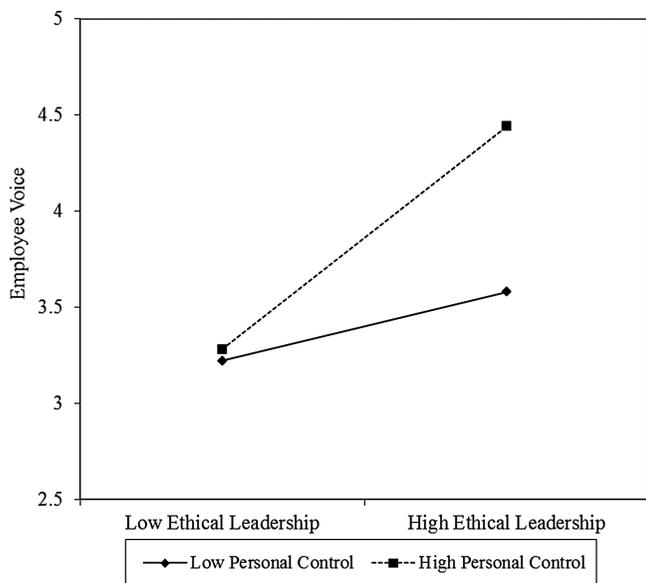
Measures	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	β	t	VIF	β	t	VIF	β	t	VIF
21–30 years	-0.06	-1.00	1.18	-0.04	-0.55	1.24	-0.05	-0.86	1.25
31–40 years	0.01	0.09	1.22	0.01	0.06	1.22	0.01	0.95	1.22
51–60 years	0.02	0.23	1.27	0.02	0.33	1.28	0.02	0.33	1.28
Over 60 years	0.08	1.47	1.19	0.07	1.28	1.20	0.08	1.47	1.21
Female	0.19**	3.11	1.05	0.21**	3.49	1.07	0.22**	3.65	1.08
Minority	-0.16*	-2.48	1.07	-0.12†	-1.81	1.09	-0.10†	-1.66	1.09
Job tenure	-0.18**	-2.63	1.29	-0.20**	-3.14	1.26	-0.21**	-3.28	1.26
Supervisor tenure	-0.05	-0.71	1.16	-0.03	-0.45	1.16	-0.04	-0.62	1.16
Job satisfaction	0.08	1.23	1.41	-0.07	-0.91	1.84	-0.08	-1.09	1.84
Procedural fairness	0.22**	3.09	1.67	0.08	0.48	2.23	-0.00	-0.03	2.29
Performance monitoring	-0.13†	-1.90	1.33	-0.18**	-2.70	1.46	-0.21**	-3.11	1.49
Ethical leadership (EL)				0.26**	2.75	2.19	0.38**	3.69	2.69
Personal control (PC)				0.19*	2.35	2.03	0.23**	2.95	2.08
EL × PC							0.20*	2.41	1.23
R^2	0.16			0.22			0.25		
ΔR^2	—			0.06			0.03		
F	4.42**			4.66**			5.72**		
ΔF				7.44**			5.81*		

Notes: $N = 415$.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; † $p < .10$.

Figure 2

The Effects of Ethical Leadership on Voice for Low and High Levels of Control



of extra-role employee behavior that has been shown to contribute positively towards higher learning, innovation, and performance in organizations is improvement-centered voice (Detert et al. 2013; Edmondson 2003). The extant research in PA, however, does not provide much insight about how to encourage government employees to engage in such behavior (Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012). To address this gap, this study examined the direct and interactive effects of ethical leadership and perceptions of personal control on improvement-centered voice among government employees. The results provided support for the proposed theoretical model. Both ethical leadership and personal control were found to relate positively with government employees' voice behavior. The results also showed that the effectiveness of ethical leadership in promoting voice was contingent on employees' perceptions of autonomy and influence in their workgroup.

The results are noteworthy as no prior study examined and found support for the independent and joint influences of ethical leadership and personal control on public employees' voice behavior. The results provide insight about the circumstances in which government employees are more or less likely to engage in voice to improve performance of their workgroup. The positive connection found between ethical leadership and voice suggests that perceptions of fairness, honesty, and integrity of the manager provide employees with important cues about whether it is safe for them to raise concerns, provide divergent ideas and opinions, and take initiatives on their own to bring about necessary change in the organization. The positive relationship found between personal control and voice implies that perceptions about whether engaging in voice will be effective in achieving the intended outcome influence the likelihood that a public employee engages in such behavior. Finally, the interaction of the two variables suggests that, to elicit higher levels of improvement-centered voice, lowering

safety concerns and at the same time increasing efficacy perceptions are important and that relying on any single approach may yield only a modest improvement in voice among public employees.

The findings have implications for practice, as well. The results highlight the benefits of cultivating a sense of ownership and responsibility among government employees through improving perceptions about the extent of their autonomy and influence in the organization. Prior research on empowerment suggests specific steps that public managers can take to improve employee perceptions of personal control. Studies found that providing employees with adequate information about changes in policies and goals, soliciting employee suggestions while making important decisions, listening to employee concerns and opinions, and delegating authority to competent and motivated employees can considerably improve employee perceptions of personal control (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2013a, b; Spreitzer 1995, 1996; Thomas and Velthouse 1990; Vroom and Jago 1988).

An interesting finding of this study was the significant negative connection between performance monitoring and improvement-centered employee voice. Although the ongoing pay-for-performance performance movement in the public sector recommends using an instrumental approach to improve accountability and performance of public employees, this result highlights the potential costs for using such an approach (Moynihan and Pandey 2010; Kellough and Nigro 2006; Weibel, Rost, and Osterloh 2010). Although assessing the effects of employee attributes on voice was not a goal of this study, the analyses revealed some interesting results worth discussing. Specifically, female employees were found more likely to engage in voice than male employees, non-white employees were found less likely to engage in voice than white employees. The positive connection found between gender and voice, however, was not unexpected. Research suggests that female employees tend to be viewed as more nurturing and altruistic and, thus, they are more likely to engage in extra-role efforts than their male counterparts (Kidder 2002). The negative connection found between race and voice may be attributed to (1) higher risks perceived by minority employees about voice or (2) bias in supervisor ratings about subordinate voice behavior. Without further research, it is difficult to speculate about the underlying cause of this finding. In addition, the regression results showed a negative linkage between employee job tenure and voice. An inverse relationship between job tenure and organizational citizenship behavior has also been reported in earlier research (Thau et al. 2004). A possible explanation of this finding is that public employees become less hopeful about upward mobility in their organization as their job tenure increases, which, in turn, may lower their motivation for extra-role behavior.

The contribution of this research should be viewed in light of its limitations. Given the data were obtained from a single state agency, the results reported here have limited generalizability. In addition, to avoid problems of common method bias (Favero and Bullock 2015; Meier and O'Toole 2013b), data for employees' voice behavior were collected from their supervisors. Although supervisor reports are likely to be less susceptible to social desirability biases, such reports are not necessarily without errors. Supervisor reports, for example, may suffer from recall bias. Supervisors may also have limited opportunity to observe voice directed at coworkers. Another limitation of the study was its cross-sectional design. Cross-sectional studies are unable

to establish any causal connections, so the relationships found here should not be interpreted as causal. In addition, survey data are unlikely to reveal all mechanisms of voice. Research on issue selling indicated that employees rely on a variety of influence tactics to bring ideas, solutions, and opportunities together in ways that focus others' attention and invite actions for organizational change (Dutton and Ashford 1993). Future research in PA would benefit from relying on an ethnographic approach to elucidate about the underlying processes through which government employees engage in improvement-centered voice. Data collected through semi-structured interviews of government employees, for example, may provide insight about how ethical leadership (or lack thereof it) affects voice dynamics within workgroups and how employees initiate, implement, and sustain change in the workgroup.

As noted previously, a variety of factors may influence government employees' willingness to engage in improvement-centered voice, while this article focused on the role of only two important factors: ethical leadership and personal control. Other potential predictors include empowering managerial practices, employee perceptions of red-tape and duty orientation. Empowering managerial practices such as consultation and delegation may encourage voice among government employees through improving their perceptions of control, whereas higher red-tape may discourage voice through lowering perceptions of control. Future studies should consider investigating these potential relationships. Research on principled-dissent (O'Leary 2006) and whistle-blowing (Miceli and Near 1985) indicated that government employees who have higher duty orientation are more likely engage in such behaviors than those with lower duty orientation. This suggests that the underlying motivation driving public employees to engage in problem-focused voice is altruistic in nature. Such motives may also influence public employees to engage in voice to improve performance of their organization. Studies in future should consider assessing the influence of duty orientation on the likelihood of government employees engaging in improvement-centered voice. Finally, an interesting avenue for future research is to examine whether ethical leadership creates greater cumulative voice (i.e., group members engage collectively in voice) by facilitating an ethical climate in government organizations.

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