

# How Superior–Subordinate Relationship Quality and Conflict Management Styles Influence an Employee's Use of Upward Dissent Tactics

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## Keywords

upward dissent tactics, conflict management styles, superior–subordinate relationship quality, LMX, voice.

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## Abstract

This study examined employees' use of upward dissent tactics to express disagreement with organizational policies or practices to their supervisors. Employees ( $N = 242$ ) from three organizations completed a survey instrument in which they reported the types of upward dissent tactics and types of conflict management styles they used with their supervisors as well as their perceptions of the quality of those relationships. The integrating conflict management style was positively correlated with the prosocial dissent tactic and negatively correlated with the threatening resignation dissent tactic. The dominating conflict management style was positively correlated with threatening resignation, circumvention, and repetition dissent tactics. When looking at relationships between the use of upward dissent tactics, superior–subordinate relationship quality, and conflict management styles, we found that conflict management styles were a stronger predictor of the use of upward dissent tactics than superior–subordinate relationship quality. Implications for employee voice are discussed.

## Introduction

Organizational dissent is defined as the verbal expression of contradictory opinions and disagreements (Hegstrom, 1990) as well as divergent views about organizational practices, operations, or policies (Kassing, 1997, 2008). Dissent is a subset of voice, which was originally conceptualized by Hirschman (1970) as one of three employee responses to dissatisfaction in the workplace. Employees who are unhappy with organizational policies or actions may leave the organization (exit), communicate their concerns or disagreement (voice), or remain silently loyal to the organization (loyalty). While some treatments of voice suggest that the construct specifically refers to a citizenship behavior that is intended to benefit the organization as a whole (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009), others have noted that the use of voice to express concerns or disagreement also plays an important role in the emergence and management of organizational conflict (Shapiro & Burris, 2014). While dissent and conflict will not always co-occur, an employee considering whether to dissent to their supervisor is likely to assume that conflict might be a possible outcome. As Kassing (2011) suggests, “the coworker who dissents – disagreeing openly about his manager's leadership style – likely will experience conflict with that supervisor” (p. 50).

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To be clear, conflict and dissent are discrete constructs. Conflict occurs when two or more interdependent parties perceive incompatible goals (Putnam & Poole, 1987), or “scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995, p. 21). An employee may have a conflict with a supervisor related to definitions of a task or different ideas about the nature of their relationship. Conflicts of this nature would not fall under the category of organizational dissent because they are not examples of disagreement about a practice, policy, or process. Dissent, on the other hand, is a form of employee resistance that may or may not lead to conflict (Kassing, 2011). One can express dissent to a supervisor who agrees there is a problem, resulting in a cooperative response and compatible goals. An important link between dissent and conflict is whether and how they are expressed. Employees face the difficult decision of whether to engage in dissent or conflict with a supervisor, and both are examples of employees’ use of voice in an organization. The goal of this study was to examine relationships between conflict management styles and upward dissent tactics to determine whether this provides insights into the use of employee voice.

Scholars of both voice in general and dissent specifically are interested in understanding when and how employees choose to communicate their disagreement, and several studies have examined the role of superior–subordinate relationships in the expression of voice and dissent (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Kassing, 2000b; Krone, 1992; Waldron, 1991). Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory provides a framework for exploring these relational dynamics in greater detail for at least two reasons. First, according to the theory, supervisors develop differentiated relationships with their subordinates rather than an average leadership style (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975). The degree of latitude (i.e., negotiation latitude) that supervisors grant their subordinates means that negotiating work roles is mutual (Dansereau et al., 1975). Second, once subordinates demonstrate their competence in the relationship, supervisors determine how the relationship progresses by creating two distinct categories of relationships: in-group memberships (i.e., high-quality relationships) and out-group memberships (i.e., low-quality relationships) (Dansereau et al., 1975). Organizational communication, in particular voice, is therefore bound to the quality of exchanges between superiors and subordinates.

While dissent can be articulated to one’s peers or outside the organization, there is higher risk or potential reward when expressing dissent to one’s supervisor (Kassing, 2011; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Employees weigh several considerations in deciding whether to express dissent to a supervisor. These include organizational climate, adversarial position and retaliation, and organizational attachment (Kassing, 2008). Past research also suggests that the quality of the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate is related to whether and how they express dissent (Kassing, 2000b, 2007). Given the potential overlap between expressing dissent to one’s supervisor and the emergence of conflict, we suggest that an employee’s conflict management style may be another important concept related to whether and how employees choose to communicate dissent. This study examined specific communication tactics used when articulating upward dissent and investigated whether conflict management styles are related to the choice of dissent tactics. This article contributes to the understanding of employee voice, operationalized in this study as upward dissent, by understanding the influence of perceptions of superior–subordinate relationship quality and subordinates’ conflict management styles on employees’ use of upward dissent tactics.

## Review of the Literature

### Organizational Dissent

Kassing (2011) suggests that dissent adds value to organizations because it provides corrective feedback that allows organizations to adapt to changing conditions. Topics of dissent may include unfair treatment, organizational change, roles and responsibilities, ethics, and/or supervisor inaction (Kassing, 2011; Kassing & Armstrong, 2001). Organizational dissent may be directed laterally to coworkers, upward to

management, or to people outside of the organization, such as family and friends (referred to as displaced dissent) (Kassing, 1997). Whistle blowing is another form of dissent that describes reporting organizational wrongdoing (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011). In this study we are specifically interested in better understanding the use of upward dissent, so we limit our focus to the superior–subordinate relationship.

### *Upward Dissent*

Upward dissent entails the expression of disagreement to supervisors, superiors, or management. Decisions of whether and how to express upward dissent are influenced by the individual, relational, and organizational context (Kassing, 1997). Concerns about retribution, relational damage, and poor performance evaluations are the primary reasons employees choose not to communicate upward to superiors (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Upward dissent has been found to be an indicator of work engagement, while dissent expressed to nonmanagement was found to be an indicator of intent to leave the organization (Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012). Kassing (2000a) also found that employees who reported high levels of workplace freedom of speech used more upward dissent than employees reporting either moderate or low levels of workplace freedom of speech. The ability to dissent is also likely related to one's sense of their organizational status, as employees in management positions reported using more upward dissent as compared to employees in nonmanagement positions (Kassing & Armstrong, 2001).

Not surprisingly, employees also weigh the level of relationship quality they have or want to maintain with their supervisors in decisions about whether to dissent (Kassing, 2000b). After all, upward dissent is risky and can have detrimental impacts on superior–subordinate relationship quality. Superiors and subordinates in higher quality exchanges exhibit language patterns indicative of mutual, rather than one-way, influence (Fairhurst, 1993). Fairhurst also found that subordinates in high LMX relationships exhibited a tendency to question and challenge superiors' decisions, but with language that was oriented toward finding common ground and providing alternative solutions to nonroutine issues. Similarly, Krone (1992) found that subordinates with high LMX argued openly for their ideas more frequently than subordinates with low LMX. Their upward influence tactics included openly arguing for some desired course of action, giving reasons, and providing factual support for their point of view.

Kassing (2000b) conducted a study of LMX and dissent and found that employees who perceived higher quality relationships with their supervisors were more likely to engage in upward dissent than employees who perceived having lower quality relationships with their supervisors. In a study of the relationship between voice, power distance, and LMX, Botero and Van Dyne (2009) found that subordinates in high LMX relationships were more likely to use voice than those in low LMX relationships. However, at least for participants living in the U.S.A., that relationship was mediated by perceptions of power distance. If subordinates in high LMX relationships perceived higher power distance, they were less likely to use voice. Finally, in an experimental study where the authors defined whistle blowing as reporting an organizational wrong doing to one's immediate supervisor (i.e., upward dissent), Bhal and Dadhich (2011) found a relationship between high LMX and whistle blowing. Other variables included in this study were ethical leadership and moral intensity of the wrongdoing. Leader support for the whistle blower was found to be an important consideration, consistent with characteristics of a high LMX relationship.

While the previous studies all confirm that superior–subordinate relationship quality is correlated with a subordinate's willingness to express voice or dissent, none of these studies has examined the relationship between superior–subordinate relationship quality and the use of specific upward dissent tactics. Following Kassing (2002), we focus on five types of dissent strategies: (a) solution-presentation, (b) direct-factual appeal, (c) repetition, (d) circumvention, and (e) threatening to resign. For each of these upward dissent tactics, we provide a brief description below along with hypothesized relationships between the tactic and superior–subordinate relationship quality based on the existing literature.

### ***Solution-Presentation***

Solution-presentation is defined as stating a complaint or concern accompanied by providing a solution to a problem. This tactic uses active, constructive voice in which employees present a solution that allows “managers and supervisors to be receptive to employee dissent in specific and meaningful ways” (Kassing, 2002, p. 199). Kassing (2002) argues that presenting solutions to a problem draws the attention away from the act of dissenting and focuses on the issue at hand, which in turn allows the relationship to stay intact.

### ***Direct-Factual Appeal***

Providing physical evidence and factual information in support of the dissenter’s claim is referred to as direct-factual appeal. Direct-factual appeals work under the premise that employees use their organizational experience and knowledge of organizational policies and practices in expressing their dissent (Kassing, 2002). Following Kassing and Kava’s (2013) operationalization and measurement of upward dissent tactics, solution-presentation and direct-factual appeal are collapsed under the category of *prosocial* dissent.

The types of communication described by Fairhurst (1993) and Krone (1992) as representative of high LMX relationships are consistent with the prosocial upward dissent tactic. Thus, we pose the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1:*** There is a positive relationship between quality of relationship with supervisor and use of the prosocial dissent tactic.

### ***Repetition***

Repetition is defined as bringing up an issue over and over again to steer attention to the problem and gain the attention of an unresponsive supervisor. When employees engage in repetition, they initially use a prosocial dissent tactic and then escalate to more face-threatening strategies (Kassing, 2002). Fairhurst and Krone’s studies both indicated that subordinates in high-quality relationships are less likely to use face-threatening communication with their supervisors. On the basis of the Botero and Van Dyne (2009) study, however, when subordinates perceive there is low power distance (or that they are treated as more equal to their supervisor) they may be more likely to use repetition. Given the lack of research related specifically to LMX and repetition, we do not propose a hypothesis but a research question:

**RQ 1:** What is the nature of the association between quality of relationship with supervisor and the repetition dissent tactic?

### ***Circumvention***

Bypassing one’s immediate supervisor and expressing dissent to someone higher in the organization’s hierarchy is referred to as circumvention (Kassing, 2002). Kassing (2009) found that explanations for circumvention include supervisor’s inaction, supervisor’s performance, and supervisor’s indiscretion. Circumvention carries a considerable amount of risk because it poses high face threat to one’s immediate supervisor (Kassing, 2007; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Fairhurst (1993) found that acts of criticism and rebuke were present in low superior–subordinate relationships and that these subordinates engaged in face-threatening behaviors with their supervisors.

### ***Threatening to Resign***

Kassing (2002) defines threat of resignation “as a form of leverage for obtaining responsiveness and action from supervisors and management” (p. 201). Threatening to resign is most likely to occur when employees or customers are placed at risk, employees feel a threat to their integrity, or employees perceive the situation has become intolerable (Kassing, 2002). Previous research has found that subordinates

experiencing low superior–subordinate relationship quality indicated limited involvement in decision-making (Liden & Graen, 1980), more performance monitoring (Fairhurst, 1993), and greater workload (Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996). Employees in these out-group relationships also faced more severe problems with their superiors (Graen & Cashman, 1975), experienced high levels of job burnout, and used more defensive communication (Becker, Halbesleben, & O’Hair, 2005). In a more recent study of upward dissent, Garner (2012) found that the use of pressure tactics is risky, but can be effective. Success with tactics such as circumvention and threatening to resign usually comes at the expense of the superior–subordinate relationship (Kassing, 2011). On the basis of this previous research we propose a second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a negative relationship between quality of relationship with supervisor and use of (a) threatening resignation and (b) circumvention dissent tactics.

Botero and Van Dyne’s (2009) study demonstrated that power distance moderates the relationship between LMX and voice in high LMX relationships. Because employee dissent is a specific form of voice in which the employee is sharing concerns about or disagreement with an organizational practice or policy, using this form of voice may be related to one’s conflict behavior. For example, even if employees perceive a high-quality relationship with their supervisor, they may choose not to dissent if they have a tendency to avoid conflict. We therefore turn to the conflict management styles research to see how this may help explain a subordinate’s decision of whether and how to dissent.

## Conflict Management Styles

Conflict management styles are individual tendencies or preferences for communication during conflict situations (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Conflict management styles can help us better understand how subordinates approach challenging situations and can influence the different strategies that they use when communicating with supervisors. Although the literature on conflict management styles cautions that no single conflict management style is best and that not all conflict management styles are perceived the same way (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Papa & Canary, 1995), conflict management styles have been shown to influence conflict interaction and outcomes of superior–subordinate relationships (Rahim, 2011). The forthcoming section briefly describes five conflict management styles and hypothesizes their relationships with upward dissent tactics.

### *Integrating*

Employees exhibiting an integrating conflict management style want to understand the other person’s reasons, are open to learning from the other person, and ultimately, merge insights from different perspectives to gain a consensual decision to address and solve a disagreement (Papa & Canary, 1995; Song, Dyer, & Thieme, 2006). Rahim, Magner, and Shapiro (2000) found that subordinates used an integrating conflict management style more often when subordinates perceived leaders were fair. Barbuto, Phipps, and Xu (2010) learned that a supervisor’s agreeableness and openness showed direct effects on an integrating conflict management style. Green (2008) surveyed 605 employees at one U.S. company and found that high-quality relationships between superiors and subordinates were associated with an integrating conflict management style. Guerrero and Gross (2014) found that an integrating conflict management style was closely related to traits of argumentativeness, the ability to advocate positions and issues, and benevolence.

As demonstrated by these research studies, descriptions of the integrating conflict management style are consistent with the prosocial upward dissent strategies of solution-presentation and direct-factual appeals. Just as prior research has found that integrating is perceived as both appropriate for the relationship and effective in solving issues (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Papa & Canary, 1995), the prosocial dissent

tactic has also been found to be the most competent form of expressing dissent (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 2005). On the basis of this literature, we propose a third hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** There is a positive relationship between the integrating conflict management style and the prosocial dissent tactic.

### ***Dominating***

This style is usually marked by a win–lose strategy pressuring the other party to give in (Rahim, 2011). The dominating conflict management style can lead to higher levels of destructive conflict (Song et al., 2006), but it can be effective when the organizational conflict is task related (Papa & Canary, 1995). Gross and Guerrero (2000) supported these findings, arguing that a dominating conflict management style was more effective for the task, but less appropriate for the relationship. Van de Vliert, Euwema, and Huismans (1995) discovered that high scorers in a dominating conflict management style engaged with fellow employees regardless of whether they were supervisors, subordinates, or peers. This supports the idea that despite hierarchical status within the organization, employees may use a dominating conflict management style. The use of a dominating conflict management style in combination with an initial integrating conflict management style has been shown to be effective for the conflict situation and the relationship between employees and supervisors (Van de Vliert et al., 1995).

Sometimes the dominating conflict management style can be considered a sign of strength (Hocker & Wilmot, 2007). In this case, supervisors might view subordinates' dissent favorably if they can back up their argument with facts or provide alternative solutions to the problem. The prosocial dissent tactic seems to be perceived as competent by others (Kassing, 2005), so in this case the presentation of dissent may be viewed as competing, yet appropriate for the relationship because employees are using evidence to support their position. Similarly, subordinates' repetitious dissent may be seen as a dominating conflict management style that is appropriate to get attention for their concerns. Using any of the four upward dissent tactics may therefore be seen as competing with the supervisor, and we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 4:** The dominating conflict management style will be positively related to all upward dissent tactics.

### ***Obliging***

This conflict management style can be appropriate in situations when employees are less familiar with the topic (Rahim, 2011) or to prevent conflict escalation. The obliging conflict management style hinders creative problem solving and disputants miss opportunities for joint gains. Employees using an obliging strategy have been found to rate themselves as less effective (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). The obliging conflict management style has several similarities to the avoiding conflict management style discussed below.

### ***Avoiding***

Avoiding is appropriate when dealing with “trivial or minor issues or when a cooling-off period is needed before a complex problem can be effectively dealt with” (Rahim, 2011, p. 54). The avoiding conflict management style has been found to be more common in low LMX relationships (Green, 2008). As Perlow (2003) states, “When differences are kept quiet, we limit creativity, learning, and effective decision making” (p. 5). Given that neither accommodating nor avoiding accomplishes the goals of upward dissent, we would not expect them to be related to any of the upward dissent tactics. Thus, we pose an exploratory research question regarding this relationship:

**RQ 2:** What is the nature of the relationship between the obliging and avoiding conflict management styles and any upward dissent tactics?



### ***Compromising***

Compromising involves settling a conflict through mutual concessions, where both parties give a little to gain a little (Van de Vliert et al., 1995). Thomas, Thomas, and Schaubhut (2008) surveyed 2,400 employees at six organizational levels and found the compromising conflict management style to be “the most frequent one at levels below top executives” (p. 159). While compromising is often thought of as a normative conflict management style, Song et al. (2006) actually found compromising to be associated with destructive conflict.

Compromising is marked by the limited amount of information that is being exchanged (Kurylo, 2010). Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1986) observed that employees using a compromising conflict management style sent informative messages (i.e., information concerning the job, product, or plans) and innovative messages (i.e., messages about new ways of doing things) more frequently than regulative (i.e., messages dealing with rules) or integrative messages (i.e., messages dealing with relationships between individual and organizational goals, support, trust). These findings can be interpreted to suggest that a compromising conflict management style shares characteristics of prosocial dissent, such as rationality and logic. Gross and Guerrero (2000) found that using a compromising conflict management style can be seen as moderately effective and appropriate, although it is not perceived as being as competent as an integrating conflict management style since it “precludes the emergence of creativity” (Papa & Canary, 1995, p. 170). However, Hocker and Wilmot (1995) noted that the compromising conflict management style has an “external moral force, and it appears reasonable to other parties” (p. 122). Given the features of the compromising conflict management style, it is unclear from the research how it might be related to upward dissent tactics, so we do not propose a hypothesis, but rather ask a research question.

**RQ 3:** What is the nature of the relationship between the compromising conflict management style and any upward dissent tactics?

Hypotheses 3 and 4 and research questions 2 and 3 address potential relationships between upward dissent tactics and conflict management styles, but do not directly address the role of superior–subordinate relationship quality in this interaction. We therefore propose one final research question to integrate all three constructs:

**RQ 4:** What are the relationships among upward dissent tactics, relational quality with supervisor, and conflict management styles?

## **Method**

### **Sample and Data Collection**

A nonprobability sample was used for this study, and the selection of participants was purposive. Participants consisted of full-time employees of three organizations: a roofing company in the southeastern U.S.A. with 430 employees; a bank with offices in two major cities in North Carolina with 104 employees; and a national youth development organization with 244 employees in North Carolina. Following approval from our Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, an online survey was used to explain the research to participants, obtain informed consent, and collect data. Human resources directors at the three participating organizations sent out a prenotification email to all full-time employees asking for their participation in the study. Participants were informed that their organization would receive a final report once the research was completed. After employees received the prenotification email, the human resources directors sent another email with the link to the survey to all full-time employees. Two reminder emails and one final thank-you email were sent to all employees during a two-week time frame. The sample included 265 employees, or roughly 34.06% of the employees invited to participate. Because of

some invalid responses and missing values, the analysis was conducted with a final sample of 242 responses.

Our sample was 47% female. Employees' age ranged from 21 to 72 years ( $M = 43.18$ ;  $SD = 10.85$ ). The majority of the sample (72%) reported an education level beyond a high school degree, including a trade degree or associate's degree (12%), a bachelor's degree (48%), and master's degree or higher (12%). Supervisory role was defined as whether the participant had employees who reported directly to them, and 52.8% were supervisors. Organizational tenure (i.e., total years of experience at current organization) ranged from less than 1 year to 33 years ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 5.75$ ).

**Construct Measures**

***Upward Dissent Tactics***

The Upward Dissent Scale (UDS) (Kassing & Kava, 2013) is a 20-item battery of questions measuring upward dissent along four dimensions on a 5-point Likert-type response format (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A higher score for a given tactic represents greater respondent identification with that upward dissent tactic. The measure collapses both solution-presentation and direct-factual appeal into the category prosocial. The resulting scale includes four tactics, measured with five survey items each. Sample statements for each tactic are as follows: prosocial ("I gather evidence to support my concern"), threatening resignation ("I say I'll quit if the organization doesn't do something about the problem"), circumvention ("I talk to someone higher up in the organization than my direct supervisor"), and repetition ("I raise the issue repeatedly"). Table 1 contains the mean and standard deviation for each variable along with its two assessments of reliability. In the instructions, participants were asked how they voiced their disagreement about organizational practices and policies to their immediate supervisor.

***Relationship Quality of Superiors and Subordinates***

To measure perceived relationship quality of respondents with their supervisors, defined as LMX, Bernerth, Armenakis, Field, Giles, and Walker's (2007) Leader-Member Social Exchange (LMSX) scale was used. The 8-item scale measures responses on a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) from the perspective of subordinates. A high score corresponds with a higher perception of negotiation latitude and a higher perception of social exchange with one's supervisor. Statements such as "When I give effort at work, my manager will return it" or "Voluntary actions on my part will be returned in some way by my manager" were used. Table 1 reports the mean and standard

Table 1  
*Univariate Statistics for Variables Used in Analysis*

Variable	Mean	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Average interitem $r$
Conflict management styles			
Integrating	4.09 (.51)	.89	.55
Obliging	3.69 (.49)	.77	.36
Dominating	2.74 (.65)	.80	.44
Avoiding	3.05 (.72)	.82	.43
Compromising	3.61 (.56)	.74	.42
Upward dissent tactics			
Prosocial	4.06 (.51)	.81	.48
Threatening resignation	1.63 (.64)	.89	.65
Circumvention	2.40 (.86)	.88	.60
Repetition	2.92 (.79)	.87	.87
LMX scale	5.18 (1.28)	.94	.67

Note.  $N = 242$ .



deviation for this variable and two assessments of its scale reliability. Participants were instructed to respond in the context of their current relationship with their immediate supervisor. The correlation matrix for all variables is reported in Table 2.

**Conflict Management Styles**

The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983) was used to measure conflict management styles. The ROCI-II consists of a series of statements represented on a 5-point Likert-type scale format (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Conflict with supervisors was measured from the perspective of subordinates; thus, Form A was used for this investigation. The preference for conflict management styles was the average of the derived ratings for the questions associated with each conflict management style. The 28-item battery of questions measures preference for each of the five different conflict management styles, with a higher score indicating higher preference. The five conflict management styles are *integrating* (7 items), *obliging* (6 items), *dominating* (5 items), *avoiding* (6 items), and *compromising* (4 items). Examples of statements for each of the five conflict management styles are as follows: integrating, “I try to investigate an issue with my supervisor to find a solution acceptable to us”; obliging, “I generally try to satisfy the needs of my supervisor”; dominating, “I use my influence to get my ideas accepted”; avoiding, “I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my supervisor”; and compromising, “I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.”

Descriptive statistics for these variables are provided in Table 1, which reports the mean and standard deviation as well as two assessments of measurement reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , which tends to inflate for scales with many items, and the average interitem correlation). Prior research reported scale reliability ranging from .67 to .77 (Rahim, 1983). The ROCI-II has been also satisfactorily tested for construct, convergent, and discriminant validity (Rahim, 2011). Other studies using the ROCI-II have shown consistently similar results (see Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Weider-Hatfield, 1988). In the instructions, participants were asked how they managed conflict with their immediate supervisor.

**Results**

Rather than looking at relationships in isolation from one another through bivariate analysis, we opted to look at them simultaneously in a series of hierarchical ordinary least squares regression models. We report three models for each upward dissent tactic. The main advantage of multiple regression is its ability to test the relationship between independent variables and dependent variable while simultaneously controlling for other variables that might distort or suppress the effects of interest (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The models are described as hierarchical because we have specified different blocks of

Table 2  
Correlation Matrix for Upward Dissent Tactics and Conflict Management Styles

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Prosocial (1)									
Threatening resignation (2)	-.10								
Circumvention (3)	.09	.44***							
Repetition (4)	.24***	.35***	.44***						
Integrating (5)	.57***	-.27***	-.15*	-.03					
Obliging (6)	.03	-.11	-.08	-.08	.15*				
Dominating (7)	.16*	.18**	.33***	.33***	.14*	-.01			
Avoiding (8)	-.17**	.03	.05	-.09	-.14*	.41***	-.08		
Compromising (9)	.34***	-.05	.06	.09	.57***	.15*	.26***	-.03	

Notes. N = 242. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

variables that are conceptually similar to one another. Each block is introduced into the equation according to its presumed causal order, with our control variables (age, sex, education, supervisory role, and organizational tenure) entered first followed by the LMX variable, conflict management styles, and controls for the other upward dissent tactics. The first model (LMX Model) tests the relationship between LMX and each upward dissent tactic. The second model (CMS Model) leaves out LMX and adds conflict management styles to explore their relationships to upward dissent tactics. Finally, the Combined Model includes both the LMX and conflict management styles in predicting each upward dissent tactic. The Combined Model also introduces controls for the other upward dissent tactics to discount spurious relationships between our variables of interest.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that as the relationship with one’s supervisor increases in quality, subordinates are more likely to use the prosocial dissent tactic. This relationship was significant in the LMX Model ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ , see Table 3).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that as relationship quality with supervisor increases, subordinates will be less likely to use (a) threatening resignation and (b) circumvention dissent tactics. Hypothesis 2a was significant ( $\beta = -.16, p < .05$ ), but Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Thus, Hypothesis 2 overall was supported only in the case of the threatening resignation dissent tactic (see Tables 4 and 5).

Research Question 1 explored the relationship between relationship quality with supervisor and the use of the repetition dissent tactic. The regression model indicates no significant relationship (see Table 6).

Table 3  
Multiple Regressions Predicting Prosocial Dissent Tactic through Leader–Member Exchange and Conflict Management Styles

	LMX Model	CMS Model	Combined Model
Block 1: control variables			
Respondent age	.09	.02	.05
Respondent sex	-.18**	-.12*	-.10#
Education	.01	.01	.02
Years of employment	-.09	-.12*	-.13*
Supervisory role	.14*	.08	.07
Block R <sup>2</sup> (%)	8.3**	8.0**	8.0**
Block 2: superior-subordinate relationship			
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	.13*	–	-.07
Block R <sup>2</sup> (%)	1.6*	–	2.1*
Block 3: conflict management styles			
Integrating	–	.57***	.62***
Obliging	–	-.02	-.00
Dominating	–	.03	-.04
Avoiding	–	-.05	-.06
Compromising	–	.02	.01
Block R <sup>2</sup> (%)	–	33.8***	32.4***
Block 4: other upward dissent tactics			
Prosocial	–	–	–
Threatening resignation	–	–	-.05
Circumvention	–	–	.15*
Repetition	–	–	.13*
Block R <sup>2</sup> (%)	–	–	3.7**
Total R <sup>2</sup> (%)	9.9	41.9	46.2

Notes. N = 242. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 4

*Multiple Regressions Predicting Threatening Resignation Dissent Tactic through Leader–Member Exchange and Conflict Management Styles*

	LMX Model	CMS Model	Combined Model
Block 1: demographics			
Respondent age	-.16*	-.12	-.05
Respondent sex	.01	.06	.09
Education	-.12	-.14*	-.11
Years of employment	-.04	-.03	-.04
Number of supervisees	-.07	-.08	-.07
Block $R^2$ (%)	4.6*	4.7*	4.7*
Block 2: superior-subordinate relationship			
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	-.16*	–	-.07
Block $R^2$ (%)	2.5*	–	2.4*
Block 3: conflict management styles			
Integrating	–	-.31***	-.18*
Obliging	–	-.12	-.08
Dominating	–	.22**	.08
Avoiding	–	.04	.01
Compromising	–	.11	.06
Block $R^2$ (%)	–	12.4***	11.1***
Block 4: other upward dissent tactics			
Prosocial	–	–	-.06
Threatening resignation	–	–	–
Circumvention	–	–	.27***
Repetition	–	–	.20**
Block $R^2$ (%)	–	–	11.4***
Total $R^2$ (%)	7.1	17.2	29.6

Notes.  $N = 242$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive relationship between use of an integrating conflict management style and the prosocial dissent tactic. This is supported as shown in the CMS Model of Table 3 ( $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Hypothesis 4 proposed a positive relationship between the dominating conflict style and all upward dissent tactics. This hypothesis is partially supported as we found a positive relationship between dominating and threatening resignation ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), circumvention ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and repetition ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, no significant relationship was found for the dominating conflict management style and the prosocial dissent tactic (see Tables 3–6, CMS Model).

Research Question 2 asked whether there were any relationships between the obliging and avoiding conflict management styles and any upward dissent tactics. No significant relationships were found. Likewise, no relationship was found between the compromising conflict management style and any upward dissent tactics as addressed in Research Question 3.

Research Question 4 examined the relationship among all three variables: upward dissent tactics, superior–subordinate relationship quality, and conflict management styles. These results are reported in the Combined Model for each upward dissent tactic (Tables 3–6). Results indicated that LMX was not a significant predictor of any of the four upward dissent tactics when also controlling for conflict management styles. This was surprising for the prosocial dissent and threatening resignation dissent tactics, since LMX was a significant predictor of these two dependent variables in the LMX Models. We address a potential explanation for this in more detail below.

Table 5  
*Multiple Regressions Predicting Circumvention Dissent Tactic through Leader–Member Exchange and Conflict Management Styles*

	LMX Model	CMS Model	Combined Model
Block 1: demographics			
Respondent age	-.19**	-.17**	-.11
Respondent sex	-.09	-.03	.02
Education	-.00	-.05	-.00
Years of employment	-.04	-.03	-.01
Number of supervisees	.01	.01	.02
Block <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	4.8*	5.6*	5.3*
Block 2: superior-subordinate relationship			
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	-.10	–	-.04
Block <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	1.0	–	1.1
Block 3: conflict management styles			
Integrating	–	-.21**	-.21*
Obliging	–	-.09	-.04
Dominating	–	.33***	.21**
Avoiding	–	.10	.11
Compromising	–	.14	.09
Block <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	–	14.9***	14.7***
Block 4: other upward dissent tactics			
Prosocial	–	–	.18*
Threatening resignation	–	–	.25***
Circumvention	–	–	–
Repetition	–	–	.23***
Block <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	–	–	14.9***
Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	5.7	20.5	36.1

Notes. *N* = 242. \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

Significant relationships were found for conflict management styles and upward dissent tactics in the Combined Models. In other words, even after controlling for LMX and upward dissent tactics, several relationships between conflict management styles and upward dissent tactics remained robust. First, there was a significant relationship between the integrating conflict management style and the prosocial dissent tactic ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ). Conversely, there was a negative relationship between the integrating conflict management style and the threatening resignation dissent tactic ( $\beta = -.18, p < .05$ ). There was also a negative relationship between the integrating conflict management style and the circumvention dissent tactic ( $\beta = -.21, p < .05$ ) but a positive relationship between the dominating conflict management style and the circumvention dissent tactic ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ). A positive relationship was found between the dominating conflict management style and the repetition dissent tactic ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ).

In at least two models, LMX was no longer a significant predictor of upward dissent tactics once we introduced conflict management styles. One potential explanation for this is mediation, that is, the LMX variable indirectly influences the upward dissent tactics outcome through the integrating conflict management style. To test this possibility, which goes further in answering Research Question 4, we conducted a follow-up mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2009) with bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 draws). The mediation analysis replicated the nonsignificant direct effect between LMX and prosocial dissent tactic ( $B = -.02, SE = .02; 95\% \text{ CI} = -.06, .02$ ), but the analysis also revealed a significant indirect effect between these two variables through the mediator of the integrating

Table 6

*Multiple Regressions Predicting Repetition Dissent Tactic through Leader–Member Exchange and Conflict Management Styles*

	LMX Model	CMS Model	Combined Model
Block 1: demographics			
Respondent age	-.12	-.13	-.07
Respondent sex	-.22**	-.13*	-.13*
Education	-.05	-.10	-.06
Years of employment	.02	.03	.05
Number of supervisees	.04	.01	.00
Block $R^2$ (%)	6.8**	6.7**	6.7**
Block 2: superior-subordinate relationship			
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	-.06	–	-.06
Block $R^2$ (%)	.4	–	.4
Block 3: conflict management styles			
Integrating	–	-.09	-.06
Obliging	–	-.05	-.00
Dominating	–	.28***	.15*
Avoiding	–	-.08	-.11
Compromising	–	.08	.04
Block $R^2$ (%)	–	9.6***	10.5***
Block 4: other upward dissent tactics			
Prosocial	–	–	.16*
Threatening resignation	–	–	.20**
Circumvention	–	–	.25***
Repetition	–	–	–
Block $R^2$ (%)	–	–	13.2***
Total $R^2$ (%)	7.2	16.4	30.9

Notes.  $N = 242$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

conflict management style ( $B = .09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ; 95% CI: .05, .13). In sum, LMX is positively related to an integrating conflict management style, which is in turn positively related to the prosocial dissent tactic, and the previously significant relationship between LMX and the prosocial dissent tactic disappears as a result. Overall, these results indicate that LMX exerts an indirect effect on the prosocial dissent tactic through its positive relationship with the integrating conflict management style.

As with the prosocial dissent tactic, we also tested for an indirect effect of LMX on the threatening resignation dissent tactic. In this case, the indirect effect of LMX on the upward dissent tactic through the mediator of the integrating conflict management style was not significant ( $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .02$ ; 95% CI:  $-.07$ ,  $.00$ ). There was no support from this test for a mediating effect of conflict management style.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationships between and among upward dissent tactics, superior–subordinate relationship quality, and conflict management styles to better understand the conditions under which employees express upward dissent as well as the specific upward dissent tactics used. On the basis of previous research on superior–subordinate relationship quality and voice, we expected that LMX and upward dissent tactics would be related. The findings of this study showed mixed results. Our initial regression supported the hypothesis that perceptions of relationship quality are linked to an employee's use of the prosocial dissent tactic. However, accounting for conflict management styles

eliminated this significant, direct relationship. We were able to confirm that the effect of the superior–subordinate relationship quality on the prosocial dissent tactic is mediated by the use of an integrating conflict management style. This is an important finding in that it suggests that a high-quality superior–subordinate relationship is related to the use of an integrating conflict management style, which in turn leads to the use of a prosocial dissent tactic. Furthermore, the integrating conflict management style was negatively related to both the threatening resignation and circumvention dissent tactics. Related to our study, Guerrero and Gross (2014) found that individuals who rated themselves high in both benevolence and argumentativeness in conflict with others were especially likely to be perceived as using an integrating conflict management style. They further noted that conflict management styles “are not only shaped by one’s own traits but also by the traits of others and the interaction between two people’s traits” (Guerrero & Gross, 2014 p. 99). Our findings have implications for organizations because dissent is an important feedback mechanism that can lead to greater employee satisfaction and commitment as well as creativity and innovation (Kassing, 2011; Perlow, 2003; Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch, & Vogelgesang, 2008). Therefore, organizations should provide mechanisms that increase both superiors’ and subordinates’ skill in communicating arguments focused on facts, evidence, and solutions to foster positive employee relationships and support prosocial employee dissent.

The initial regression also found that superior–subordinate relationship quality was negatively related to the upward dissent tactic of threatening resignation. However, when conflict management styles were added to the model, the significance of LMX disappeared, and in this case conflict management styles did not mediate the effect of the relationship. Superior–subordinate relationship quality was neither directly nor indirectly related to the upward dissent tactics of circumvention or repetition. However, a dominating conflict management style predicted the use of threatening resignation, circumvention, and repetition, but not a prosocial upward dissent tactic. This finding is important because each of these tactics has been found to be face-threatening to supervisors, and employees using these approaches might be more likely to experience the negative effects of expressing voice, such as retaliation and a sense of futility. While previous research has suggested that dominating can be effective for addressing task conflict (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Papa & Canary, 1995), our results remind us that conflict and dissent are not equal. In the context of dissent, the dominating conflict management style does not predict optimal upward dissent tactics and therefore carries greater potential risk than reward.

As expected there were no relationships between the obliging and avoiding conflict management styles and any of the four upward dissent tactics. This makes sense since employees cannot voice their opinion by accommodating or avoiding the other. They remain passive. Instead, they might opt for lateral or displaced dissent by venting to coworkers or complaining to people outside work. These findings as a whole support the idea that the upward dissent tactics and conflict management styles constructs are related in ways that the literature would predict.

Interestingly, no relationship was found between the compromising conflict management style and the prosocial dissent tactic as compromise is often thought of as a reasonable and normative form of conflict management (Hocker & Wilmot, 2007). The lack of relationship again illustrates the distinction between dissent and conflict. While an employee with a compromising conflict management style is eager to find a solution that is reasonable to both parties, dissent is more likely to involve ethical or moral issues (Kassing & Armstrong, 2001), which are not open to negotiation or compromise. Therefore, it makes theoretical sense that compromise would be less relevant in the context of organizational dissent.

To summarize the theoretical implications of this study, superior–subordinate relationships are relevant to upward dissent in that LMX is related to the integrating conflict management style, which promotes the use of the prosocial dissent tactic. This supports previous studies of voice and dissent that found a connection between high-quality relationships and the use of proactive and prosocial communication (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Kassing, 2000b; Krone, 1992; Waldron, 1991). Given our findings, we were able to confirm previous research in the context of superior–subordinate relationship quality and voice.



However, this study supports that the quality of the superior–subordinate relationship is not the only, nor perhaps the most important, indicator of the expression of upward dissent. Dissent is tied to freedom of speech at work, and the higher the level of perceived freedom of expression at work, the more likely employees are to participate in dissent (Hegstrom, 1990; Kassing, 2000a; Redding, 1985). As Kassing (2008) has discussed, organizational climate, adversarial perception and retaliation, and organizational attachment are also important indicators of dissent. To these indicators we can add a fourth, individual conflict management styles, since our study found direct relationships between the integrating and dominating conflict management styles and the use of discrete upward dissent tactics.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have implications for organizational leaders and management. After all “leaders have the ability to affect their relationship with followers by employing particular styles of conflict management” (Green, 2008, p. 105). Moreover, and as previously mentioned, communication traits shape how people are being perceived in conflict situations (Guerrero & Gross, 2014), which can further influence how superiors impact the superior–subordinate relationship quality. By virtue of their position, leaders influence the outcome of the dyadic relationship between superiors and subordinates. Supervisors’ responses to dissent may either enable or constrain future communication, and therefore, they “should pay special attention to the conflict parties’ opportunity to voice their perspectives” (Siira, 2012, p. 201). Organizations would likely benefit from training supervisors in specific communication strategies for inviting and responding to dissent. For example, supervisors who model an integrating conflict management style would use evidence to support and explain their decisions as well as invite employees to engage in collaborative problem solving. These positive communication experiences should create an open environment in which employees learn that they can voice their concerns to supervisors as long as they do so using an integrating conflict management style and by association, a prosocial dissent tactic. While this study cannot support the claim that an integrating conflict management style or a prosocial dissent tactic will improve relationship quality between employees and their supervisors, the literature supporting the value of creating an open voice climate would suggest that this strategy is more likely to help than harm relationships (Frazier, 2013). After all, better relationships increase job satisfaction, which in turn can increase job performance and ultimately result in greater organizational effectiveness (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Garnder, 2009; Fix & Sias, 2006).

In terms of leader and organizational self-assessments, paying attention to employees’ use of upward dissent tactics may provide insight into how employees perceive the quality of their relationship with their supervisor. Trends in upward dissent might also provide a macrolevel indication of the organization’s tolerance for employee dissent (Kassing, 2011). This kind of feedback could help improve individual relationships as well as improve organizational systems, as organizations that do not embrace voice are likely to stunt organizational innovation, creativity, and growth (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2008).

## Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, this study has limitations. The concept of voice is interactive and longitudinal and affects multiple levels of an organization (Shapiro & Burriss, 2014). Whether and how employees engage in dissent is affected by the response from one’s supervisor in previous dissent attempts. As a cross-sectional study, we only have access to one party’s perspective at one point in time. Moreover, this study only investigated the subordinates’ perceptions of relational quality with their supervisors. Having the supervisors’ perceptions would increase our ability to evaluate the quality of the relationship. This could also help predict how one party’s use of communication influences upward dissent tactics and conflict management styles. The study is also limited by the sample size and use of a nonrandom sample that is restricted to the individualistic culture of the U.S.A. While this study makes an important contribution by collecting data in the field rather than in the laboratory, a more dyadic and interactive approach that examines actual dissent expression would go even further in helping to unpack the intricacies of employee use of voice.

The findings from the current study suggest recommendations for future research. Like any social relationship, workplace relationships are dynamic. Because of unforeseen fluctuations that employees experience, future studies should use longitudinal research designs to separate everyday routine from nonroutine communication behaviors that might impact the choice of upward dissent tactics and conflict management styles. Another question we propose to investigate is whether the quality of superior–subordinate relationships leads to the use of an integrating conflict management style and prosocial dissent, or whether communication creates higher quality relationships. Indeed, as communication scholars we believe this to be an iterative relationship. In this study we followed previous dissent scholars who examined LMX as the independent variable, but it would also be interesting to empirically explore whether relationship quality is a moderator between conflict management styles and upward dissent tactics.

As mentioned above, implications for training employees and supervisors in the integrating conflict management style and the prosocial upward dissent tactic are a beneficial way to foster leadership, improve conflict behavior, and maintain positive and high-quality superior–subordinate relationships. Future research should assess whether such training has the effect of improving employee voice as well as superior–subordinate relationship quality.

While this study did not directly examine demographic variables, in this sample men were more likely than women to report use of prosocial and repetition dissent tactics. Future research ought to investigate why this is the case as well as the effectiveness of these tactics. If women are less likely to use these tactics with their managers, what are they doing to manage conflict and express dissent, and how effective are these strategies? More in-depth understanding of why and how men and women use different dissent tactics with their superiors may require qualitative approaches that help explain the current findings.

Additionally, this study revealed that employees in supervisory positions tended to use a prosocial dissent tactic more frequently than employees without a management role. An interesting question is whether employees in supervisory roles use different tactics because they are in management positions, or they have achieved promotions because of the communication competence shown through the use of the prosocial dissent tactic.

In summary, our findings have supported previous findings on superior–subordinate relational quality and increased use of voice, defined as upward dissent. However, our findings reveal that this relationship may be mediated by employees' conflict management styles. Moreover, our findings show that upward dissent tactics and conflict management styles are theoretically related in ways that scholars would predict. But we also believe that conflict management styles and upward dissent tactics operate independently of each other. Lastly, our research extends previous assumptions (see Green, 2008; Northouse, 2001) about how supervisors can build positive relationships that can lead to higher quality communication with subordinates that allows them to use their voice in a meaningful way that contributes to greater organizational effectiveness.

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