

Disagreeing with Employees' Constructive Disagreement: On Giving (Non-)Specific Explanations for Rejecting Employees' Voiced Suggestions

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Abstract

When employees express constructive disagreement (i.e., engage in voice behavior) with managers, it provides valuable opportunities for organizational improvement. However, managers cannot implement all suggestions, and how they handle rejection can shape employees' willingness to speak up again. This study explores whether managers' explanation specificity—offering clear, detailed reasons for not endorsing employees' ideas—can foster a sense of voice safety, and in turn voice resilience—voice behavior about an issue following a prior instance of voice non-endorsement on a different voiced issue. Two experiments, one conducted with American participants and another with Chinese participants, show that when managers explain their rejections with specificity rather than with vague, non-specific remarks, employees feel safer and more likely to voice a new suggestion. Our findings highlight a practical means for managers to sustain the flow of constructive employee input, underscoring the importance of clear managerial communication within the voice process.

Transparency & Openness

The data and syntax used to replicate the results reported in this study are openly available at the Open Science Framework (OSF):

https://osf.io/xs2dq/?view_only=bae2d91db08c41c19e83611626513a4e

Introduction

Employee voice is a form of constructive disagreement in which an employee expresses suggestions for changes in task, work, or organizational procedures to their superior with the purpose of improving performance (Burris et al., 2008; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Employee voice yields various benefits for organizations, such as improved information flow and decision making (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Knoll et al., 2016) and for employees as, for example, expressing voice may be an effective coping mechanism in a conflict situation (Chaudry et al., 2022). Given that voice behavior entails an expressed disagreement with tasks, plans, or procedures over which the voicing employee's manager has direct authority, employees may believe that expressing this disagreement means that they are criticizing their managers, and managers may not take it well (Morrison, 2023). Hence, it is not surprising that research has focused on when and why employees feel reluctant or encouraged to express this disagreement (Li et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2021) and when and why managers are likely to respond positively when employees do express disagreement (Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014; Schreurs et al., 2020; Whiting et al., 2012). Indeed, for this expression of constructive disagreement to yield its beneficial impact, the voiced suggestion needs to be endorsed by someone with the power to enact it, which is often a manager (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011).

Yet, the reality is that managers, even those who value employee voice, from time to time, must turn down suggestions, especially those suggestions that are too radical, resource-intensive, and over which they have no authority (Burris et al., 2017; Deichmann & Ende, 2014). Voice rejections, while often necessary, may discourage employees from engaging in voice again when a new issue comes up in the future (see Knoll et al., 2016), which would be undesirable because for organizations to learn and develop, it is preferable that employees continue to voice their valid disagreements with the status quo when they identify an issue (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). In this study, we conceptualize voice resilience as a situation in which an employee engages in voice behavior about an issue following a prior instance of voice non-endorsement on a different voiced issue.

Because voice rejections are prevalent (Hamstra et al., 2024; Satterstrom et al., 2021), knowing how to reject voice effectively—that is, to turn down employees' voice while not discouraging their future voice on other issues—would be useful for managers who seek to reap the benefits of employees' (continued) voice. Managers who can effectively turn down voice can foster a positive work environment, enhancing job satisfaction and employee trust (Morrison, 2011). Conversely, poor handling of these situations can undermine psychological safety, resulting in decreased idea sharing and increased turnover (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

To investigate how managers can effectively turn down voice while ensuring voice resilience, we draw from the organizational justice literature (Colquitt et al., 2005; Druckman & Wagner, 2016, 2017; Greenberg, 1990a). Employees who have their voice rejected are likely to perceive it as an unfair outcome. When employees put forth an idea with time and effort, they believe it is a good idea, and rejection is therefore an unfair outcome in light of their assessment

that it is a good idea and their expectation that it is taken seriously. However, when managers provide an *explanation* for why they rejected the voiced suggestion, this explanation has the potential to restore the perception of overall fairness by showing employees whose voice was rejected that the manager used *procedural* fairness in coming to this decision. For this to happen, however, the explanation should indeed provide information regarding the specifics of how the decision to reject the voice came about (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Druckman & Wagner, 2016; Scott et al., 2007; Shapiro et al., 1994). Accordingly, we suggest that providing detailed explanations can help establish a procedure that is perceived as transparent and fair, which in turn means that employees will find their manager to be reliable and trustworthy (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Voice behavior is risky (Morrison, 2023). Yet, when employees trust their manager, they feel safe to voice suggestions to them (Guzman & Fu, 2022; Hamstra et al., 2021), and they are more likely to continue doing so in the future (Kim et al., 2019). The perception of voice safety is the critical component in this process as it is in essence the voice context-specific outflow of a restoration of trust (the expectation that one will not be harmed) that would be expected if a specific explanation leads to an improvement in procedural justice. Accordingly, we propose that *specific* rather than general explanations for voice rejections will lead to higher perceptions of voice safety and in turn to voice resilience.

We thus aim to make several contributions. First, whereas considerable research has studied different conflict management styles applied by managers, such research tends to focus on the manager as a third party in inter-employee or intra-team conflict (e.g., Hogler et al., 2009). Scant research has focused on managers' conflict management regarding a disagreement they have with an employee (Dijkstra et al., 2014). The handful of studies that have investigated manager-employee conflicts (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Dijkstra et al., 2014; Frone, 2000) indicate that such conflict tends to have detrimental outcomes such as employee counterproductivity, gossiping about the boss, and employee turnover. Thus, our research contributes to the conflict management literature by examining the relative effectiveness of a novel way managers have to handle their employees when they express a constructive disagreement that managers do not endorse. We focus on the effectiveness of managers' response in terms of its relative impact on whether the employee feels that it is safe for them to continue to express disagreement (i.e., voice safety) and, consequently, whether employees are likely to express disagreements on other issues again in the future (i.e., voice resilience).

Second, our research has practical relevance as most voiced suggestions are turned down (Satterstrom et al., 2021), yet organizations benefit from employees who engage in employee voice on other issues, even after voice on a particular issue was not endorsed. As such, studying antecedents of voice resilience in terms of how managers may handle their responses to this disagreement can contribute to ensuring that the upward flow of ideas is not inhibited despite employees experiencing non-endorsement events. Third, we contribute to voice research. Whereas most research has studied employee voice as a one-time event (Klaas et al., 2012), we consider it as a process where experiences (i.e., non-endorsement) during previous voice episodes can impact how employees respond during future voice episodes (Knoll et al., 2016). Despite prior non-endorsement experiences, our results show how employees can remain resilient to give input about new issues in the future. Further, we draw attention to the role of message characteristics, such as explanation specificity, in influencing sustained voice behavior. We highlight how explanation specificity, a marker of fairness, instills perceptions of safety, which in turn promotes subsequent employee voice.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Explanation Specificity of Voice Non-Endorsement

Managers play a key role in deciding which suggestions they endorse and which not to support with organizational resources (Guzman & Espejo, 2019). Managers' response to employees' voiced suggestions also impacts employees' future attitudes and subsequent behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007). Although non-endorsement does not automatically speak to the quality of the suggestion or to the appreciation of the manager for the employee, it is probably not the employee's hoped-for outcome when speaking up with a dissenting view. Moreover, unfavorable manager responses have the potential to arouse negative emotions and frustration in employees, such as lowering self-esteem, and can even lead to conflict, aggression, and retaliatory behaviors (Baron, 1988; Chester & DeWall, 2017; Skarlicki et al., 2008).

When managers offer specific explanations when turning down voice, defined as the extent to which the explanation about the decision includes clearly defined and identifiable reasons (Shapiro et al., 1994), as opposed to explanations that include only imprecise or equivocal reasons, managers utilize a possibly effective way to buffer some of the adverse effects from the non-endorsement event. Specificity, along with clearness, reasonableness, and timeliness, constitutes one of the key characteristics that determine whether a message is interpreted as informationally fair (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Shapiro et al., 1994). Offering specific explanations for unfavorable events, such as a non-endorsement experience, may not only ameliorate employees' negative reactions, but also could even result in positive reactions. This is because specific explanations promote employees' beliefs that their managers' actions were fair and the result of good judgment (Bies & Moag, 1986). Using fair procedures positively affects employees' reactions, even more so than outcome favorability (Druckman & Wagner, 2016; Lind & Tyler, 1988). People are often uncertain about how to evaluate the fairness of the outcomes they have received, and under conditions of uncertainty about outcome fairness, people rely strongly on procedural fairness perceptions (Van den Bos et al., 1998), which includes perceptions on whether managers provided adequate explanations for decision-making (Colquitt, 2001). Because employees typically lack complete information regarding the potential available resources, organizational tactics, and general strategy, it is difficult for them to judge whether voice non-endorsements are fair. However, when managers provide them with concrete information detailing why their idea cannot be implemented, in the form of a detailed explanation, employees are likely to use this as a heuristic to judge whether they are being treated fairly.

In support of the fair process effect, research has shown that offering specific explanations for unfavorable decisions is positively related to employees' perceptions of informational fairness (Richter et al., 2018), trust in leadership (Holtz & Harold, 2008), cooperation (Shaw et al., 2003), and job satisfaction (Loi et al., 2009). Unfortunately, managers sometimes do give explanations that are so vague that they alienate themselves from employees when adopting the role of the "bearer of bad news" (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Holtz & Harold, 2008). The absence of specific explanations for unfavorable events can be costly as it can lead to increased employee turnover intentions (Kim, 2009), unethical behavior (Greenberg, 1990b), lower favorability of managers' resource allocation decisions (Brockner et al., 1990), and reduced psychological health (Lang et al., 2011). We argue that specific explanations foster perceptions of voice safety, which in turn affects voice resilience.

Explanation Specificity, Voice Safety, and Voice Resilience

Voice safety relates to employees' beliefs about whether it is safe to speak up in a particular context and believing that engaging in voice will not have negative consequences for the self or for one's relationships with others (Morrison, 2023). By offering specific information, managers meet the informational justice rule, which expects them to give adequate explanations for voice non-endorsement (Colquitt, 2001; Scott et al., 2007). Specific explanations can also increase employees' procedural fairness perceptions (Cole et al., 2010; Druckman & Wagner, 2017; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), which send messages to employees that managers treat them with respect and appreciation, showing their support of their voiced ideas (Janssen & Gao, 2015). A manager who shies away and avoids involvement by giving vague explanations, violates the informational justice rule, from which employees would most likely conclude that it is not safe to voice (Scott et al., 2007). Research in the conflict management domain supports this reasoning. For example, research on conflict management styles suggests that collaborative conflict management styles lead to greater perceptions of fairness. The "problem-solving" style of conflict management involves giving relatively more information about one's priorities and reasons for one's position (Pruitt, 1983; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). It signals a concern for the follower's need for information and has been found to predict a sense of interactional justice (Dijkstra et al., 2014). As another closely related example, supervisors' open communication during a conflict episode led to greater trust in the supervisor (Korsgaard et al., 2002). Thus, we propose,

***H1.** Specific explanations (relative to non-specific explanations) for voice non-endorsements will lead to higher levels of perceived voice safety.*

When employees perceive higher levels of voice safety, they are more likely to voice again about new issues, that is, to display voice resilience. In general, the decision to express voice or to remain silent is undergirded by a cost-benefit analysis, a mental calculation that employees make based on a variety of factors (Detert & Burris, 2007). A cost of voice could be that employees imagine that their manager will feel criticized by the voiced suggestion and may feel threatened in their position/power (Fast et al., 2014; Isaakyan et al., 2021). Such thoughts could lead the employee to expect that the manager is likely to retaliate or lash out against the employee, give poor performance evaluations, or pass the employee over for promotions, and so forth (Milliken et al., 2003).

However, when an employee perceives higher levels of voice safety, it means that the employee believes the manager will *not* act in a negative or detrimental way toward the employee when they express something that could be considered as critical of the manager or challenging of the status quo (Morrison et al., 2011). Under high voice safety the employee perceives lower potential costs from speaking up to their manager. Consequently, the cost-benefit calculation will be relatively favorable, and will more likely prompt the employee to engage in voice. Indeed, previous research finds that perceived manager trustworthiness, which refers to the expectation that employees will not be harmed by their manager, is a clear antecedent of speaking up versus remaining silent (Hamstra et al., 2021). Similarly, in the conflict domain, supervisor "listening" behavior relates positively to future employee dissent (Kelly et al., 2023). When employees perceive their manager as trustworthy, they have positive expectations that their manager could act in honest ways. Therefore, employees are more likely to believe and accept manager's specific explanations for voice non-endorsement, leading employees to perceive voice behavior as safer. Hence,

***H2.** Indirectly via voice safety, specific explanations (compared with non-specific ones) result in higher levels of voice resilience.*

The Current Research

Research on voice resilience has been scarce (for some notable exceptions see: Hamstra et al., 2024; King et al., 2019). King and colleagues (2019) examined the role of specificity of explanations for voice non-endorsement in two studies. In addition to explanation specificity, they also examined the role of explanation sensitivity. King and colleagues' research concluded that providing specific explanation when rejecting voice did not influence employees' sense of voice safety or voice resilience.

However, King and colleagues' research displays an inconsistent patterns of results. In both studies, explanation sensitivity affected outcomes only when explanation specificity was also accounted for. Their Study 1 correlation table shows that voice intentions is correlated with explanation specificity, but not with explanation sensitivity. However, their structural model suggested an inverse pattern: explanation sensitivity, but not explanation specificity indirectly affected voice via voice safety. Adding further complexity to the interpretation of these results is the fact that explanation sensitivity and explanation specificity were highly correlated, suggesting that specificity may function as a suppressor variable in their model. Their Study 2 correlation table shows that voice resilience is also correlated with the explanation specificity condition, but not with the explanation sensitivity condition, and neither condition was significantly correlated with voice safety after participants had their voice turned down. However, their structural model shows that explanation sensitivity, but not explanation specificity, was indirectly related to voice via voice safety.

King and colleagues suggest that individuals' tendency to focus on relational considerations (i.e., explanation sensitivity) when evaluating managers' rejections may explain why they did not find support for the effect of explanation specificity. Their rationale, however, contradicts the results of Shapiro and colleagues (1994), who found that explanation specificity accounted for more variance in judgments of explanation adequacy than interpersonal sensitivity. Furthermore, the usefulness of the specificity of explanations is rooted in the fairness perspectives (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt et al., 2005) and has received extensive research support (e.g., Cole et al., 2010).

Based on the preceding discussion, we believe that it is premature to conclude that explanation specificity does not matter in the voice process. As such, we seek to investigate the role of explanation specificity separately from explanation sensitivity. We do so in two experiments, with working adults from two different cultures. We selected USA and China because of their country-level differences in power distance. Sampling participants from these two countries will help us to determine whether our results could be generalized across cultures that differ in whether managers are expected to offer explanations after disagreeing with subordinates.

Study 1: Method

Participants

We recruited working adults from the United States to participate in a vignette experiment, using Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Three attention check questions (e.g., “please choose ‘strongly disagree’ for this question”) to detect careless responses were embedded for data quality. The final sample consisted of 176 respondents (a response rate of 83.8%, 34.09% female) after excluding those who failed the attention check and failed to follow the experimental instructions (giving advice unrelated to the experiment settings). The average age was 37.00 years ($SD = 12.10$); 66.48% had a bachelor diploma or higher; the average working experience was 10.93 years ($SD = 10.28$).

Design and Procedure

The study employed a between-subjects design. After reading an informed consent screen, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: specific versus non-specific explanation. The participants in our study were asked to imagine that they were an employee of a supermarket company and had been working in the customer service department for three years. Participants were given a description of a work-related problem and a solution proposed by their manager, Brandon. Next, participants were asked to imagine that they were not able to stop thinking about their manager’s proposal, and after careful consideration, they had decided to inform their manager of their concerns, though aware that they are thereby questioning their manager’s authority. Then participants were shown the specific suggestions that they had (allegedly) expressed to their manager. We designed this framing in accordance with the definition of voice as challenging behavior (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998).

On the next screen, participants saw an email sent by their manager with the explanation of why their suggestions could not be implemented. Here, participants were randomly assigned to receive a specific or a non-specific explanation, which was based on the manipulation used by King and colleagues (2019; see details in the Appendix). Then participants were asked to report their perceptions of voice safety. Subsequently, participants were shown another new but flawed proposal that was offered by the same manager, and they were asked if they would like to make a suggestion to their manager. If they choose yes, they were asked to write down their suggestions. Finally, participants responded to a few items to assess whether the explanation-specificity conditions were perceived as we had intended.

Measures

Unless noted otherwise, all items were rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

We measured voice safety using a three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.89$) from May and colleagues (2004). A sample item is “It feels safe for me to make suggestions to Brandon”.

We coded voice resilience (i.e., engaging in voice after experiencing non-endorsement on a different issue) as a dichotomous variable (1 = those who made subsequent suggestions; 0 = those who did not make any subsequent suggestions). 129 out of 176 participants chose to make subsequent suggestions (73%).

Regarding our manipulation check, explanation specificity was assessed using a four-item measure from Shapiro et al. (1994). A sample item is “Brandon gave specific reasons for not using my idea” ($\alpha = 0.61$).

Study 1: Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations ($N=176$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	1.34	0.48	-			
2. Age	37.00	12.10	0.07	-		
3. Specificity condition	0.50	0.50	0.04	-0.12	-	
4. Voice safety	4.28	1.46	0.01	-0.06	0.49***	
5. Subsequent voice behavior	0.73	0.44	0.08	-0.13	0.48***	0.42***

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

Manipulation check

We performed a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effect of specific versus non-specific on perceived explanation specificity, which showed a significant difference, $F(1, 174) = 35.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$. Participants in the specific explanation condition perceived their manager’s explanation to be more specific ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.05$) than participants in the non-specific explanation condition ($M = 3.52, SD = 0.99$).

Hypothesis Testing

We performed the same ANOVA as above to examine the effect of explanation specificity conditions on voice safety. We found a significant effect of explanation specificity on voice safety, $F(1, 174) = 54.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .240$. Participants felt higher voice safety in the specific condition ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.23$) compared to the non-specific condition ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.32$), supporting Hypothesis H1.

We conducted an indirect effects analysis (Hayes, 2017) with 1,000 bootstrapped samples and 95% confidence intervals, using model 4 in the PROCESS macro for SPSS. An indirect effect is considered supported if zero falls outside the 95% confidence interval. First, perceived voice safety was significantly related to voice resilience in a model controlling for the explanation specificity factor, $B = 0.48, SE = 0.16, Z = 2.99, p = .003$. Second, the indirect effect of explanation specificity on voice resilience via voice safety was positive and the confidence interval did not include zero, $B = 0.68, SE_{boot} = 0.24, 95\%CI_{boot} = [0.25; 1.19]$. These results support Hypothesis H2, which predicted that voice safety mediates the relationship between explanation specificity and post non-endorsement voice resilience. One may note that the observed statistical power of these effects was high. For the effect of specificity on safety it was 1.00, for the effect of specificity on voice resilience 1.00, and for the effect of safety on voice resilience controlling for specificity, 0.89.

Study 1: Discussion and Introduction to Study 2

The results of Study 1 support the expectation that specific explanations of voice non-endorsement, relative to non-specific explanations, lead to higher levels of voice safety and, indirectly, to voice resilience (i.e., future voice behavior). Despite the importance of these findings Study 1 is not without limitations as Study 1 participants did not actually voice suggestions initially, but were asked to imagine having done so, which could limit realism of the experiment. We thus conducted another study that dealt with this limitation. Thus, in Study 2, participants voice a suggestion that does not get endorsed, and we then provide them with a subsequent opportunity to express voice.

Study 2: Method

Participants

We recruited working adults in China using Credamo's data mart, which is a crowdsourcing platform that operates in a manner similar to Mturk. Three attention check questions were embedded to ensure data quality (e.g., "please choose 'strongly disagree' for this question"). The final sample consisted of 275 respondents (a response rate of 85.9%, 35.64% female) after excluding those who failed the attention checks and failed to follow the experimental instructions (giving advice unrelated to the experiment settings). Average age was 28.79 years ($SD = 4.95$); 87.3% had an academic bachelor's degree or higher; the average working experience was 6.26 years ($SD = 4.82$).

Design and Procedure

In Study 2, we created a scenario to manipulate the rejection of voice of a marketing plan using a between-subjects design (explanation specificity: specific versus non-specific). After reading an informed consent screen, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Identical to Study 1, the manipulation of explanation specificity was based on King et al. (2019).

Participants were asked to adopt the role of a consultant in a marketing company. They first read a brief introduction about this *Meiyu* marketing company, including the mission and specialization of the company. Then, participants proceeded to the next screen, which presented a marketing request from a client, and a market plan designed by their manager Wang for this client. Participants then had the opportunity to write down their voluntary suggestions to Wang to improve the marketing plan with the intention to benefit their company.

After writing down their suggestions, participants proceeded to the next page in which they received an email sent by their manager with the explanation of why their suggestions could not be implemented, which included the manipulation of explanation specificity. We suppressed the "Next" button on the page for 30 seconds to assure that participants read the explanation. Then we asked participants to report their perceptions of voice safety. Next, participants were shown a new market plan for another client designed by their manager Wang, and they were provided a second opportunity to make voluntary suggestions to their manager, which was where voice resilience (voice after rejection) was measured. Finally, participants responded to a few items to assess the efficacy of explanation-specificity manipulations.

Measures

Following prior research (e.g., Morrison et al., 2011), we asked participants the extent to which they feel it is safe to voice again (voice safety), ranging from 1 (definitely not safe) to 7 (definitely safe), and then listing the four kinds of voice behavior chosen from LePine and Van Dyne's (1998) scale ($\alpha = 0.93$). Sample voice behaviors included "Developing and making recommendations concerning issues that affect this company"; "Communicating your opinions about work issues to Wang even if your opinion is different from his/her opinions."

We coded voice resilience (i.e., engaging in voice after experiencing non-endorsement on a different issue) as a dichotomous variable (1 = those who made subsequent suggestions; 0 = those who didn't make any subsequent suggestions). 240 out of the total 275 participants (87%) chose to make subsequent suggestions.

Regarding our manipulation check, we used the same measure from in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.84$). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Study 2: Results

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations ($N=275$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	1.36	0.48	-			
2. Age	28.79	4.96	0.04	-		
3. Specificity condition	0.48	0.50	0.06	0.01	-	
4. Voice safety	3.84	1.34	0.03	-0.11	0.36***	
5. Subsequent voice behavior	0.87	0.33	0.06	-0.07	0.09	0.46***

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

Manipulation check

We performed a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effect of specific versus non-specific conditions on perceived explanation specificity, which showed a significant difference, $F(1, 273) = 428.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .61$. Participants in the specific explanation condition perceived the explanation to be more specific ($M = 4.94, SD = 0.91$) than participants in the non-specific explanation condition ($M = 2.80, SD = 0.81$).

Hypothesis Testing

We performed the same ANOVA as above to examine the effect of explanation specificity conditions on voice safety. We found a significant effect of explanation specificity on voice safety, $F(1, 273) = 39.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$. Participants felt higher voice safety in the specific condition ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.41$) compared with in the non-specific condition ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.08$). This result supports Hypothesis H1.

We used the same analysis as in Study 1. First, perceived voice safety was significantly related to voice resilience in a model controlling for the explanation specificity factor, $B = 1.29, SE = 0.23, Z = 5.64, p < .001$. Second, the indirect effect of explanation specificity on voice

resilience via voice safety was positive and the confidence interval did not include zero, $B = 1.25$, $SE_{boot} = 0.34$, $95\% CI_{boot} = [0.71; 2.05]$. These results support Hypothesis H2, which predicted that voice safety mediates the relationship between explanation specificity and post non-endorsement voice resilience.

General Discussion

When employees express constructive disagreement towards their managers, managers often need to turn down their employees' suggestions. The main question we sought to answer in our research is how can managers handle this conflictual situation in a way that does not negatively affect an employee's willingness to express disagreement in the future? The current research sought to contribute to an emerging understanding of how managers can do so while ensuring voice safety, and in turn encouraging voice resilience. We proposed that the specificity of a manager's explanation for their voice non-endorsement positively impacts employee voice safety, which in turn fosters subsequent voice behavior on a different issue. Indeed, in both experiments conducted with samples from two different cultures, we found support for our main prediction: explanation specificity had a strong and consistent main effect on voice safety, which subsequently fostered voice resilience.

Theoretical Implications

This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on conflict management and specifically managers' handling of a conflict between them and an employee. By voicing, the employee expresses disagreement. By rejecting the suggestion, the manager deals with the conflict by shutting it down. However, managers may turn down an employee's voiced suggestion in different ways. There is thus far not much research on how managers should handle these types of conflicts (Dijkstra et al., 2014). As the conflict management field has often investigated conflictive situations utilizing a justice and fairness perspective (e.g., [Kleshinski et al., 2023](#); Montag-Smit et al., 2024), the literature pointed us in the direction that specific explanations are likely perceived as fairer, prompting higher perceptions of voice safety and in turn resilience. Thus, our results contribute to the conflict management literature by examining a specific, but common, managerial conflict situation, in which managers must react negatively to the expressed disagreement of an employee and by examining a relatively straight forward solution for dealing with this conflict. Our findings indicate that it is beneficial to provide specific information about why the suggestion could not be endorsed. Handling the conflict in this manner leads to higher levels of voice safety and subsequent (post rejection) employee voice.

Second, we contribute to the voice literature by considering voice as a process in which managers' previous response to an employee's suggestion can impact their subsequent voice behavior. Not all employees' suggestions can be carried out, so a common situation in the workplace is that managers reject suggestions from employees (Deichmann & Ende, 2014). Yet, the voice literature has largely studied voice and voice endorsement (or non-endorsement) as a one-time event (Klaas et al., 2012). Moreover, a preponderance of research on managerial responses to voiced suggestions seems to have exalted the benefits of endorsing voice (e.g., Schreurs et al., 2020). Consequently, we know very little about how managers' turning down employees' voiced input can impact employees and their subsequent voice behavior. Consistent with existing research (King et al., 2019), our study contributes to expanding the knowledge on

this topic by showing that an unfavorable experience (i.e., voice turned down by one's manager) need not adversely affect employees' voice resilience when managers properly deal with this event. Moreover, we consistently find that the specificity of the explanation for non-endorsement is related to voice resilience via voice safety.

Third, our research presents fresh insights that the content of explanation (i.e., specificity) can affect voice resilience. Previous studies have indicated that managers offering employees explanations for their decisions, in general, may enhance employees' perceptions of procedural fairness of managers' decisions (Shapiro et al., 1994; Shaw et al., 2003; Skarlicki et al., 2008). We extend this line of research to the domain of employee voice. In contrast to situations in which managers explain their own decisions to employees in specific ways, explanations for voice non-endorsement differ because they involve a strong element of interpersonal treatment and a sort of disapproval, in the sense that they involve how managers *respond* to something an employee has suggested, rather than revolving around the decisions of managers *per se*. Finally, our research also extends voice resilience literature by investigating when employees will respond in a positive way despite non-endorsement.

Potential Limitations and Future Research Directions

A first potential limitation relates to the matter of generalizability and ecological validity. For both studies we used an experimental scenario approach to mimic the voice non-endorsement situation, so future research should test whether these results generalize to real work settings. For instance, a recall design could be adopted in which employees respond to questions about an incident of voice rejection that they experienced in the past. One issue with such a design might be that employees' responses to these questions would be likely influenced by variables such as organizational justice perceptions or LMX, and researchers would need to control for such variables effectively. A less intrusive alternative would be through the study of digital communications between manager and employee, in which managers' voice non-endorsement messages could be coded for specificity.

Additionally, our conclusions do not generalize to situations in which employees speak up regarding the *same* issue because we focused on participants' voice resilience in terms of them speaking up again about a different issue. In fact, we speculate that specific explanations would have a negative (not positive) effect on voice 'repetitions' given that such explanations would provide employees with concrete feedback and arguments as to why the suggestion cannot be implemented. It is also possible that specific explanations would make employees more likely to voice regarding the same issue, but with a new and different suggestion, but our data cannot speak to this possibility. We do acknowledge that this is both an important and intriguing area for future research in this domain, and we encourage future studies on this topic.

Second, while the results are consistent across two culturally diverse samples, caution regarding generalization is warranted. Alongside the cultural background of the respondents, differences in the experimental paradigm and measurement instruments used should be noted. This makes it impossible to attribute variations in results to a specific factor or to make causal statements about the role of culture. Further research is needed to delve into why and when detailed explanations for voice non-endorsement are necessary in each culture.

Third, we concentrated solely on how voice specificity may influence voice resilience because we argued for a close connection between voice rejection, specific explanations, and procedural justice. The informational quality of specificity makes it, in our reasoning, particularly

suitable for the promotion of voice resilience via voice safety perceptions. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that messages such as voice rejection may vary in many dimensions. For example, managers might use different ‘types’ of explanations focusing on considerate or alternatively critical ones. For a complete understanding of the effects that different explanation types may have, in different context, future research on this matter is certainly called for. One could speculate that more critical explanations that focus on the problems of the voiced suggestion could be needed and helpful in a situation where it is for instance less obvious that the suggestion cannot be implemented or situations in which there is usually a high degree of participative decision making.

Another suggestion for future research is to examine other mechanisms apart from voice safety, for example, trust in managers, employees’ emotional reactions to managers, and face-threat of employees. Further, future research should consider contextual or individual moderators, such as perceived managerial openness, employees’ causal attributions of rejection, and leadership styles. Another potential moderator is the type of voice. Employees may respond differently to non-acceptance by their supervisor depending on whether the emphasis of their voice message is critical (i.e., prohibitive voice) or constructive (i.e., promotive voice) (Liang et al., 2012). These are interesting and potentially fruitful options for future (cross-sectional) research on explanation-specificity in voice non-endorsement.

Practical Implications and Conclusion

Expressions of constructive disagreement are important for the organization and employees. Managers need to respond to those expressions in an effective way. While managers might *like* to endorse an employee’s suggestion or to respond in a positive way to their concern, the reality is that managers often must tell employees “No” and reject their suggestion for change. Given that they would not wish to discourage future expressions of disagreement, saying “No” in an effective way is an important practical issue. The results of the current research clearly indicate that there is a benefit to providing specific explanations for why they must say “No”, relative to giving non-specific reasons. When employees are given specific explanations (relative to non-specific ones), they subsequently feel greater safety to express their disagreement again in the future, and consequently, are more likely to actually express their constructive disagreement in the future. Accordingly, the advice based on this research is simple and straightforward: whenever possible, managers should provide specific explanations for why they must say no to an employee’s voiced suggestion for change. Organizations can accomplish this in several ways. For instance, they could implement training programs for managers that focus on how to handle constructive dissent. These programs should focus on how managers should provide specific and concrete feedback to employees when they do not endorse their suggestions.

One important nuance of our research is that we investigated instances where managers actually turn down employee input. However, managers might also ignore employees’ voiced suggestions (Satterstrom et al., 2021). Although instances where managers ignore employee voice are beyond the scope of our research, we do find that when managers turn down voice providing a specific reason is better than a vague reason. Thus, organizations may foster a “no idea left behind” policy wherein managers are encouraged to follow up on all of their employees’ ideas. Accordingly, managers will be more likely to provide specific explanations when they need to turn down voice. As managers are encouraged to deal with all instances of employee voice, employees may see their organization as more transparent, which is becoming increasingly valuable in today’s economy. At the same time, there are likely circumstances that affect whether explanations are

expected by employees. In very hierarchical cultures, for example, superiors may not usually need to give employees explanations for their decisions and if this is a normal ‘process’ of decision making and resolving disagreements, then there may be no issue of procedural injustice in those cases. This occurs to us as if it would be a very extreme case. After all, employees still have their idea rejected, which may feel as an unfair outcome, in which case an explanation could still be helpful to encourage their future voice.

In conclusion, we examined managers’ negative responses in the context of employees’ voiced suggestions. Despite the inherent value of employee voice as a lever for organizational performance, managers inevitably face situations where certain suggestions must be rejected. Our findings elucidate the critical role of explanation specificity in such scenarios. Managers who provide specific reasons for non-endorsement not only uphold a sense of procedural fairness but fortify the feeling of voice safety, thereby sustaining employee voice resilience.

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Appendix – Explanation Specificity Manipulation

Study 1

High specificity: Thank you for your suggestion. I regret to inform you that your ideas to change the technology cannot be implemented. As far as I understand, this cash register freeing-up problem is unique to just a few stores, so corporate office is not going to change the program operating the cash register as the program is used in all our stores. It is simply too expensive to even come up with a technology work-around. So, my solution appears to be best given the circumstances. Hope this is helpful.

Low specificity: Thank you for your suggestion. I regret to inform you that your ideas to change the technology cannot be implemented. Unfortunately, there are constraints in the organization. I also don't think your idea will work given that there are other issues involved and we need a solution right away. So, my solution appears to be best given the circumstances. Hope this is helpful.

Study 2

High specificity: Thank you for your suggestion. I regret to inform you that your ideas to improve the marketing plan for Yellow Bean Cafe cannot be implemented. I do not have sufficient time to make such changes. Each marketing project is assigned a deadline, and your ideas could not be carried out before that date. To properly execute the ideas suggested by you would require about 5 extra days in the timeline. So, my solution appears to be best given the circumstances. Hope this is helpful.

Low specificity: Thank you for your suggestion. I regret to inform you that your ideas to improve the marketing plan for Yellow Bean Cafe cannot be implemented. Unfortunately, there are constraints in the organization. I also don't think your ideas will work given that there are other issues involved and we need a solution right away. So, my solution appears to be best given the circumstances. Hope this is helpful.