Organization Science
Vol. 21, No. 1, January–February 2010, pp. 249–270
ISSN 1047-7039 | EISSN 1526-5455 | 10 | 2101 | 0249
DOI 10.1287/orsc.1080.0405
© 2010 INFORMS

Speaking Up to Higher-Ups: How Supervisors and Skip-Level Leaders Influence Employee Voice

James R. Detert
Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853,
jrd239@cornell.edu

Linda K. Treviño
Smeal College of Business, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802,
ltrevino@psu.edu

In this qualitative research, we enhance understanding of leader influences on employee voice perceptions by examining which leaders influence these perceptions and why these influences occur. We conducted 89 interviews in a high-tech multinational corporation with employees at multiple levels in two manufacturing and two R&D units that differed significantly on "speak up"-related items on a company-wide employee survey. Systematic analysis of the interview data led us to conclude that a broad spectrum of leaders from supervisors to senior managers influences individual employee voice perceptions in both direct and indirect ways. For example, informants referred to "skip-level leaders," those leaders two to five levels above themselves, as reasons to view voice as risky or futile nearly as often as they referred to immediate bosses. We present evidence related to "how" and "why" these patterns of influence occur by reviewing the direct and indirect modes of influence identified and by outlining the managerial functions that provide occasions for skip-level leaders to have direct influences on employee voice perceptions. We also point to differences in the specific echelons of leadership that were most influential across the units studied. We propose that multilevel, multileader influences on voice perceptions result naturally from modern workflows, the essential functions performed by skip-level leaders, and deep-seated employee attitudes about authority in hierarchical organizations. We propose further that differences in which levels of skip-level leadership are most critical to employee voice perceptions in different units depend on which leaders have the power to handle strategic contingencies and to resolve key uncertainties within particular work environments. Finally, we delve into the theoretical implications of our findings to offer a set of research propositions that can be tested in future research. Collectively, our findings point to a complex and nuanced picture of multilevel leader influences on employee voice perceptions with important practical implications for management.

Key words: voice; silence; leadership; authority; psychological safety
History: Published online in *Articles in Advance* November 6, 2008.

Employee failure to speak up with concerns or ideas can have dire consequences when, for example, accounting irregularities are suppressed (Gordon 2004), nurses are silent about medical problems (Edmondson et al. 2001), or researchers fail to speak up about product safety (e.g., O'Connell 2004). In most cases, however, employee silence concerns more routine matters. Some managers may believe that day-to-day employee voice about problems or opportunities is distracting and that soliciting it is not a worthwhile use of their valuable time. In contrast, scholars who study voice assume that such beliefs are likely to haunt managers who must compete in today's dynamic business environment, where success depends on learning and responding before problems expand or opportunities are lost (Argyris and Schon 1996).

Because many workers feel that the potential personal costs of voice outweigh the likely benefits (Milliken et al. 2003), this discretionary behavior is frequently withheld (Van Dyne et al. 2003). Employees who fear speaking up to those above them or believe that it is futile to do so are likely to remain silent or to simply acquiesce when they truly disagree (Van Dyne et al. 2003). Only prosocial, improvement-oriented voice—the provision of genuine, constructive input about problems and possibilities for change (Van Dyne and LePine 1998)—presents those in power with information that might actually spark learning and change (Pinder and Harlos 2001).

Our research seeks to contribute to theory on the antecedents of voice in organizational hierarchies. Specifically, we present an enriched understanding of leadership influences on employees' voice-related perceptions—that is, beliefs about how welcome voice is, how it will be received and reacted to, and what the outcomes will be. Leaders should be critical to the voice process for two reasons. First, when employees want to initiate learning or action, they must direct their concerns or suggestions to a specific target with the formal authority to act. Generally that means speaking *up* to a leader

above them in their work hierarchy (Emerson 1962, French and Raven 1959). Second, leaders have power over pay, promotions, and job assignments, which makes them particularly salient in an economy where most people rely on formal organizations to meet their material and psychological needs (Leavitt 2005, Perrow 1991). In sum, the dependency of subordinates on higher-ups—both for resources to address the specific issues raised and for continued employment—makes leaders a key influence on subordinates' voice perceptions and behavior.

Whereas extant research and theory focus primarily on the direct influence on voice perceptions of a single leader—usually immediate supervisors—or on the indirect influence of top managers via the organization's climate or structures, our findings significantly expand this understanding of leadership influences. Specifically, we find that an entire constellation of leaders influences the perception that it is safe or worthwhile to speak up. This leader constellation for a given employee includes not only his/her immediate supervisor and the organization's most senior leadership team, but one or more "skip-level leaders," which we define as any leader in the organization's formal chain of command above the informant's immediate supervisor. We describe and illustrate how the nature of modern workflows, the functions performed by managers, and deep-seated employee attitudes about authority in hierarchical organizations lead to skip-level leader influences on employee beliefs about speaking up via a myriad of direct and indirect routes. We then offer a set of testable propositions about the types, relative strength, and patterns of influence that leaders from one to several levels above an employee have on perceptions about voice in different work environments.

Prior Perspectives on Leadership and Voice

Among the explanations for voice or silence, prior research has emphasized employee individual differences, including extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (LePine and Van Dyne 2001). Research has also focused on contextual influences (e.g., Detert and Burris 2007, Dutton et al. 2002, Edmondson 2002, Milliken et al. 2003) such as leader behavior, organizational structure (e.g., degree of centralization), and human resources policies (e.g., evaluation systems) (Ashford et al. 1998, Milliken et al. 2003, Withey and Cooper 1989). Because organizations rarely select employees based on voice-related personality and cannot alter employees' fundamental dispositions, understanding the role of contextual factors such as leadership seems crucial.

Prior research and theory on leadership as an influence on voice have focused on two types of leaders and two associated modes of influence. First, the majority of research has examined the *direct* impact of *immediate supervisors* (e.g., Janssen et al. 1998, Ryan and Oestreich 1998, Saunders et al. 1992), presumably because normal chain-of-command structures provide for many more interactions between employees and immediate supervisors than between employees and more distal leaders (Waldman and Yammarino 1999, Shamir 1995). Thus, employees have many possibilities for speaking up to their most proximate leader and many direct experiences to draw from in forming perceptions about this leader's likely reactions. Edmondson (1999, 2002), for example, found that team members were likely to believe that it was safe to speak up if their team leaders were seen as accessible and interested in open communication. Conversely, Ryan and Oestrich (1998) found that subordinates most feared speaking up when their supervisors were "abrasive and abusive" (e.g., insulting, blaming) and "ambiguous" (e.g., secretive, nonresponsive).

A second perspective has described top management as a key influence on voice perceptions and behaviors. Because senior leaders are presumed to have few direct interactions with most employees, the effect of senior managers is assumed to be primarily *indirect*—that is, occurring as a result of stories about these leaders and leader-enacted and maintained structures, policies, and practices that lead to widely shared beliefs in the organization about speaking up to authority (Ashford et al. 1998, Dutton et al. 2002). In Morrison and Milliken's (2000) conceptualization of organizational climates for silence, senior managers are said to create a tone for speaking up that "trickles down" throughout the organization. For example, senior managers may create a negative voice climate by centralizing decision making, leading to the perception among most that speaking up is unwanted or a waste of time. Such expectations about senior leaders are consistent with the broader leadership and culture literatures, wherein senior leaders are said to have widespread indirect influence via strategic direction setting (Jacobs and Jaques 1986), control over structures and policies (Trice and Beyer 1993), and stories about these leaders that get broadly diffused (Schein 1992).

In this study, we add to this understanding of leadership influences on voice by examining how and why multiple levels of leadership can affect employee voice perceptions in direct and indirect ways. By levels of leadership, we mean the number of levels between a focal employee and specific leaders above him/her. For example, one's immediate boss is "one level up" from that employee. Similarly, one's boss's boss is "two levels up," and one's boss's boss's boss is "three levels up." These latter two leaders are both "skip-level leaders" for the focal employee. The term "skip-level leader" is not synonymous with the notion of a "middle manager," which refers only to those managers in the "middle echelons" of an organization (e.g., Jacobs and Jaques 1986,

Westley 1990, Floyd and Woolridge 1992). In contrast, even the most senior managers can be skip-level leaders for others quite high in the organization, and fairly low-level managers can be skip-level leaders for the organization's lowest-ranking employees. Our goal extends beyond understanding how any one layer of leadership—such as "middle managers"—influences voice in those directly below them. Instead, we seek to understand how leaders at any organizational level influence the voice perceptions of subordinates *two or more levels below them* in both direct and indirect ways. At present, we know little about the frequency, settings, or nature of interactions where voice might be possible between subordinates and such leaders.

We also seek to understand how overall perceptions about speaking up are created. Present theorizing about climates for voice or silence (Morrison and Milliken 2000), for example, suggests that the impact of senior leaders on voice will be fairly strong and consistent throughout an organization, in part because leaders at subsequent levels of leadership will use the same structures and mirror the same behaviors. It is also plausible, though, that the impact of senior leaders will be variable because speaking up ultimately occurs in specific episodes in specific settings and is targeted toward specific leaders who are likely to have at least somewhat different styles and approaches to getting input from below. Additionally, even where large groups of employees come to share perceptions about the overall environment for speaking up, it is unclear *which* leaders and/or *which* organizational structures and policies have contributed most to these perceptions.

Given this current state of knowledge and the complexity of questions about the full range of leadership influences on voice perceptions, we conducted an exploratory, theory-building interview study with employees embedded in four units of a Fortune 500 corporation. The broad research questions to be addressed are, "Which leadership levels are critical influences on an employee's voice perceptions?" and "How and why do these influences occur?" As these questions indicate, our focus is on the entire leadership landscape, from immediate supervisors to the most distal skip-level leaders. We used an *emic* strategy, wherein informant descriptions, rather than strict adherence to an a priori set of categories or frameworks, helped to define the conceptual territory (Guba and Lincoln 1998, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Because our goal was to build theory about a multilevel phenomenon (the totality of leadership influences on beliefs about speaking up at work), our research design spanned "levels of analysis" (e.g., from consideration of specific voice episodes to shared voice perceptions within units) (Klein et al. 1994).

Methods

Site and Interview Sample Selection

We collected data from four units in "Tech-Co" a mature Fortune 500 corporation with more than 50,000 employees engaged in research, manufacturing, marketing and selling, and all other work typical of a horizontally integrated company in a high-technology, high-volume industry. The spark for an investigation of conditions for voice arose after the company received feedback from a worldwide opinion survey that indicated that nearly 50% of employees across all divisions had responded that it was not safe to speak up or to challenge traditional ways. This led the CEO to charter an internal task force charged with developing a "root cause" understanding of these results. One author joined this task force as an external researcher.

We selected four units for study from Research and Development (R&D) and Manufacturing because senior management saw these divisions as critical to company success and because they are quite different in ways that could influence the flow of information across organizational levels (e.g., R&D work is more abstract and discovery-focused and employs highly educated professionals; manufacturing work is more concrete, routinized, and efficiency-focused, and employs less-educated workers). The two R&D units studied are both standalone facilities devoted solely to research. Each has 700 researchers and on-site project directors. The two manufacturing facilities are both involved in high-volume production of a small number of products for worldwide distribution, both utilize state-of-the-art technologies, and both are located in nonurban U.S. settings where they are staffed with several hundred operators and smaller numbers of quality assurance and engineering personnel. In all four sites, the primary language is English. One of the R&D sites is located outside the United States but in a highly westernized culture.

Within each division, the two units were chosen by utilizing a "matched pairs" strategy based on the logic of the embedded case study of polar opposites/extreme cases (Yin 1994, Pettigrew 1995). The goal in each division was to select two units that were similar in the nature of work done, technology employed, and employee characteristics but significantly different in their "speak up" survey scores. To achieve these objectives, we used statistical evidence from the worldwide employee survey in conjunction with discussions with senior managers. This resulted in selection of two divisional matched pairs, where one unit ranked in the top quartile of that division's units on the average "speak up" score (computed as the mean of the two relevant survey items: "most of the time it is safe to speak up" and "the company has established a climate to challenge traditional ways of doing things;" $r = 0.461$, $p < 0.001$) and the comparison unit ranked in the bottom quartile.

Table 1 Voice-Related Survey Results for Units Chosen for Interview Study

	Survey respondents	Q1[1] percent favorable	Q2[1] percent favorable	Two-item average percent favorable
R&D				
Site 1: RD-hi unit	218	**62**	**51**	**56.5**
Division (18 total units)	5,670	52	42	47
Site 2: RD-lo unit	757	**49**	**37**	**43**
Manufacturing				
Site 3: Mfg-hi unit	438	**60**	**64**	**62**
Division (51 total units)	11,779	50	45	47.5
Site 4: Mfg-lo unit	451	**51**	**32**	**41.5**

[1]Q1 = "most of the time it is safe to speak up"; Q2 = "the company has established a climate for challenging traditional ways of doing things"; "favorable" refers to the percentage of respondents choosing either "agree" (1) or "tend to agree" (2) on a five-point scale.

We used ICC(1) and ICC(2) statistics to confirm that the higher and lower units were statistically different from one another and that there was significant within-unit agreement on this measure. The ICC(1) value for the two-item speak up scale was 0.062, which was significantly different from zero at $p < 0.001$ ($F = 25.76$) (Bliese 2000); the ICC(2) value was 0.961, well above the proposed cutoff of 0.60 (Glick 1985). Table 1 shows the survey results for the selected units, along with their respective division averages. Results are displayed in "percent favorable" terms, because this is how they were shared with informants to start the interviews (see below). We labeled the units by combining descriptions of their divisional affiliation and their higher and lower means on the "speak up" survey (i.e., RD-hi, RD-lo, Mfg-hi, and Mfg-lo).

Within each unit, we purposefully selected leaders at the top of the focal units and then randomly selected subsets of direct reports down to the bottom of each hierarchy, attending to gender and tenure only to get a diverse mix of respondents at each lower level (Stake 2000). For example, in one R&D site we interviewed one site director, four of his direct reports (who are senior project directors), and so on down to four research associates at the lowest level of this site. In Manufacturing, informants ranged from the plant director to the lowest-level operators (five levels below the division president), along with intermediate echelons of line and staff (e.g., quality control) managers. Table 2 presents summary statistics for the 89 informants.

In sum, the selection of matched pair sites represents a design choice intended to promote understanding of perceptions about speaking up to leaders across individuals situated in different contexts. Although sites were selected based on the overall survey scores, informants were not "selected on the dependent variable" because individuals' survey responses were anonymous.

Table 2 Interview Sample Characteristics

	R&D		Manuf.		
	RD-lo	RD-hi	Mfg-lo	Mfg-hi	Total
No. of Interviews	26	23	19	21	89
Male/female	13/13	10/13	13/6	12/9	48/41
Grade/rank level:[1]					
2 – 4	11	11	2	5	29
5 – 6	9	7	4	2	22
7 – 9	6	5	5	4	20
≥ 10	0	0	8	10	18
Age:					
Mean	42.8	39.5	41.5	41.4	41.3
(SD)	(8.5)	(7.8)	(9.7)	(7.3)	(8.3)
Range	26–58	28–55	20–54	25–57	20–58
Tenure:					
Mean	10.5	9.2	14.1	13.1	11.6
(SD)	(7.2)	(3.9)	(9.3)	(7.1)	(7.2)
Range	1–23	1–17	1–31	1–25	1–31

[1]Grade/rank levels 2–4 represent the most senior managerial and professional positions; grade/rank levels 10 or higher represent nonmanagerial, nonprofessional employees and unionized employees.

We knew, for example, that 62% of all survey respondents at Mfg-hi had reported a favorable climate for speaking up. But we did not know how that site's individual interviewees had responded on the survey.

Data Collection

A protocol was developed to elicit interviewees' general reactions to the unit's "speak up" survey scores as well as detailed behavioral examples of situations in which each informant either felt particularly able/unable or willing/unwilling to speak up. Each interview began by showing a simple chart depicting the informant's unit average on the "speak up" questions in comparison to the overall average for his/her division (similar to Table 1). The conversation began with an open-ended question such as "What do you make of these figures?" Informants offered their opinions about speaking up in their unit without the imposition of an a priori causal scheme suggested by more structured questions. Furthermore, in the a priori "low" units in particular, the sharing of the unit's survey scores may have served to reduce the risk that respondents felt about sharing negative perceptions because the scores reminded those with negative experiences that they were clearly not alone. After informants had finished their initial reflections (often lasting 15 minutes or more), the interviewer turned to the more specific protocol questions that were likely to stimulate responses involving leadership. (See Appendix 1 for the interview protocol.) By moving from less to more structuring, we reduced the concern about whether the data represent respondents' actual experiences or merely their desire to comply with the interviewer (Denzin 1978). In fact, informant responses indicated that most had already

seen the survey results, and our subsequent analyses indicated that informants across all sites provided a mix of "positive" and "negative" experiences during specific voice episodes.

Between 19 and 26 interviews were conducted at each of the four sites (see Table 2). The first author visited all sites, conducting 33 of 89 interviews. Following joint piloting, two trained interviewers conducted the other 56 interviews. Each of the interviews, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, was tape-recorded[1] and transcribed, generating more than 1,000 pages of single-spaced text available for analysis.

Data Coding and Analysis

We culled from the data those "analytic units" that met two criteria. First, a block of text had to specifically point to one or more leaders as an influence on the informant's beliefs about speaking up. Thus, passages of text relating only to general perceptions about the context for speaking up (e.g., "I can't pinpoint the reasons, it just doesn't feel safe") or to stable individual differences (e.g., "I'm just too shy") were excluded. Second, to be an analytic unit for our purposes it was necessary that the leader(s) referenced be identifiable either by name or by level. This second criterion was needed to develop an understanding of *which* leaders (e.g., immediate versus distal leaders; colocated project or site leaders versus off-site divisional leaders) were important influences on subordinate perceptions.

The analytic units were then coded according to a three-part scheme. First, each leader with one or more reports among those interviewed, plus all senior leaders at the top of the respective leadership hierarchies, received a unique leader identifier (e.g., "Leader 12") in order to track all examples referencing that specific leader's impact. Next, a "distance" code was assigned indicating the number of hierarchical levels separating the informant from the leader being referenced. Then, one of two valence codes was assigned to the passage to indicate whether the speaker was attributing leadership as having a *supportive* (+) or *inhibiting* (−) influence on voice. Leadership was considered supportive of speaking up when words or phrases like "made me feel safe" were used and was treated as inhibiting when described as causing the informant to believe it was "unsafe" or "futile" to speak up. General valence labels were considered sufficient because our purpose in the initial coding was to understand *which* leaders were influential in the voice episodes, not to document the specific content that led to attributions about these leaders. The following hypothetical example about "Leader 12" illustrates the application of the coding scheme: "My supervisor's boss slammed me so hard in a public forum one time that I'll never open my mouth there again. He actually said my project was a waste of money and his time . . . " (coding: "Leader 12" − "2 levels down" − "voice-inhibiting leadership"). Where informants used leader names (e.g., "John Winters" rather than "My supervisor's boss") coders used organizational charts to identify the number of levels between the informant and the leader.

The first author identified and coded all of the analytic units in the R&D interviews using this tripartite scheme. A research assistant then coded the manufacturing interviews after an iterative training process that included independent coding and comparison between the research assistant and first author until intercoder reliability approached 1.0. All coding was entered into *NVivo*, a qualitative software package that facilitates aggregation and pattern searching. Appendix 2 uses a schematic of an R&D unit hierarchy to illustrate how the coding scheme allowed us to examine leadership influences attributed to either (a) the leader(s) *at a specific echelon* or (b) leaders *a specific number of levels above* the subordinates making the attributions. For example, analytic units referring to the relationships indicated in D, C′, B″, and A‴ represent, in aggregate, all influences on speaking up attributed to that R&D unit's site director by interviewees one to four levels below him. In contrast, the summation of the analytic units indicated by all "B" designations or all "C" designations provides information about the total number of times interviewees referenced leaders two levels and three levels above them, respectively, irrespective of the specific leadership echelons occupied by those referenced.

Our review of the analytic units led to the observation that nearly all of the attributions to immediate bosses (i.e., one level up) referred to *direct* influences—that is, resulting from interaction with or observation of the leader in a copresent situation; by comparison, the attributions to skip-level leaders (i.e., two or more echelons above the informant) referenced both direct and indirect influences. By *indirect*, we mean leadership influences on informant beliefs stemming not from personal experiences or interactions but rather via symbolic means, either in the form of myths or stories about leaders, or through the structures, policies, and practices controlled by leaders (Hunt 1991, Schein 1992, Trice and Beyer 1993). We therefore coded the leadership-related passages (i.e., the initial analytic units) for *direct* or *indirect mode of influence*, again checking our decisions against those of an independent coder (who replicated 97% of our designations).

To develop further insight, we searched for themes within the data. We iterated between the data and the extant literature to identify appropriate theoretical labels for those concepts that we identified at least 10 times each. This journey was messy and subjective and required extensive discussion between the authors. In the end, we concluded that the direct influences for skip-level leaders could be best explained as occurring

because these leaders perform roles, or functions, similar to those used to describe what immediate supervisors do to facilitate subordinate performance (McGrath 1964, Katz and Kahn 1978). We therefore organized the data on direct influences for skip-level leaders according to four functions performed by leaders—that is, into direct influences on distal subordinates' voice perceptions that occur as leaders (a) *search for and structure information*, (b) *use information to solve problems*, (c) *manage material resources*, and (d) *manage personnel resources*. These four superordinate functions emerged from Fleishman and colleagues' (1991) systematic synthesis of decades of prior leadership research and leader function/role frameworks. We also agreed that the data indicating indirect influences on distal subordinates' voice perceptions could be further separated into those reflecting *stories with symbolic value* and those reflecting *observable structures, policies, and practices*.

We used a similar iterative process to explore how leadership influences identified for immediate supervisors and those identified for skip-level leaders related to the inhibiting beliefs that voice was "unsafe" or "futile." These affect-laden cognitions are considered to be the primary mediators between individual difference and contextual factors and voice or silence (Detert and Burris 2007, Milliken et al. 2003). We reread all passages marked as voice-inhibiting leadership and noted all cases where the leadership influence was clearly linked with a reference to perceived futility or lack of safety regarding voice. Next, we searched for further delineations within all indications of each type of summary belief and iterated between the examples and our emerging labels until we had derived a more fine-grained set of types of safety and futility beliefs. Finally, we organized all occurrences identified for each specific safety and futility belief by (a) the level of leadership the comment was linked with (i.e., immediate boss, skip-level leader two levels up, and skip-level leaders three or more levels up) and (b) which of the four units the example came from.

We then searched for additional patterns in the data using strategies suggested for theory building from qualitative data (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Eisenhardt 1989, Miles and Huberman 1994). This included aggregating, comparing, and contrasting the data by level(s) separating the informant and leader referenced, by valence (supportive or inhibiting) of influence, by types of safety and futility beliefs, by echelon of leaders (e.g., site leaders versus division leaders), and by division and unit. The process of organizing, counting, and comparing codes helped to limit powerful idiosyncratic examples from overly influencing our interpretation of the data. Our findings, therefore, are based in frequency of occurrence (where such counts seemed appropriate) and researcher judgment about theoretical importance.

Findings

In what follows, we first address the question "Which leaders?" by briefly reviewing our findings on direct supervisors and then describing those on "skip-level" leaders—those leaders two or more levels above the informant. Although interview questions did not direct interviewees to think about leaders at multiple levels, they nonetheless cited leaders at all levels of the hierarchy in describing their beliefs about, and experiences with, speaking up at work. As summarized in Table 3, our 89 informants provided nearly as many references to skip-level leaders two to five levels above themselves as to immediate bosses (270 and 313, respectively). We then present evidence related to "how" and "why" these patterns of influence occur by reviewing the direct and indirect modes of influence identified, outlining the managerial functions that provide occasions for these influences, and pointing to differences in the specific echelons of leadership that were most influential in the units studied. Our findings reveal the direct influences of multiple levels of leaders between immediate supervisors and executive leadership and suggest that leader influences down the organizational hierarchy are not strongly homogenous. Collectively, our findings point to a more complex and nuanced picture of leader influences on employee voice perceptions than has previously been portrayed. This picture shows a constellation of leadership influences, wherein leaders at multiple levels above the employee affect voice perceptions in different ways.

Immediate Supervisors and Voice Perceptions

Our analyses confirm that immediate supervisors strongly influence employee voice perceptions. In total, 93% of informants (83/89) gave one or more examples coded as either supportive or inhibiting behavior by an immediate boss. As expected, the influence of immediate supervisors stemmed primarily from direct personal interactions and vicarious learning opportunities. Similar to the findings of others, our data indicate that supervisors contribute to positive voice perceptions by being seen as open, empathic, tolerant, or emotionally composed; they negatively influence subordinate voice perceptions when perceived as abusive, closed, or unwilling to accept mistakes (Ashford et al. 1998, Milliken et al. 2003, Ryan and Oestrich 1998). The total number of positive and negative voice-related attributions to direct supervisors (see "Immediate supervisors" column in Table 3) suggests that immediate supervisors do more than merely reinforce an overall climate for speaking up set by leaders at the top. In fact, they act in a variety of supportive or inhibiting ways that may have little to do with broader influences emanating from above.

Beyond their behavior when they are targets for subordinate voice, we also found that immediate supervisors

Table 3 Summary and Illustrations of Analytic Units Referencing Different Levels of Leaders as Supportive (+) or Inhibiting (−) of Voice

Site	Immediate supervisors	Skip-level leaders	=	Leaders 2 levels up (boss's boss)	+	Leaders 3–5 levels up
Mfg-hi	49+[1]	23+		8+		15+
	26−	16−	=	13−	+	3−
Mfg-lo	59+	22+		17+		5+
	29−	49−	=	33−	+	16−
RD-hi	32+	26+		16+		10+
	38−	49−	=	31−	+	18−
RD-lo	45+	34+		25+		9+
	35−	51−	=	21−	+	30−
Leader level	1 level up:	2–5 levels up:		2 levels up:		3-5 levels up:
Totals	**185**+	**105**+		66+		39+
	128−	**165**−		98−		67−
Illustrations	Supports (+): "[*My supervisor*] *always encourages me to say, 'How about we do something a different way?' I always feel like I'm encouraged to give my ideas. And she always gives me positive feedback.*" (female assoc., R&D)			(+): "*I had a face-to-face with the plant manager. I said, 'We have some real communication problems and I think we need to do some things to improve that communication.' I was not afraid at all to tell him of a problem, not only a big problem but one that may have been a little sensitive to him because he used to be the plant manager at* [*that location*]. . . . *It was very positively received.*" (male manager, mfg.)		(+): "[*The division president*] *was here for his annual visit and we took the opportunity to give him a full blown presentation. His reaction was essentially, 'This is great. Let's get this done yesterday.' He could have been somewhat upset about, 'Why did it take us this long to get this done?' but instead, was very positive saying, 'Well, obviously we have an opportunity, let's seize it. Let's make this happen.'*"(male manager, mfg.)
	Inhibits (−): *"I can't think of an occasion where my manager said, 'Hey, I just thought I'd stop by and see what you're doing.' That sends the message that these people are too busy for us.*" (male operator, mfg.)			(−): "*It's very hard to speak to your next level up supervisor.* [*Mine*] *will hardly even say hello to people like me. It's just like I'm not there. And so of course, I couldn't just approach him. My boss doesn't know much about* [*my area*]*, but still* [*my second level boss*] *will only speak to him.*" (female assoc., R&D)		(−): "*There is a* [*Review Committee*]*, and* [*Division President X*] *is present. And a related series of programs are discussed and reviewed. One person stands up and talks about the whole project. One person to beat up on.*" (male director, R&D)

[1]Indicates the total number of analytic units where a leader at the specified level was noted by informants as supporting (+) or inhibiting (−) voice. The percentage of respondents within a company site providing one or more analytic units for a given level and valence of leadership influence ranged from 19% to 100%. For example, 90% of informants from the Mfg-hi unit provided one or more of the 49 analytic units coded as a positive influence for an immediate supervisor, and 67% of informants in the same unit provided one or more of the 23 analytic units that were coded as positive influences for a skip-level leader.

influence subordinates' voice perceptions by effectively or ineffectively serving as intermediaries between their subordinates and more senior leaders. First, informants pointed to the linking pin function of supervisors—that is, their supervisor's role in connecting them to higher echelons of leadership within the organization (Likert 1961). In Manufacturing, scheduling problems, production process problems and issues, and unrealistic targets for output or quality create the need for a link to more senior leaders; in R&D, key decision making about resources or recognition for research projects creates a need for linking between subordinates and skip-level leaders. As illustrated by the following example from a manufacturing employee, poor linking by a supervisor clearly influences beliefs about the *futility* of speaking up: "I think it would help if you saw them take your suggestions back to whomever and actually consider it, rather than just throw it in the trash bucket as soon as you walk out the door. I think that's the way a lot of people feel—you can speak in a meeting, you can tell your manager. It doesn't go any further . . . " Informants sometimes attributed this lack of action to their boss's lack of power to do something and, often, felt that supervisors didn't take action because of their personality or style, such as strong conflict avoidance tendencies or low confidence. General futility beliefs were also described as resulting from indications that supervisors were unwilling to even listen, sometimes because to acknowledge the subordinate's point would conflict with the manager's own interests.

Immediate supervisors can also inhibit voice by failing to protect their subordinates from negative distal leadership influences. Informants noted how unsafe they felt when their supervisors failed to intervene during difficult interactions with more distal managers. A manufacturing analyst described one such occurrence: "I was presenting a project and there was an overrun because of some errors by someone above me and [a senior manager] was grilling me—and I was expecting [this supervisor] to speak up and say, 'OK, here's what happened,' and he never did . . . He just kept his head down." Informants reported being particularly angry at and hurt by supervisors who had shown private support for an idea and then sat quietly by while the informant took heat from above. More generally, we found "unsafe to speak up" beliefs most frequently linked to supervisory behaviors that created fear of in-the-moment embarrassment, shame, or loss of emotional control. Nonetheless, in descriptions of voice-inhibiting behavior by immediate supervisors, we found 1.8 times as many "futility" statements as "lack of psychological safety" statements.

Skip-Level Leaders and Voice Perceptions: Modes of Indirect and Direct Influence

The data also clearly demonstrate that skip-level leaders—ranging from two to five levels above informants in this organization—were a strong influence on informants' overall voice perceptions.[2] Beyond direct supervisors, leaders two levels above the respondent (e.g., "my boss's boss") were the most frequent skip-level leaders mentioned by informants, and the majority of these analytic units (98 negative compared to 66 positive) referred to "inhibiting" experiences (see Table 3). Looked at in terms of the percentage of informants providing analytic units for leaders two levels up, close to half of the informants in R&D and exactly half of those in Manufacturing who had leaders two echelons above them referenced these leaders as supporting speaking up. Similarly, nearly half of the informants in R&D and in Manufacturing provided one or more descriptions of leaders two levels removed somehow inhibiting speaking up. Skip-level leaders three to five levels above informants were also mentioned frequently in the analytic units, and the majority of these mentions were negative (67 negative compared to 39 positive) (see Table 3). Of the 71 informants with at least one leader three levels above them, approximately one-third (34%) provided data where leaders three to five levels removed were seen as positive influences. Similarly, approximately one-third of informants (36%) provided 67 examples where leaders three to five levels away were described as a negative influence. Interestingly, nearly half (44%) of these references to leaders three or more levels up involved *direct interactions* (see below), meaning occasions where informants were copresent with a quite distal leader in situations where speaking up to that leader was theoretically possible. Descriptions of these direct interactions suggest that skip-level leaders and immediate supervisors engage in similar types of behaviors that subordinates see as either creating favorable or unfavorable conditions for voice (e.g., empathic listening versus terse, abrasive verbal behavior).

Having established the prevalence of skip-level leader influences, we next consider how and why such influences occur. Our findings indicate that skip-level leaders influence distal subordinates' voice perceptions indirectly via widely diffused stories and belief systems as well as through observable policies, practices, and structures. They also indicate that skip-level leaders influence employee voice perceptions during direct interactions that occur as leaders perform key managerial functions. Table 4 provides illustrations of the types of indirect and direct influence we found for skip-level leaders across the manufacturing and R&D units. These direct and indirect skip-level leader influences were also linked to general futility and lack of safety beliefs, though for skip-level leaders the ratio shifted toward beliefs that it was unsafe to speak up (0.70 futility:1 lack of safety). Furthermore, compared to those relating to direct supervisors, additional types of safety and futility beliefs appeared. Informants reported beliefs that it was unsafe to speak up to skip-level leaders based on feelings of

general intimidation because of the personal characteristics of the target (e.g., "her brilliance," "his commanding presence") or the target's place in the hierarchy rather than based on specific negative experiences. Informants also reported a unique type of futility belief with regard to voice to skip-level leaders—namely, that many voice opportunities were only "pseudo-participation" because decisions had already been made or would be made without seriously considering input "from people like us" anyway. We next consider each of the direct and indirect modes of skip-level leader influence that lead to safety and futility beliefs and explain the reasons for their occurrence.

Indirect Influence via Symbolic Stories. Skip-level leaders at all echelons were mentioned as symbolizing for informants what is valued (Schein 1992). Their actions lead to widely diffused stories about leadership behavior and a socially constructed shared belief system about how employees are expected to act. In our data, the stories told about distal leaders were generally *negative*. In R&D, for example, informants told stories related to the division president. Said one, "I'm sure many people told you about the brutality of his behavior. I've certainly heard horror stories—banging his hand on the table and all that sort of stuff." Others in R&D reported specific stories, such as about "a senior manager challenging the wisdom of killing a project he thought would be really good for the company" leading to the division president's response, "You can fire this guy." In Manufacturing, respondents spoke of hearing "plenty of stories about managers . . . who disliked employees who spoke out." These examples illustrate how the stories told about distal leaders in these units inhibited speaking up. This was particularly true, and destructive, in regard to the most senior leaders of each division because, as one informant noted, "that type of behavior becomes normative." Another employee echoed this sentiment: "People are not likely to be open to [the division president] in case they say something and he turns around and says, 'Well, that's a really stupid thing.' You only need to do that once or twice in public and then your reputation precedes you and tends to create a cultural thing."

Conversely, there were few reports of increased willingness to speak up to senior unit leaders because of positive stories about leaders' modeling or supporting voice. So, at least in this organization, the indirect influence of stories about skip-level leaders, especially more senior leaders, appears to be quite negative and damaging to voice perceptions. As noted by a research project director, "There are a lot of negative examples where people have spoken up in this site and those stories stick in people's minds, that people who've spoken up have been punished badly. And there is just no positive example of someone who spoke up getting rewarded in the end. I think people remember these stories for a long time, and like to talk about them." This is perhaps not surprising given that negative experiences are generally more salient and enduring than positive ones (Fiske and Taylor 1991, Baumeister et al. 2001). Therefore, employees are more likely to attend to such experiences and transmit them to others.

Indirect Influence via Policies, Structures, and Practices. Our data support the proposition that leaders also indirectly affect the voice perceptions of distal subordinates via their enactment and control over structures, systems, and practices (Morrison and Milliken 2000). However, these were rarely the types of company-wide formal systems and structures typically described in relation to voice (e.g., hotlines, ombudspersons, suggestions systems, human resource policies). Instead, interviewees more often cited mechanisms used by managers at every level to control and guide interactions with employees and to make decisions about programs, processes, and people. These systems and practices had the effect of symbolizing expected behavior and thereby reinforcing beliefs about speaking up. Across R&D and Manufacturing, informants described highly centralized decision-making structures and processes as barriers to speaking openly with the most senior skip-level leaders. In R&D, two division committees were seen as making many important decisions about people and projects. Thus, despite the fact that many levels of employees were invited to routine public forums, employees saw these as representative of one-way communication, with real decisions made elsewhere. In the words of one manager, "we go to key review meetings and speak up about what we should do. I made a presentation and it was basically shrugged off on the grounds that the decisions had already been made. It just seemed to be a complete waste of time . . . ." Explained another, "Real decision making is very centralized. We have various teams, but the bottom line is that no decisions are made by these people . . . ." These examples illustrate the type of futility that was linked with perceptions that speaking up to skip-level leaders would be merely "pseudo-participation."

Interviewees also noted how ambient stimuli (Hackman 1992) in the various forums where employees might speak up to skip-level leaders, particularly physical arrangements (Bass 1990, Schein 1992), tended to suppress voice by symbolically representing the power structure at Tech-Co. A manager from RD-hi explained, "At yearly program reviews we have a U-shaped table. It's like a council meeting. Senior management sits at one end of the table. Other people give a very polished presentation where there would have been numerous rehearsals. And it's in this public forum, with video links to many outside rooms." A counterpart from RD-lo reported the same thing, and also his attempts to change

this practice: "At program reviews we have this fantastic horseshoe table. It's so petrified into the culture that if you want to change it, people don't know where to sit. So I actually turned it around in some meetings and sat at the margin. But we should make a company-wide decision to abolish this horseshoe table and just have tables and say 'sit wherever the hell you please.' I think [Tech-Co] has the symbolic part of the power structure that is so strong that this by itself is an intimidating factor." Subordinates noticed the contrast effect created by this leader. Two informants independently mentioned these steps taken to "promote a better atmosphere for speaking up." Said one, "[He] realized that meetings are way too stiff, so he's done things like rearranged the furniture. He's thinking of ways to get more associate level people to contribute and for presenters to be less stiff."

Furthermore, informants described the practices surrounding access to and interaction with some skip-level leaders as closely controlled and scripted, whether in formal meetings or in brief encounters. In Manufacturing, informants in both units pointed to visits where division leaders are shown around by site management like visiting dignitaries. Explained one manager, "in the past month, I've done some kind of 'dog and pony' show for senior management once a week, and there's no dialogue there . . . just two sentences in the hallway at a flip chart, that really reinforces the need to be on, really on, during those five minutes because that's your only chance to talk to them." In R&D, interactions with some skip-level leaders were described as similarly unnatural: "There have been emails sent around telling us exactly how to do presentations—one slide per minute, no fly-in bullets, etc. So what's implied here is that this is very important. It makes people think they should be very careful what they say. You certainly don't make ad lib comments too often, which limits real debate." In these situations, learning suffers as speakers gravitate toward defensive voice (Van Dyne et al. 2003)—e.g., "always worrying about what I think they want me to say and concentrating . . . on what he wanted to hear"—rather than providing unfiltered knowledge or ideas.

Although organizations may differ in their overall levels of centralization, formalization, and standardization, and thereby seemingly create institutionalized barriers to voice beyond the control of a particular level of leadership, we found instead that the targeted, episodic nature of voice means that when informants pointed to policies, practices, or ambient stimuli that affected their beliefs about speaking to a specific leader, it was often within the discretion of that leader to alter those stimuli. For example, leaders can control seating arrangements or the level of formality in *their* meetings to make it feel safer to speak up, and, as noted above, some actively altered those stimuli to positive effect. Thus, the bigger challenge for altering indirect cues about speaking up seemed to involve *awareness* of these influences—especially because many practices were in place prior to the current leader assuming his/her role—rather than lack of power. Of course, the power that most leaders have to change structures or practices that make employees below them feel it is *safer* to speak up to them does not mean every leader can eliminate all reasons why subordinates may feel it is *futile* to speak up. For example, the manufacturing division's policy of creating "worldwide unity" in standards led some to report that speaking up with improvement suggestions for their site would be a waste of time. But again, responsibility for this barrier to voice was linked to *divisional* managers—that is, to those who were responsible for choices about standardization—not to plant directors or other lower-level leaders.

Direct Influence via the Performance of Managerial Functions. In addition to the indirect modes by which skip-level leaders influence employees' voice perceptions, our findings indicate a substantial *direct* mode of influence. Surprisingly, we found 120 analytic units referencing the direct influence of skip-level leaders, wherein the informant was "in the room" with these distal leaders either as the focal actor or as an observer in a voice episode and theoretically had the opportunity to speak up. For example, an R&D informant reported an incident of vicarious learning in which a coworker got "dressed down" by a skip-level leader during a presentation, leaving a "flare in the air that this guy was a failure" and cementing the impression that this leader "destroys those meetings when he's there—no one will speak up."

Across the units, direct voice-related experiences with skip-level leaders occurred in both formal and informal settings. In R&D, 44 of the 67 direct experiences with skip-level leaders occurred in formal settings (generally project-related meetings) and 23 in informal settings (e.g., hallway meetings or informal lunches). Notably, the valence of the majority of the descriptions of direct experiences in formal settings in R&D was negative (28/44), whereas the majority of experiences in informal settings were described as positive (15/23). Thus, at least in these data, large, public "face-to-face" meetings with distal leaders were not occasions where most informants felt free to give honest input about the organization's key source of competitive advantage—its research projects and processes. Conversely, as illustrated by the following report from a researcher, informal settings seemed to increase the possibility of current and future organizational learning: "[Senior Manager Z] approached us in the cafeteria when I was sitting there with a friend of mine and we just started talking. I felt comfortable because of the atmosphere. It wasn't his office. And ever since then, I was just relaxed. He made me feel relaxed." This appears to be good news for the Manufacturing

division, where 41 of 53 direct experiences with distal leaders were in more informal settings. However, the highly scripted nature of most of these ostensibly informal interactions (e.g., the "dog and pony" show plant walk-throughs described above) resulted in the majority (26/41) of these voice episodes being described as difficult or risky. This suggests that whereas large, public venues pose inherent challenges for speaking up to authorities, smaller, more private venues are not a certain antidote—if communication in the latter settings remains highly formalized and interactions continue to reinforce the unequal status of the parties, subordinates will likely be hesitant about speaking up to skip-level leaders.

In considering *why* informants reported so many direct interactions with skip-level leaders, we found that these leaders were reported to be performing many managerial functions that brought them into routine contact with subordinates two or more levels below them. As noted in the Methods section and illustrated in the last four rows of Table 4, these managerial functions that lead to direct interactions between subordinates and skip-level leaders can be organized into four categories (Fleishman et al. 1991). First, subordinates interact with distal leaders when the latter search for and structure the information they need to make and implement decisions because information and knowledge are widely distributed in most organizations. Thus, for example, plant managers have information sessions with their employees, "just opening it up, [asking]... 'What do you want to share with me?'" Second, leaders also make decisions and solve problems affecting distal subordinates and then engage in direct communications about these matters. For example, a manufacturing manager described a skip-level leader's behavior during a recent voice episode, "We had this huge inefficiency [in packaging a product] and [Senior Manager Y] was very eager to hear about this. He actually had a pad and paper and started writing these things down and things happened." Explicit invitations for input, positive behavioral reactions, and subsequent actions taken by leaders during these interactions lead to perceptions of safety and willingness to speak up in future interactions.

The third and fourth superordinate leader functions involve managing material and human resources (Fleishman et al. 1991). Informants noted that possibilities for speaking up to skip-level leaders arise because immediate bosses often do not control the material resources needed to make improvements to existing products or processes or to pursue new ideas. Informants also noted that skip-level leaders have a hand in personnel decisions (e.g., performance ratings and promotion possibilities) that directly impact them. This increases the potential risks of speaking up because, as one R&D associate explained, "the real rating is done by the area head [a skip-level leader], and he bases it on what he sees in this forum."[3]

In sum, skip-level leaders directly affect employee voice beliefs and behaviors because the array of managerial functions performed by these leaders results in direct interactions with and consequences for employees several levels below them. (See Table 4 for additional examples.)

Skip-Level Leader Influences: Cross-Unit Comparisons

We next compared findings about skip-level leaders across the four units. Given the inductive nature of the study, our intent was not to draw statistical conclusions about these units' overall climates for voice or to identify the precise contribution of leaders to the differences in the mean survey scores that led to these units' selection for study. Rather, we used the cross-unit comparisons to hone our understanding of skip-level leader influences on employee voice perceptions. Below, we review two main findings that emerged.

First, we found that few of the skip-level leadership influences on employees' voice perceptions we identified represented company-wide, or even in most cases division-wide, structures, policies, or practices. Instead, they reflected the choices and behaviors of specific lower-level leaders, with impact limited to the groups of employees (e.g., site units, research projects, or production lines) they oversee. For example, in Manufacturing, informants did not seem to be affected heavily by division- or corporate-level leadership, especially regarding perceptions of safety in speaking up. Instead, the two units seemed to be more or less favorable environments for speaking up because of distinctly different local operating philosophies in combination with several managerial practices undertaken by one plant director but not the other. First, Mfg-lo is unionized, whereas Mfg-hi is not. However, rather than creating a better overall climate for speaking up (e.g., by contributing to perceptions of safety), the formalized union environment in Mfg-lo seemed to symbolize a more antagonistic, us-versus-them mentality wherein employees were seen by managers more as potential problems than as valued partners with useful knowledge. Thus, although employees and managers noted that the union provided protection from formal retaliation for speaking up, employees believed that they could nonetheless be routinely ignored or even "blackballed." Conversely, Mfg-hi was run based on the principles of employee partnership. A senior manager at Mfg-hi explicitly noted his belief that their continuous improvement operating philosophy affected the unit's climate for speaking up: "Employee involvement really stresses that you should become involved and ask questions and find better ways to do things and should involve the people doing the work in making decisions that affect their work. That's why I think you see our [speak up average survey score] being almost 20% higher than the rest of the division."

Table 4 Illustrations of Direct and Indirect Modes and Functions Through Which Skip-Level Leaders Affect Subordinates' Psychological Climate for Speaking Up

Mode of influence[1]	Influence occurs via:[2]	Illustrations from R&D	Illustrations from Manufacturing
Indirect	Symbolic stories	"[*Upper manager P*] *was an example of what happens if you're maybe too outspoken.* [*Upper manager P*] *would always, nearly always speak up if he disagreed with something. And he would do it no matter who it was, including* [*the Division President and Vice President*]. *. . . In the end he was essentially forced out of the company, so he took early retirement. . . . He was actually one of the best brains we had in terms of understanding problems, asking good questions, and unfortunately he wasn't into the politics in a sufficiently wise way to be able to question things and survive.*" (male project director, RD-hi)	"*There are some urban legends about managers who've worked within the organization at different times, would get 360 degree feedback and call their direct reports into a room, and demand to know who made certain comments. Try to analyze the direct quotes to. . . I mean, really, really bad stories about people responding negatively to that kind of feedback.*" (male director, Mfg-lo)
Indirect	Policies, structures, and practices	"*There used to be a very strict rule about who could go to meetings. Now it's much broader. People are encouraged to go, to get ideas, and to listen to others who bring them back. With the approach now, you just feel that everyone does have an opinion. Even a young graduate can go to a meeting with an idea or come back with one. We also have, at least yearly if not more, a meeting where people at all levels are invited to give their ideas for possible new projects.*" (female senior scientist, RD-hi)	"*We used to have* [*all-employee meetings*]*, they were called face-to-faces, on a routine basis. And then also in smaller groups, and then larger groups, and then we would have them with the vice president when he would come down. And now we have those occasionally, but with no regular frequency.*" (female superintendent, Mfg-lo)
Direct	Search for and structuring of information (i.e., acquiring, organizing, and evaluating info; engaging in feedback and control)	"*We have group meetings once a week, so that's the whole project—15 of us, including my manager—will go and discuss the work we've done over a period of 2–3 weeks. We'll have that in a board room, and* [*distal manager B*] *will always attend our meeting. He'll ask questions and there have been many occasions where I'll say, 'no, that's not right. I would say do A,' because perhaps I'm more familiar with directly what I'm doing whereas he's got global responsibility. . . . He'll ask 'well, why do you think that?' You tell him, and he'll say, 'OK, right, didn't know that,' and move on.*" (male senior scientist, RD-hi)	"*He* [*the plant manager*] *started having a session with the supervisors where he kind of just opened it up, 'What do you want to talk about? What do you want to share with me?'*" (male quality supervisor, Mfg-lo)
Direct	Use of information in problem solving (i.e., identifying needs and requirements; planning and coordinating; communicating)	"*We have senior management meetings occasionally where all the group gets together, and* [*distal manager X*] *was identifying areas he thought we should be working on more and were not covering appropriately. One of the areas he was saying we should be putting more effort into was [Y] . . . he thought there was no joint effort around that. I disagreed with him and told him about the* [*Y task force*]*. So I pointed out all these various things to him. Now when he communicates about this he mentions the task force.*" (female project director, RD-hi)	"*If we have a problem in the module, a quality issue or something, somebody will go to him for advice or to say, "We've got this kind of problem," and he'll come in and interact with us as to what happened, what do we think is going on, this kind of thing.*" (male operator, Mfg-hi)

Table 4 (cont'd.)

Mode of influence[1]	Influence occurs via:[2]	Illustrations from R&D	Illustrations from manufacturing
Direct	Managing of material resources (i.e., obtaining, allocating, maintaining, utilizing, and monitoring material resources)	"*I have one-to-one meetings with my director too. In terms of my project if I want to do something new—like if I'm reading papers and if I find something interesting that somebody did something and we could apply it to what we are doing, both my manager and my director they listen to me very patiently and it's not just listening and then just ignoring it. They let me go ahead and do stuff. . . . They work toward getting me* [*what I need*]." (female research associate, RD-lo)	"*I was making the presentation to the Capital Management Committee. You have to make presentations during different phases of the project as you know more about the needs. I was discussing an overrun because of some misses in one of the functional areas, and* [*the Manufacturing Division President*] *was really grilling me*." (male operations manager, Mfg-lo)
Direct	Managing of personnel resources (i.e., obtaining, allocating, developing, motivating, utilizing, and monitoring human resources)	"*I said to* [*the head of this site*] *'. . . it doesn't make sense to always be buying this equipment, building this stuff and not actually having the commitment of people to do it.' At that meeting,* [*he*] *asked, 'Well, what do you need?' I said, 'This is actually designed for eight people, but another three would get us started.' He said, 'Go hire.'*" (male senior project director, RD-lo)	"*We were working like 18 hours a day for months on end with no relief. And so we went to the* [*new director*] *and said, 'Listen, we're killing ourselves. We can't keep doing this. We're getting sick. It's unreasonable. We need help. Will you give us help?*" (female senior engineer, Mfg-lo)

[1]One-hundred-fifty of two-hundred-seventy (56%) analytic units relating to leaders two to five levels above the informant were categorized as "indirect" influences, and one-hundred-twenty/two-hundred-seventy (44%) were categorized as "direct" influences.
[2]At least 10 examples of each of these specific 6 types of influence were identified in the data.

Although the current plant directors in the two manufacturing units studied operate within substantially different institutional environments—one a union shop and the other a nonunionized, high-employee-involvement plant—it would be incorrect to conclude that these factors alone, or primarily, determine how employees feel about speaking up to specific leaders in each unit. Consider, for example, two specific practices of the plant directors that seem related to employees' overall beliefs about speaking up. First, the plant director in Mfg-hi holds monthly all-employee meetings where he explicitly creates time for employee questions and input. Multiple informants credited the director for this practice, as well as for his generally positive responses to their input (e.g., "listens carefully," "reports back to us," "deals with the issue"). In contrast, the Mfg-lo plant director did not hold regular all-employee meetings at the time of the study and canceled scheduled meetings when management determined there was an insufficient agenda. This practice conveyed to informants that the sole purpose of such meetings was to disseminate information in one direction—downward. A second conspicuous difference across the manufacturing units was the use or nonuse of "management by walking around" (MBWA), a managerial practice that creates opportunities for direct influence of skip-level leaders but that in itself has an indirect influence on employee perceptions about speaking up. Informant descriptions indicate that MBWA, by its presence or absence alone, has symbolic value independent of what happens in the interactions it affords. Explained one operator, "[The site director] will walk back in our area sometimes . . . which to me suggests that he cares about what's going on in our area, as opposed to saying, 'my office is up here, if you need something come to me.'" Conversely, multiple informants in Mfg-lo noted the conspicuous absence of MBWA: "I think that the visibility problem is huge. I think if [the plant director] just went out once in a while, he'd get a lot of feedback"; said another, "From a casual walk-around perspective, it's very rare; very, very little exposure. That establishes some barriers, some walls. If people are just there for no other reason than to be there, I think that opens up a lot of channels."

These specific practices (routine meetings and MBWA), and the behaviors of the site directors during the interactions stemming from them, are fully within the control of the site directors. That is, the presence of a union does not constrain the Mfg-lo director from holding or keeping scheduled meetings or from walking around to interact with multiple levels of subordinates more frequently. In short, when employees in unionized Mfg-lo pointed to specific reasons why the plant director or other skip-level leaders contributed negatively to their beliefs about speaking up, they pointed to practices largely within the control of these leaders, not to union rules or other institutional constraints. This is an important point, because nearly *all* leaders operate against a backdrop of institutional (e.g., industry, company, or division) norms or regulations and institutionalized myths and practices (e.g., stories about prior

leaders, meeting structures instituted in the past). Yet leaders need not be, and often are not, "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel 1967). As noted earlier, leaders described as creating positive conditions for voice had sometimes consciously and conspicuously worked to dispel notions about the need to be silent in certain settings, had changed intimidating ambient stimuli, and had clarified the distinction between their desires and those of prior leaders. Thus, although the environment in which any leader is embedded certainly affects his/her overall discretion (Hambrick and Finkelstein 1987), we did not find substantial evidence that institutional constraints (e.g., corporate policies) were inevitable roadblocks to creating a positive local (e.g., unit or group) environment for speaking up.

The second main finding that emerged from our cross-unit comparisons is that the echelon of skip-level leaders discussed most frequently varied across the Manufacturing and R&D divisions, and the nature of the influence attributed to the specific leaders at these key echelons is consistent with the a priori "high" and "low" site designations for the units within each division. As suggested above, in Manufacturing *on-site plant directors* were the most salient skip-level leaders associated with voice perceptions, and the pattern of influence noted for the plant directors was clearly different across the two units studied. Using the aggregation method illustrated in Appendix 2 to identify references to a specific leader (rather than to number of levels above informants as in Table 3), we found that in Mfg-hi 78% of the references to skip-level leaders were to the plant director, with 93% of those comments portraying this leader as a positive influence; in contrast, in Mfg-lo 71% of the references to the plant director portrayed this manager as one who directly or indirectly inhibits voice. In contrast, in R&D *off-site senior divisional leaders* were identified as particularly salient skip-level leaders for subordinates. Nearly one-third of the R&D interviews (15/49) contained one or more positive attributions, and more than 80% (41/49) contained one or more negative attribution regarding off-site skip-level leaders. Even among R&D informants a full four or more reporting levels removed from off-site senior leaders, more than half (16/29) referenced these most distal skip-level leaders. Because the R&D divisional leader had a reputation for being very intimidating, references to this skip-level leader were only marginally different across the two units studied: 87% and 69% of the comments about this leader in RD-lo and RD-hi, respectively, were coded as inhibiting voice. In Manufacturing, divisional skip-level leaders seemed largely absent from the voice-related perceptions of all but the most senior employees.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to enhance our understanding of leader influences on employee beliefs about speaking up at work. We investigated *which* leaders are important influences and *how* and *why* these influences occur. We found that in addition to the well known direct influences of immediate supervisors and the indirect influences stemming from the most senior executives, a wide constellation of skip-level leaders influences subordinate voice perceptions in both direct and indirect ways. In the discussion below, we delve into the theoretical implications of these findings, explaining why this broader spectrum of leadership influences exists and how the specific patterns of influence differ in systematic ways. We offer a set of research propositions that can be tested in future research and note important practical implications.

Implications for Theory and Research

Why Skip-Level Leaders Matter. Although our interview questions did not ask about any specific echelon of leadership, informants mentioned skip-level leaders frequently when talking about their voice perceptions and experiences. We found that multiple skip-level leaders are important to voice perceptions throughout the company's hierarchy. We were particularly interested in understanding why and how these skip-level leader influences occur. For example, we wondered whether direct speaking up to skip-level leaders results primarily from employees proactively skipping over their supervisors to speak up to higher-level leaders because the boss is a problem, or to sell senior managers on the merits of addressing company-wide issues (Ashford et al. 1998). However, interviewees rarely mentioned intentionally skipping over problematic supervisors or seeking out the most senior leaders to promote company-wide changes. Rather, we learned that opportunities to speak up to skip-level leaders occur quite routinely because the inherently cross-level nature of many workflows brings employees and more distal managers together for the purpose of accomplishing the organization's work. Our detailed examination of the data uncovered an array of voice-relevant functional roles performed by such leaders (Fleishman et al. 1991). Employees attend forums where bosses from multiple levels are present to gather and disseminate information, they make presentations to skip-level leaders to aid in resource allocation decisions, and they interact with skip-level leaders when problems cannot be solved locally by direct supervisors with limited discretion. Thus, our data suggest that skip-level leaders are essential to understanding how employees think about voice in complex organizations because often *only* skip-level leaders have the authority and power to solve important problems or to make crucial resource decisions that affect employees two or more levels below them (cf. Zaccaro et al. 2001). Furthermore, it is often only a leader two or three levels up from a focal employee who has the ability to take

the employee's observations or ideas to a forum where decisions about the issue are ultimately made.

We learned that skip-level leaders often influence distal subordinates' voice beliefs and behaviors in direct ways, not just indirectly via structures and practices that they establish or stories that are told about them. Though the indirect influences of distal corporate leaders have received more research attention, our findings about skip-level leaders' direct influence—as they perform managerial functions that bring them into direct contact with subordinates in meetings, hallways, or the cafeteria—seem quite face valid and likely to generalize. For example, salespeople would likely reference regional managers as critical targets for improvement suggestions (rather than just shift supervisors or corporate management); likewise, engineers, scientists, and computer programmers may reference intermediate-level project directors as essential voice targets. Employees have many opportunities to meet with these skip-level leaders in their daily work, and often these leaders are the ones with the power to influence relevant employee outcomes and to act on suggestions. Therefore, the less power the immediate supervisor is perceived to have to address subordinates' problems and needs, the more employees are likely to see skip-level leaders as important voice targets.

Proposition 1. *For employees in complex organizations, the importance of skip-level opportunities for voice will be inversely related to the power or discretion of immediate supervisors to address the problems, needs, and ideas of their subordinates.*

Safety and Futility Perceptions in Hierarchical Authority Structures. Given the multilevel and qualitative nature of our data, we were able to delve deeply into informant perceptions about the "safety" and "utility" of speaking up. Starting with safety, we found that fear can be a common impediment to voice whether the target is an immediate supervisor or a skip-level leader and that fears for one's well-being can reflect concerns about immediate (e.g., on-the-spot humiliation in front of others) or longer-term (e.g., retaliation in performance management decisions) consequences (Dutton et al. 1997, Ryan and Oestrich 1998, Milliken et al. 2003). However, when examining safety concerns related only to skip-level leaders, our analysis also indicates that fear can stem simply from *the notion* of speaking up to more senior authority figures rather than from the leader's specific personal characteristics or from specific prior experiences with him/her. That is, raising issues with leaders, especially skip-level leaders, can be *inherently* intimidating and fear-provoking. These findings led us to reconsider the very nature of authority structures and vertical communications between those with more or less authority. Organized hierarchies, wherein formal authority is vested in progressively larger doses as one ascends the pyramid, are ubiquitous and perhaps inevitable organizing structures (Fiske 1991, Leavitt 2005, Milgram 1974). Over time, normally socialized human beings come to interpret events and interactions within this "authority ranking" model (Fiske 1991); that is, behavior in interactions with authorities becomes nearly automatic because individuals draw from the cognitive rules associated with this primary social framework (Goffman 1974). Critical to this knowledge structure is the notion of obedience to authority, an idea learned in early interactions with parents, teachers, and religious figures and continuously reinforced in most adult institutions (Milgram 1974). Thus, by adulthood, most individuals know intuitively how and when to defer to authority and often consider it quite legitimate to do so (Weber 1947). Even where submission is consciously distasteful, most individuals submit nonetheless for quite practical social and material reasons (Leavitt 2005).

This fundamental nature of most individuals' overall life experience explains why opportunities to speak up to authorities can be extremely anxiety producing for would-be speakers (Leavitt 2005). In ideal form, voice episodes represent "conversation opportunities" (Westley 1990)—that is, discrete chances to have honest discussions with leaders about problems and possibilities for the organization. Yet the term "conversation" assumes two-way communication and suggests equality between conversation partners when it is arguable that all communications between superiors and subordinates in organizations "contain elements of authority" (Westley, p. 340). In the case of immediate supervisors, these elements of authority can perhaps be suppressed by intense daily interactions that develop trust. That is, through repeated tests and consistently positive responses, an employee may develop the belief that it is safe to speak honestly to a supervisor despite the authority relationship. Our data support this idea, as we found many more examples of informants characterizing speaking up to their supervisors as "safe" than as "unsafe."

However, neither subordinates nor superiors have the luxury of intimate knowledge of each other to use as a guide during skip-level interactions (Dutton et al. 1997, Shamir 1995, Waldman and Yammarino 1999). Therefore, most subordinates are likely to feel too anxious to test the idea that speaking up to less-known authorities is legitimate and safe. As one manufacturing respondent in this study noted, "There are a lot of people here that really admire [the company], love their jobs and this plant, would do anything to make it better, but . . . you don't get trust through the organization chart. And [skip-level leaders] can't come down here . . . and expect blind loyalty and total trust." Thus, in the presence of skip-level leaders many employees will revert to general authority scripts and simply choose silence.

PROPOSITION 2. *All else being equal, the belief that it is unsafe to speak up is more likely to be based in general intimidation of, and deference to, authority figures when the target is a skip-level leader rather than an immediate supervisor.*

PROPOSITION 3. *Because of lack of familiarity and the propensity of subordinates to rely on general authority scripts, it will be more difficult for skip-level leaders* (*than for immediate supervisors*) *to create perceptions that it is safe for distal subordinates to speak up to them, even when the characteristics and behaviors of both types of leaders are otherwise similar.*

Employees who do test the water will be closely attuned to the cues sent by leaders and quickly "return to script" at the first sign of displeasure from above (Goffman 1974). This helps explain our finding that employees noted so many inhibiting voice-related cues from skip-level leaders despite the fact that many of the examples provided by leaders themselves suggest that individual leaders at Tech-Co were going out of their way to encourage upward input from lower-level employees by holding face-to-face all-employee meetings, touring plants, and even approaching employees in informal settings. But, in the context of an existing authority structure, formal meetings where employees are encouraged to speak up to leaders multiple levels above them may simply serve to reinforce membership boundaries and status. To illustrate, one of our informants credited a leader in R&D with trying hard to encourage voice by scheduling monthly meetings. These meetings, though, were scheduled in "this board room where you are seated at a square table and everybody's arranged and everyone finds it very formal. Then he asks if anyone's got any issues, but no one says anything because the whole atmosphere isn't lending itself to speaking up." Similarly, a manufacturing manager noted, "When the only time you get to talk to [skip-level managers] is via a slide in a formal meeting it just reinforces the concept that this is not a dialogue. I am being tested. This is my minute in the spotlight and this is some kind of test." In these situations, the leader does not need to act as if it is a test or overtly wield power over the subordinate to shut down voice—the nature of ambient stimuli (e.g., physical arrangements) cues the latent authority structure frame that leaders may be trying hard to overcome (Schein 1992, Leavitt 2005). Thus, skip-level leaders may be hampered in attempts to encourage voice because of subtle cues that were created by others and that current leaders may not even recognize as inhibiting.

In sum, we believe that many well meaning leaders are unintentionally reinforcing an authority-ranking social frame that is so pervasive and fundamental that most employees enter organizations expecting to "tread lightly" around those in power. At Tech-Co, many managers were described (or described themselves) as being interested in stimulating input from below. They monitored their verbal behavior in face-to-face meetings with distal employees and enacted various structures and policies to encourage voice. Even so, the net effect was often to reinforce unconscious, deep-seated beliefs about hierarchical authority structures rather than to break them down. For example, "face-to-face" meetings, ombudspersons, and grievance systems are all designed explicitly to support voice. But implicitly they can trigger employees' fears about the risk of speaking up. After all, why do organizations need formalized systems that promise anonymity, or templates and rehearsals for talking in skip-level meetings, if it is not inherently unsafe to speak up without such systems and practices? One informant noted exactly this reality by rhetorically asking, "Who pays the ombudsman's salary?"; another quipped, "If it isn't unsafe, why do we need 90 back-up slides to make a simple point!" Similarly, an R&D informant noted that the use of a massive survey to investigate comfort with speaking up in the organization (as Tech-Co did) further reinforced authority beliefs: "Sending out a questionnaire is the perfect example of what people view as hierarchical and autocratic . . . " Viewed this way, it should not be surprising that skip-level leaders are rarely able to convince employees to operate according to fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of interaction in hierarchical organizations. Interestingly, the more they rely on "formal" mechanisms such as surveys, hotlines, and ombudspersons to support voice, the more they may be inadvertently cueing employees that the long-held hierarchical authority schema is accurate.

PROPOSITION 4. *All else being equal, the more skip-level leaders rely on formal mechanisms to create a conducive environment for voice, the less safe subordinates will actually feel about speaking up.*

We also carefully considered the nature of beliefs that it is *futile* to speak up. Beyond confirming that futility beliefs can be a powerful additional impediment to voice (Milliken et al. 2003, Ryan and Oestrich 1998), our content analysis uncovered different informant explanations for why it is futile to speak up depending on the hierarchical distance between the informant and the target leader. Explanations that it was futile to speak up to immediate supervisors were often grounded in either personal or structural attributions. That is, informants believed that no action would result from voice because of either a personal (e.g., "he's too conflict avoidant") or structural (e.g., "she has no power") characteristic of the supervisor. Conversely, explanations about the futility of speaking up to skip-level leaders seldom referred to characteristics reflecting an inability to act. Instead, informants saw speaking up to skip-level leaders as futile because of disinterest of the leader—that is, to simple unwillingness to be influenced by distal subordinates or

refusal to incorporate the input into preordained decisions. These findings are important because they suggest that addressing the futility barrier to voice will require leaders to target the specific futility concerns most common among their proximate and distal subordinates.

PROPOSITION 5. *The belief that it is futile to speak up because the leader has personal or structural weaknesses is more common when the voice target is an immediate supervisor rather than a skip-level leader. Conversely, the belief that it is futile to speak up because the leader is disinterested or unwilling to incorporate input is more common when the target is a skip-level leader rather than a supervisor.*

Finally, we considered the preponderance of safety versus futility concerns as an impediment to voice to immediate supervisors and skip-level leaders. Based on prior research (e.g., Milliken et al. 2003), we expected to see more safety concerns than futility concerns overall. For example, whereas 44% of reasons given for silence by Ryan and Oestrich's (1998) informants were coded as "fear of repercussions," only 17% were coded as "nothing will change." However, our data show a somewhat different and more complex picture and illustrate the importance of theorizing about voice to specific leader targets. As described earlier, our informants mentioned futility more often than safety (a ratio of 1.8:1) when describing beliefs about voice to supervisors. By contrast, lack of safety was more frequently mentioned in descriptions of voice to skip-level leaders. Though the specific frequencies and ratios must be interpreted with caution given this study's methodology, we believe that the general pattern is likely to hold based on the theoretical considerations regarding power and authority structures discussed above.

First, immediate supervisors are much more likely than skip-level leaders to be seen as personally or structurally weak, leading to a higher occurrence of futility beliefs associated with immediate supervisors. In contrast, safety concerns are likely more frequent in considerations about speaking up to skip-level leaders. Beyond the "in-the-episode" behavioral considerations that affect whether subordinates feel safe speaking to a leader at any level (e.g., being open and understanding versus abusive and abrasive), skip-level leaders are more likely to be additionally burdened by the chilling effects of hierarchical authority structures. Thus, we propose that the nature of power in multilevel authority structures will make futility concerns the more frequent impediment to voice to immediate supervisors, whereas safety concerns will be the more frequent impediment to voice to skip-level leaders. We expect that the ratio will tilt more strongly toward safety concerns as the number of levels between the subordinate and target leader increases.

PROPOSITION 6. *Perceptions of futility will be a more frequent impediment to voice to immediate supervisor voice targets than will perceptions that voice to that target is unsafe. Conversely, perceptions that voice is unsafe will be a bigger impediment to voice to skip-level leader targets than will perceptions that it is futile to speak up to those targets.*

Skip-Level Leaders and Overall Environments for Speaking Up. Recall that this study was instigated by a company survey that indicated differences in overall perceptions about speaking up across units. Therefore, we wondered whether specific levels of skip-level leaders were particularly salient in employee descriptions of the "overall" environment for speaking up at work. To develop further insight into this question, we compared and contrasted our findings on different echelons of leadership across four organizational units and found that the echelon of skip-level leadership that appeared to be most critical to these general perceptions differed across the divisions. Specifically, on-site plant directors seemed to be driving these perceptions in Manufacturing whereas divisional leaders were more important in R&D.

Our theoretical explanation for this finding derives from the strategic contingency perspective, which argues that power accrues to those in the structural positions with the greatest ability to resolve the organization's key uncertainties (e.g., Hickson et al. 1971, Pfeffer and Salancik 1974). At Tech-Co, each manufacturing plant typically produces one to three standardized products according to tight specifications set by senior management. Little interdependence exists *across* plants, and the majority of uncertainties and contingencies are handled by a plant manager. Daily work involves contingencies bearing on specified production tasks, but resolution of problems generally resides with the plant manager. Operators said that they take problems or questions that are not resolved by supervisors either to the production manager or, on occasion, to the plant head. Manufacturing operators and low-level supervisors reported little reason to interact with people outside the plant and noted that they seldom see division-level managers. From the perspective of most manufacturing workers, therefore, their plant head has the power to handle most issues. By contrast, in R&D, research processes commonly involve sequential or reciprocal interdependence across sites (Thompson 1967), requiring more coordination at higher levels. Centralization rests on the premise that those at the apex possess the most expert power (French and Raven 1959) and have a broader view of the strengths and weaknesses of projects across the company than the heads of any site or project (Conger 2000). Therefore, when R&D employees consider experiences with speaking up, they are likely to think of divisional review meetings where final decision-making authority rests with the power elite. These decision-making structures reflect where key strategic and operational issues get resolved and can therefore be used to predict which

skip-level leaders are most influential in employees' overall perceptions about speaking up at work.

PROPOSITION 7. *The most influential level of skip-level leadership on employees' overall perceptions about speaking up at work will be the level perceived to have the requisite power to handle the majority of strategic contingencies and key uncertainties faced by employees.*

Study Strengths, Limitations, and Extensions

We used an inductive, perception-based approach to assessing employees' voice perceptions because it matches the reality that leaders are influential based on how followers view them, rather than on their "objective" behaviors or their "intended" signals (Kim and Yukl 1998, Lord and Maher 1991). This exploratory approach led to insights, such as those about the importance of skip-level leaders, that would likely not have emerged had we utilized a deductive strategy. Our conclusions are nonetheless subject to the limitations of our method. Because we studied a single organization, the generalizability of the findings is not known and we cannot say how strongly corporate-level leaders or overall voice climates (Morrison and Milliken 2000) may influence employee voice. We also note that beyond the open-ended beginning to each interview, our specific questions were more geared toward evoking descriptions of direct interactions with leaders and therefore may have elicited fewer descriptions of indirect senior leadership influences or organizational culture influences than are actually present. Systematic cross-organizational, multilevel studies will be required to determine how variables such as CEO behavior, organization size, organization structure, or degree of centralization relate to voice perceptions and behavior, as well how these macro or aggregate factors (e.g., "overall climate") impact voice to specific leaders in specific voice episodes.

We also acknowledge that, despite the fact that informants offered many concrete examples of voice experiences, we have learned mostly about voice perceptions, not behaviors. But what people *believe* about speaking up should be strongly associated with voice behavior (Detert and Burris 2007). In addition, though we carefully organized our data and counted codes (where appropriate), our data are not well suited for making fine-grained descriptive claims (e.g., the frequency of occurrence of a phenomenon for a given individual or unit) or for testing theory. However, our protocol did not direct informants to talk about any particular level of leadership, and yet respondents commonly talked about skip-level leaders beyond their immediate supervisor. Therefore, we believe that the idea of a multilevel leadership constellation for voice is likely to generalize quite broadly across large organizations.

Given the imperatives of globalization, future research should investigate whether characteristics associated with national cultures influence the multilevel leadership effects we found. Although one of the R&D units we studied was outside the United States, it was highly westernized, and we saw little evidence that national culture dimensions were as important as individual differences or Tech-Co factors in influencing how informants felt about speaking up. Nevertheless, individual characteristics that differ in aggregate across national cultures may well be related to employees' reticence to speak up to proximate and more distal, skip-level authorities. For example, higher acceptance of "power distance" (Hofstede 1980) may particularly exacerbate the perceived difficulty of speaking openly to skip-level leaders.

Beyond increasing understanding of leadership influences on voice, we believe that our findings have implications for leadership research more broadly. This study demonstrates the value of considering a wide spectrum of proximal and distal leaders as potential influences on important subordinate behaviors and outcomes (Mowday and Sutton 1993). Despite leadership being embedded across intrapsychic, interpersonal, and organizational levels (Conger 1998, Yukl 2002), most leadership theory and research remain focused on a single leader or on groups of leaders at a single level (Shamir 1995, Waldman and Yammarino 1999), such as team leaders (e.g., Hackman 2002) or very senior leaders (e.g., Hambrick and Mason 1984). Our research points to the need for an approach that simultaneously considers *multiple* leaders across organizational levels (e.g., Higgins and Kram 2001). For example, a multilevel leadership approach highlights questions about how leader messages flow across organizational levels. Based on the idea that senior leader behavior is mimicked by successively lower levels of leadership (Bass et al. 1987), Morrison and Milliken (2000) proposed that senior management cues about the safety of speaking up trickle down through lower levels of leadership. We found some evidence suggestive of this pattern. But we also observed that intermediate leaders sometimes choose "contrasting" leadership behavior, actively seeking to reverse the impact of (especially negative) messages from higher-level leaders (Yammarino 1994). This "alternating" pattern can lead to mixed assessments of the safety or utility of speaking up to leaders at different echelons. It would be useful to learn more about when such efforts by leaders are effective or ineffective in counteracting higher-level influences on employees' voice perceptions. We also saw some evidence that immediate supervisors who suppress voice can chill employee willingness to speak up to higher-level leaders. This makes sense because if it is unsafe to bring an issue to your boss, raising the issue with a skip-level leader risks a second negative reaction to the issue *and* further trouble with your immediate supervisor for going above him/her. Thus, supervisors appear to affect perceptions about voice to

higher-ups both via linking pin behaviors (Likert 1961) and via signals that they send about the acceptability of speaking up directly to skip-level leaders. Such cross-level leadership influences—both trickle-down and the "trickle-up" effects suggested above—are likely to affect other phenomena as well and should be further explored.

Finally, the distinction between "skip-level leaders" and "middle managers" has implications for leadership research. Middle managers are thought to serve as a bridge between the "rank and file" and more senior managers (Uyterhoeven 1991, McDermott 1992, Williams 2001) or to buffer employees in the organization's technical core (Thompson 1967). But research in this tradition has not addressed how multiple levels of "managers in the middle" have direct influence on distal employees. This is precisely the value of the "skip-level leader" term—it focuses on superior-subordinate dyads where the *distance between* an employee and a leader is two or more levels, irrespective of the actual level of the leader. As our findings illustrate, skip-level leaders can be "middle managers" or very senior managers—what matters for advancing leadership theory is attention to skip-level leaders' direct and indirect influence on distal subordinates.

Implications for Management

Our findings suggest that if managers truly wish to create learning organizations that garner useful information about organizational problems and opportunities from all employees, they must acknowledge their own culpability in inhibiting the free flow of ideas and concerns. The most obvious implication of this study for management is that leaders who are motivated to increase voice need to be much more aware of their *direct* impact on distal subordinates' voice perceptions and the many opportunities that they have for such impact. As Bartolome and Laurent (1991, p. 87) noted, "Trust flees authority. Good ideas often remain unexpressed because subordinates believe they will be punished for disagreeing with their superiors or showing too much competence." We agree, but we add that attempts to start conversations with distal subordinates can be particularly problematic because there is less interaction history to rely on in assessing psychological safety and because negative stories about leaders diffuse more broadly and endure longer than positive ones (Baumeister et al. 2001). As a result, encounters with skip-level leaders are likely to be particularly anxiety provoking and interpreted through the lens of an authority ranking cognitive frame that dictates deferential behavior.

Even leaders who are highly motivated to overcome these challenges will have to recognize the inherent obstacles and make major and repeated proactive efforts to overcome them, whether they are responsible for having created the barriers, inherited them from predecessors, or are merely the victims of pervasive unconscious authority structure scripts. This is particularly true in skip-level relationships. For example, declaring an "open door" policy is unlikely to be enough to encourage voice because it still signals the underlying authority structure (Likert 1961). Conversely, regularly making time to walk through that open door, down the hall, and to the cafeteria or some other informal venue says to employees, "Let's talk on your turf, not mine." During such conversations, leaders must listen more than talk and then respond in ways that reduce employees' concerns about breaching written or unwritten rules. Because of the heightened vigilance of employees in such interactions, consistency of cues will be critical. An "informal" skip-level meeting, which many organizations report having in various guises, quickly becomes "formal" for employees when seating arrangements, presentation rituals, and manner of dress all still signal the underlying power dynamics of the conversation. Ironically, managers who are quite conscious of hierarchy's effect on their own behavior with superiors seemingly fail to recognize how these same organizational realities influence subordinate interactions with them (Leavitt 2005).

Our findings have direct implications for leadership evaluation and training programs. In most organizations, such programs focus primarily on immediate supervision, such as 360-degree feedback processes that obtain leadership ratings from direct reports. This practice reinforces the belief that employee behavior is influenced directly by only supervisors. Distal leaders tend to be considered only in climate surveys that assume indirect paths of influence for senior managers. Furthermore, most leadership evaluation processes focus on identifying explicit behaviors, especially those that are particularly abusive and abrasive. Although clearly important, our findings suggest that efforts to eliminate the overt abusers (Sutton 2007) and to "set the right tone from the top" are unlikely to be sufficient for creating a true cross-level learning environment. Leadership evaluations for anyone with skip-level subordinates should require input from employees at all levels, because leaders may find that whereas direct reports find them open or accessible, distal subordinates do not. Beyond leading to individual interventions, such information could help the organization identify more generally the links in the upward communication chain most in need of repair. For example, organizations might learn how to optimize their training budgets by focusing efforts on different echelons of leaders across divisions or business units. Specific programs could be developed to help leaders understand how they may be inadvertently discouraging voice by sending subtle cues (behaviorally or via ambient stimuli) that undermine their attempts to get ideas from below. This is important because our findings suggest that even well intentioned leaders may nonetheless be inadvertently reinforcing underlying authority

structures that limit honest communication across ranks (Fuller 2003, Leavitt 2005).

In sum, if leaders truly want to know about *all* employees' concerns and improvement ideas, they must proactively and consciously create opportunities for direct, informal interaction with employees at multiple levels. And they must use such opportunities to build trust by consistently welcoming feedback (especially feedback that challenges their own beliefs or decisions), following up on it, and reporting back about action taken. Doing so may begin to transform guarded interactions into two-way conversations where important information is exchanged. These are daunting tasks for leaders, but the failure to get the unvarnished truth or the best ideas from employees is a matter of tremendous potential consequence for organizations.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Chris Argyris, Mike Beer, Michael Brown, Ethan Burris, Amy Edmondson, Raghu Garud, Denny Gioia, Don Hambrick, Peter Marsden, Sandra Spataro, Tim Quigley, and the participants in the Organizations Research Group workshop at Pennsylvania State University for their helpful suggestions on this work.

Appendix 1. Interview Protocol

Open-Ended Introductory Question

We began each interview by showing respondents their unit's and division's average scores on the "safe to speak up" and "challenge traditional ways" questions from the organization-wide employee survey that sparked the research study and asking, "What do you make of these results for your unit?"

Specific Questions

1. Tell me about a time when you personally experienced (or observed) a situation in which *you did not feel it was safe to speak up*.

2. Tell me about a time when *you* (*or someone you observed*) *did speak up*—perhaps in a difficult situation or about a difficult issue.

3. Can you give me an example of a particular meeting or discussion where there were different opinions/views? (*How were the differences handled?*)

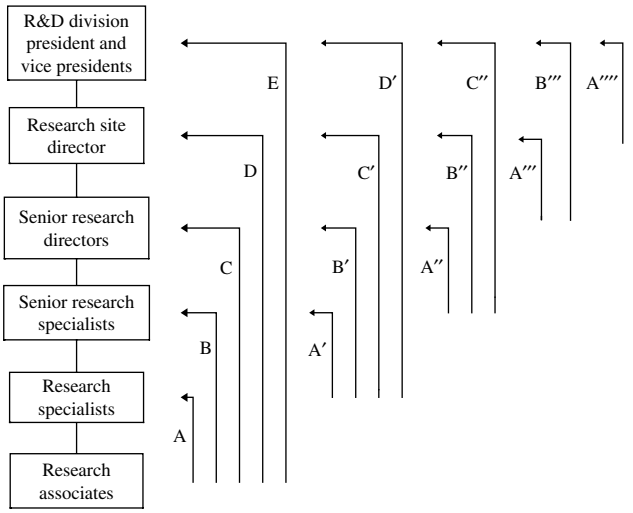
4. Can you give me any examples where you wanted to share something with a leader, but didn't? (*What took place? What was the issue/business content?*)

5. Can you give me any examples where you voiced an opinion or shared information with your leader and he/she appeared unwilling to listen or accept your view without being critical of you? (*What took place? What was the issue/business content?*)

6. People utilize different strategies to handle conflict with individuals or in meetings. How does the leader to whom you report typically handle conflict? (*e.g., confronts it directly; tries to smooth it over/avoid it.*) Can you provide an example?

7. When you make a mistake, or when something goes wrong, or your ideas don't pan out, what happens? Can you give me a specific example? (*What took place? What was the issue? Who was involved?*)

Appendix 2. Illustration of Approach to Coding Aggregation



Notes. All A designations refer to *immediate supervisors.* All B, C, D, and E designations refer to *skip-level leaders* two to five levels above a subordinate, respectively. E, D′, C″, B‴, and A⁗ indicate references to *senior divisional management* made by subordinates one through five levels distal; similarly, D, C′, B″, and A‴ indicate references to the *site director* made by subordinates one through four levels distal.

8. Have you found yourself in a situation in which you wanted to express your opinion, an idea, or suggestion and felt that you couldn't? (*What took place? What was the business issue/concern? Who was involved?*)

Endnotes

[1]We sent each informant a letter stating the purposes of the interview and the procedures in place to ensure complete confidentiality. The president of each division sent an accompanying letter pledging his/her commitment to all of the confidentiality provisions. We then secured individual consent to tape at the outset of each interview.

[2]Note that lower-level employees can have skip-level leaders as far as five hierarchical levels above them, whereas the only skip-level leaders for very high-ranking employees may be senior divisional or corporate leadership.

[3]This observations suggests that differential pay increases granted to employees rated as similar performers by an immediate supervisor may result not only from performance reward bias (i.e., the use of gender, race, or other observable characteristics at the stage where performance evaluations are translated into salary decisions (Castilla 2008)) but from disproportionate weighting of a few positive or negative verbal interactions between subordinates and the skip-level leaders who make final determinations about employee rewards.

References

Argyris, C., D. A. Schon. 1996. *Organizational Learning* II*: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

Ashford, S. J., N. P. Rothbard, S. K. Piderit, J. E. Dutton. 1998. Out on a limb: The role of context and impression management in selling gender-equity issues. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **43** 23–57.

Bartoleme, F., A. Laurent. 1991. The manager: Master and servant of power. *Managers in the Middle*. Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, 83–87.

Bass, B. M. 1990. *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*, 3rd ed. The Free Press, New York.

Bass, B. M., D. A. Waldman, B. J. Avolio, M. Bebb. 1987. Transformational leadership and the falling dominoes effect. *Group Organ. Stud.* **12**(1) 73–87.

Baumeister, R. F., E. Bratslavsky, C. Finkenauer, K. D. Vohs. 2001. Bad is stronger than good. *Rev. General Psych.* **5** 323–370.

Bliese, P. D. 2000. Within-group agreement, non-independence, and reliability: Implications for data aggregation and analysis. K. J. Klein, S. W. J. Kozlowski, eds. *Multilevel Theory, Research and Methods in Organizations*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 349–381.

Castilla, E. 2008. Gender, race, and meritocracy in organizaitonal careers. *Amer. J. Sociol.* **113**(6) 1479–1526.

Conger, J. A. 1998. The folly of knowing an elephant by its tail: Why the leadership field needs multiple levels of analysis. F. Dansereau, F. J. Yammarino, eds. *Leadership: The Multi-Level Approaches*, Part B. JAI Press, Stamford, CT, 77–83.

Conger, J. A. 2000. Effective change begins at the top. M. Beer, N. Nohria, eds. *Breaking the Code of Change*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 99–112.

Denzin, N. K. 1978. *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Detert, J. R., E. R. Burris. 2007. Leadership behavior and employee voice: Is the door really open? *Acad. Management J.* **50**(4) 869-884.

Dutton, J. E., S. J. Ashford, K. A. Lawrence, K. Miner-Rubino. 2002. Red light, green light: Making sense of the organizational context for issue selling. *Organ. Sci.* **13**(4) 355–369.

Dutton, J. E., S. J. Ashford, R. M. O'Neill, E. Hayes, E. E. Wierba. 1997. Reading the wind: How middle managers assess the context for selling issues to top managers. *Strategic Management J.* **18**(5) 407–425.

Edmondson, A. C. 1999. Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **44** 350–383.

Edmondson, A. C. 2002. The local and variegated nature of learning in organizations: A group-level perspective. *Organ. Sci.* **13**(2) 128–146.

Edmondson, A. C., R. M. Bohmer, G. P. Pisano. 2001. Disrupted routines: Team learning and new technology implementation in hospitals. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **46** 685–716.

Eisenhardt, K. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Acad. Management Rev.* **14** 532–550.

Emerson, R. M. 1962. Power-dependence relations. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* **27** 31–41.

Fiske, A. P. 1991. *Structures of Social Life*. The Free Press, New York.

Fiske, S. T., S. F. Taylor. 1991. *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Fleishman, E. A., M. D. Mumford, S. J. Zaccaro, K. Y. Levin, A. L. Korotkin, M. B. Hein. 1991. Taxonomic efforts in the description of leader behavior: A synthesis and functional interpretation. *Leadership Quart.* **2**(4) 245–287.

Floyd, S. W., B. Woolridge. 1992. Middle management involvement in strategy and its association with strategic type. *Strategic Management J.* **13** 153–167.

French, J. R. P., B. Raven. 1959. The bases of social power. D. P. Cartwright, ed. *Studies in Social Power*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 150–167.

Fuller, R. W. 2003. *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank.* New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, Canada.

Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Glick, W. H. 1985. Conceptualizing and measuring organizational and psychological climate: Pitfalls in multilevel research. *Acad. Management Rev.* **10**(3) 601–616.

Goffman, E. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* Northeastern University Press, Boston.

Gordon, M. 2004. Fannie Mae CEO defends accounting practices. *Centre Daily Times* (October 7) B9.

Guba, E. G., Y. S. Lincoln. 1998. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, eds. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 195–220.

Hackman, J. R. 1992. Group influences on individuals in organizations. M. D. Dunnette, L. M. Hough, eds. *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. Wiley, New York, 199–267.

Hackman, J. R. 2002. *Leading Teams*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

Hambrick, D., S. Finkelstein. 1987. Managerial discretion: A bridge between polar views of organizational outcomes. L. Cummings, B. M. Staw, eds. *Research in Organizational Behavior*. JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, 369–406.

Hambrick, D. C., P. Mason. 1984. Upper echelons: The organization as a reflection of its top managers. *Acad. Management Rev.* **2** 193–206.

Hickson, D. J., C. R. Hinings, C. A. Lee, R. H. Schneck, J. M. Pennings. 1971. A strategic contingencies' theory of intraorganizational power. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **23** 454–465.

Higgins, M. C., K. E. Kram. 2001. Reconceptualizing mentoring at work: A developmental network perspective. *Acad. Management Rev.* **26**(2) 264–288.

Hofstede, G. 1980. *Cultures Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.

Hunt, J. G. 1991. *Leadership: A New Synthesis*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Jacobs, T. O., E. Jaques. 1986. Leadership in complex systems. J. Zeidner, ed. *Human Productivity Enhancement*. Praeger, Inc., Westport, CT, 7–65.

Janssen, O., T. de Vries, A. J. Cozijnsen. 1998. Voicing by adapting and innovating employees: An empirical study on how personality and environment interact to affect voice behavior. *Human Relations* **51**(7) 945–967.

Katz, D., R. L. Kahn. 1978. *The Social Psychology of Organizations*. Wiley, New York.

Kim, H., G. Yukl. 1998. Relationships of managerial effectiveness and advancement to self-reported and subordinate-reported leadership behaviors from the multiple-linkage model. F. Dansereau, F. J. Yammarino, eds. *Leadership: The Multiple-Level Approaches*, Part B. JAI Press, Stamford, CT, 243–260.

Klein, K. J., F. Dansereau, R. J. Hall. 1994. Levels issues in theory development, data collection, and analysis. *Acad. Management Rev.* **19**(2) 195–229.

Leavitt, H. J. 2005. *Top Down: Why Hierarchies Are Here to Stay and How to Manage them More Effectively*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

LePine, J. A., L. Van Dyne. 2001. Voice and cooperative behavior as contrasting forms of contextual performance: Evidence of differential relationships with Big Five personality characteristics and cognitive ability. *J. App. Psych.* **86**(2) 326–336.

Likert, R. 1961. *New Patterns of Management*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Lincoln, Y. S., E. G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Lord, R. G., K. J. Maher. 1991. *Leadership and Information Processing*. Unwin Hyman, Boston.

McDermott, L. C. 1992. *Caught in the Middle*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

McGrath, J. E. 1964. *Leadership Behavior: Some Requirements for Leadership Training*. Office of Career Development, U.S. Civil Service Commission, Washington, D.C.

Miles, M. B., A. M. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd ed. Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.

Milgram, S. 1974. *Obedience to Authority*. Harper and Row, New York.

Milliken, F. J., E. W. Morrison, P. F. Hewlin. 2003. An exploratory study of employee silence: Issues that employees don't communicate upward and why. *J. Management Stud.* **40**(6) 1453-1476.

Morrison, E. W., F. J. Milliken. 2000. Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Acad. Management Rev.* **25**(4) 706–725.

Mowday, R. T., R. I. Sutton. 1993. Organizational behavior: Linking individuals and groups to organizational contexts. *Annual Rev. Psych.* **44** 195–229.

O'Connell, V. 2004. U.S. suit alleges Philip Morris hid cigarette-fire risk. *Wall Street J.* A1.

Perrow, C. 1991. A society of organizations. *Theory Soc.* **20** 725–762.

Pettigrew, A. M. 1995. Longitudinal field research on change. G. P. Huber, A. H. Van de Ven, eds. *Longitudinal Field Research Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 91–125.

Pfeffer, J., G. Salancik. 1974. Organizational decision-making as a political process: The case of a university budget. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **19**(1) 135–151.

Pinder, C. C., K. P. Harlos. 2001. Employee silence: Quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice. *Res. Personnel Human Resources Management* **20** 331–369.

Ryan, K. D., D. K. Oestreich. 1998. *Driving Fear out of the Workplace*, 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Saunders, D. M., B. H. Sheppard, V. Knight, J. Roth. 1992. Employee voice to supervisors. *Employee Responsibility Rights J.* **5**(3) 241–259.

Schein, E. H. 1992. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Shamir, B. 1995. Social distance and charisma: Theoretical notes and an exploratory study. *Leadership Quart.* **6**(1) 19–47.

Stake, R. E. 2000. Case studies. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, eds. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 435–454.

Strauss, A., J. Corbin. 1998. Grounded theory methodology. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, eds. *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 158–183.

Sutton, R. I. 2007. *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. Warner Business Books, New York.

Thompson, J. D. 1967. *Organizations in Action*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Trice, H. M., J. M. Beyer. 1993. The cultures of work organizations. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Uyterhoeven, H. E. R. 1991. General managers in the middle. *Managers in the Middle*. Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, 3–13.

Van Dyne, L., J. A. LePine. 1998. Helping and voice extra-role behaviors: Evidence of construct and predictive validity. *Acad. Management J.* **41**(1) 108–119.

Van Dyne, L., S. Ang, I. C. Botero. 2003. Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs. *J. Management Stud.* **40** 1359–1392.

Waldman, D. A., F. J. Yammarino. 1999. CEO charismatic leadership: Levels-of-management and levels-of-analysis effects. *Acad. Management J.* **24**(2) 266–285.

Weber, M. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Free Press, New York.

Westley, F. R. 1990. Middle managers and strategy: Microdynamics of inclusion. *Strategic Management J.* **11** 337–351.

Williams, D. 2001. *Mining the Middle Ground*. St. Lucie Press, Boca Raton, FL.

Withey, M. J., W. H. Cooper. 1989. Predicting exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* **34** 521–539.

Yammarino, F. J. 1994. Indirect leadership: Transformational leadership at a distance. B. M. Bass, B. J. Avolio, eds. *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 26–47.

Yin, R. K. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Yukl, G. A. 2002. *Leadership in Organizations*, 5th ed. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Zaccaro, S. J., A. L. Rittman, M. A. Marks. 2001. Team leadership. *Leadership Quart.* **12** 451–483.

Copyright 2010, by INFORMS, all rights reserved. Copyright of Organization Science: A Journal of the Institute of Management Sciences is the property of INFORMS: Institute for Operations Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.