

# An identity threat perspective on why and when employee voice brings abusive supervision

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## Executive Summary

This study investigates the conditions under which employee voice — a constructive, proactive workplace behavior — may paradoxically trigger abusive supervision. Drawing on identity threat theory and implicit leadership theory, the authors propose and test a moderated mediation model in which employee voice elevates perceptions of leader identity threat, which in turn predicts abusive supervision, with supervisor traditionalism functioning as a boundary condition. Data were collected from 93 supervisors and 533 subordinates in a single large Chinese company across two time points. Structural equation modeling via Mplus confirmed all five hypotheses: employee voice positively predicted leader identity threat; this relationship was significantly stronger among high-traditionalism supervisors; leader identity threat positively predicted abusive supervision; and the indirect effect of employee voice on abusive supervision via leader identity threat was moderated by supervisor traditionalism. The study contributes to abusive supervision literature by identifying a positive employee behavior as an antecedent of abuse, empirically testing an identity threat mechanism that had previously been theorized but not directly examined, and integrating cultural values (Confucian traditionalism) as a moderator of implicit leadership cognition.

## Key Insights

1. Employee voice, despite being a constructive behavior, can function as an antecedent of abusive supervision by triggering leader identity threat — particularly when supervisors interpret subordinate input as a challenge to their authority or competence.
2. Supervisor traditionalism — defined as endorsement of Confucian hierarchical role relationships — significantly amplifies the relationship between employee voice and leader identity threat; supervisors with low traditionalism did not exhibit this association.
3. The indirect effect of employee voice on abusive supervision through leader identity threat was significant only for high-traditionalism supervisors (indirect effect = 0.48), not for low-traditionalism supervisors (indirect effect = -0.09), confirming a culturally contingent pathway to abusive leadership behavior.

## Practical Takeaways

- Organizations operating in high-power-distance or Confucian cultural contexts may observe that supervisor traditionalism acts as a risk amplifier for abusive responses to employee voice, suggesting this variable warrants attention in supervisor selection, assessment, and development processes.
- The study identifies leader identity threat as an empirically testable mediating construct in the abusive supervision pathway, offering a potential target for organizational interventions such as supervisor

coaching, identity-reframing training, or structured voice mechanisms that reduce perceived status challenges.

## Frameworks Mentioned

**Identity Threat Theory** — A theory proposing that individuals maintain self-worth through multiple identities; when an identity is perceived as threatened, individuals adopt coping strategies to restore or reinforce that identity.

**Implicit Leadership Theory** — A framework positing that leaders hold cognitive prototypes of ideal leader characteristics that influence how they perceive and interpret subordinate behaviors.

## Critical Analysis

**Strengths:** The study uses a multi-source (supervisors and subordinates), multi-time design that reduces common method bias; structural equation modeling with bootstrapping (10,000 replications) provides robust statistical testing; confirmatory factor analyses demonstrate discriminant validity among constructs; all five hypotheses are supported with clear effect sizes and confidence intervals. **Limitations:** The sample is drawn from a single company in China, severely limiting generalizability across cultures, industries, and organizational structures; the cross-sectional nature of the data — despite two time points — does not permit causal inference as acknowledged by the authors; the sample size at the supervisor level ( $n = 93$ ) is modest for moderated mediation testing; self-reported measures introduce response bias risk despite time-lagged design; the study does not examine alternative mediators or competing explanations for the voice-abuse relationship. **Potential biases:** The theoretical framing is strongly anchored in Confucian cultural values and Chinese organizational contexts, which may not translate to Western or other non-hierarchical organizational settings; the article does not discuss whether the observed effect sizes are practically meaningful in terms of real-world abuse frequency or severity.

## Organizational Practice

The study was conducted in a single large Chinese company with over 4,000 employees. Data collection involved 100 teams with supervisors completing self-ratings of traditionality and leader identity threat, while subordinates rated their own voice behavior and supervisors' abusive behaviors. A two-wave design with unique team codes and sealed envelopes was used to link responses across time points while maintaining confidentiality.

## Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that performance management systems operating in Confucian or high-power-distance cultural contexts may inadvertently expose voice-active employees to retaliatory supervisor behavior when formal channels do not account for supervisor cultural values. The identification of leader identity threat as a mediating mechanism points toward cultural value assessment as a potentially relevant dimension in leadership evaluation and development pipelines. The moderation by traditionality implies that the risk profile of employee voice programs is not uniform across supervisory populations, and that organizational context — particularly cultural orientation toward hierarchy — shapes how proactive behaviors are received by those in authority.

