

Relationship between Transformational Leadership and Civil Servants' Voice Behavior: Moderating Effects of Self-Efficacy and Work Tenure

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Abstract: Relationships have been demonstrated between certain leadership styles and civil servant voice behavior. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory, this study constructs a three-dimensional interaction model to explore the mechanism underlying the relationship between transformational leadership and civil servants' voice behavior. By assessing the research hypotheses using data from 512 Chinese grassroots civil servants, the study uncovers that transformational leadership has a significant positive relationship with civil servants' voice behavior; self-efficacy positively moderated the relationship; the moderating effect of self-efficacy differed as a function of work tenure, though further validation is needed due to limited effect sizes. These provide valuable insights for government organizational leaders to better use the power of transformational leadership to motivate employees' voice-raising behaviors.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Voice Behavior, Civil Servants, Self-efficacy, Work Tenure

1. Introduction

Voice behavior is essential for enhancing government decision-making and service efficiency in the knowledge economy^{[1][2]}. It is vital for organizations and work groups^[3]. The concept of 'voice' introduced by Hirschman^[4], emphasized that dissatisfied employees may either exit or voice their concerns^[5]. Voice behavior in organizations involves employees proactively sharing ideas to instigate changes^[5]. Morrison and Milliken^[6] defined it as constructive communication aimed at enhancing efficiency through proactive input. Voice behavior enhances employees' ownership and initiative^[7], promotes teamwork and innovation, and improves overall performance^[8]. However, it may threaten superiors and lead to retaliation^[9]. Leadership behaviors^[6] and styles^[10] significantly influence voice behavior, with transformational^[11] and ethical leadership^[12] being typical examples. Amidst evolving market environments, organizations depend on employee feedback for competitive advantage^{[13][14]}. Selecting appropriate leadership approaches is crucial for motivating employee voice and achieving success.

Burns introduced transformational leadership as an ideal-driven approach that inspires employees to achieve goals while facilitating organizational transformation^[15]. This style greatly influences employee attitudes and performance^[16]. Chinese scholars^[17] later proposed a four-dimensional model: moral exemplification guiding through ethics; inspirational motivation articulating a compelling vision; charismatic leadership inspiring trust; and individualized consideration tailoring support to followers. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision and values, instilling purpose and responsibility in employees^[18] while stimulating intrinsic motivation and higher-order needs^[19]. It encourages employees to challenge norms and adopt new perspectives^[8]. Research increasingly focuses on how transformational leadership fosters employee voice behavior.

Previous research has mainly examined the direct impact of transformational leadership on voice behavior^{[20][21]}, leaving the complexity of underlying factors underexplored. Self-efficacy was selected as a moderator because it reflects employees' belief in their ability to enact change, which is crucial for voice behavior^[22]. Work tenure was included to assess how accumulated organizational experience influences receptivity to leadership^[23]. Senior employees often exhibit caution due to cultural norms emphasizing hierarchical harmony^{[24][25]}. With longer tenure, employees increasingly align with

organizational goals and prioritize stability during acclimatization^[26]. Work tenure signifies accumulated experience that significantly impacts advocacy behavior^[23] and requires special attention in research contexts involving control variables^[27]. While prior studies have examined leadership styles^{[28][29][30]}, work environments^[31], and individual traits^[32], they overlook the nuanced roles of self-efficacy and tenure dynamics among civil servants specifically^[33]. This study investigates self-efficacy's moderating mechanism and work tenure's higher-order influence in Chinese civil servant contexts (refer to Figure 1).

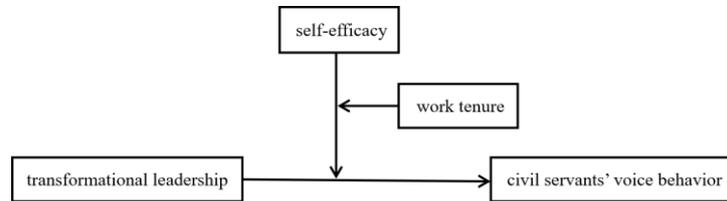


Figure 1: Research Model

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Transformational leadership and civil servants' voice behavior

Effective voice behavior is vital for organizational performance, competitiveness, and survival^{[8][34]}. In the Chinese context, Liang et al. established a two-tier structure of voice behavior: promotive and prohibitive^[35]. Promotive behavior involves employees suggesting improvements, while prohibitive behavior addresses issues that hinder productivity. Both contribute to continual organizational improvement and innovation. Research identifies multiple determinants including human resource factors (communication skills, hierarchy, policy frameworks), personality traits (emotions, cognition, attitudes), and organizational contexts (environment, leadership)^{[36][37][38][2]}. Particularly, concerning leadership styles, scholars have explored how different styles influence voice behavior such as transformational^[20], authentic^[39], ethical^[40], and abusive leadership^[41].

Research on transformational leadership and voice behavior reveals several positive influence mechanisms between them^{[42][43][20][44]}. Firstly, from a social exchange perspective, employees often reciprocate by providing constructive suggestions^[20]. Social exchange theory posits that employees build relationships with organizations based on reciprocity^{[45][46]}. This principle fosters an exchange of contributions and rewards, fostering employee loyalty and organizational support. Such reciprocal relationships promote mutual development^[47]. Transformational leadership, rooted in social exchange theory^[48], fosters trust and support, encouraging subordinates' loyalty^[49].

Grounded in self-determination theory, transformational leadership satisfies employees' psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), enhancing intrinsic motivation and voice behavior^[50], and thus improve innovative performance^[51]. It encourages proactive change attitudes and constructive suggestions that drive organizational development^[52]. Transformational leadership positively predicts voice behavior^[53], and perceived organizational politics negatively moderates this relationship^[54]. Employees under transformational leadership actively engage in vocal behavior^[55]. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Transformational leadership has a significant positive relationship with civil servants' voice behavior.

2.2. The moderating role of self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capability to execute actions required to manage situations, is not innate but develops over time through persuasion, experiences, vicarious learning, and physical/mental conditions^{[22][56][57]}. It is an essential cognitive concept^[58] that significantly influences task-related behaviors. In decision-making, employees utilize self-efficacy to assess situational factors, problem-solving abilities, resource constraints, and goal feasibility^[59]. This evaluation shapes behavioral choices, effort levels, and persistence duration^{[22][57]}.

Employees with high self-efficacy exhibit greater confidence in addressing challenges^[57], viewing proactive problem-solving as achievable^[60], and suggest organizational improvements^[61]. Conversely, low self-efficacy leads to decision-making doubts and avoidance^[62]. Per social cognitive theory, self-efficacy moderates leader-employee behavioral relationship, with efficacious employees providing more

feedback^[63] and may positively moderate voice behavior. In summary, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Self-efficacy positively moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and civil servants' voice behavior.

2.3. The synergistic moderating effect of work tenure on self-efficacy

Work tenure, defined as an employee's duration within an organization, influences work attitudes, cognition, and behaviors^[23]. As tenure increases, careers shift from effort-driven status-building to reduced involvement. Work tenure moderates the relationship between emotional commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors^[64]. Newcomers actively develop social capital and demonstrate citizenship behaviors, while senior employees exhibit declining extra-role initiatives. Prolonged tenure correlates with burnout-induced disengagement, reducing motivation for advancement even with supervisor support^[23].

Transformational leadership fosters a culture where high self-efficacy employees provide feedback, but this effect varies by career stage. In the early stages, new employees may be more receptive to transformational leadership due to adaptation needs. Early-stage employees are more receptive due to adaptation needs, while long-tenured employees may be less influenced by leadership behaviors as their accumulated experience and confidence^[65]. Task monotony in later stages can lead to fatigue and reduced excellence drive^[66]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H3: Work tenure weakens the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior.

3. Research design

3.1. Sample and procedures

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This study focuses on Chinese grassroots civil servants, who play a critical role in public management and bureaucratic efficiency^[29]. The survey questionnaire was designed and distributed both online and offline. An electronic questionnaire was produced via wjx.cn, followed by a pre-survey to refine unclear items. Online questionnaire utilized snowball sampling, while the offline version was systematically distributed with researcher assistance. To ensure data authenticity, all questionnaires were collected under principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Of 553 total responses, 512 were valid after excluding incomplete or rushed submissions, yielding a 92.6% effective response rate. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the sample characteristics.

Table 1: Basic Characteristics of the Sample.

Items	Options	N (%)	Items	Options	N (%)
Gender	Male	231 (45.31%)	Administrative rank	Clerical staff and below	327 (64.06%)
	Female	280 (54.69%)		Deputy section level	120 (23.63%)
	≥25	89 (17.38%)		Section level	51 (9.96%)
	25-30	209 (40.82%)		Deputy division level and above	12 (2.34%)
Age	30-35	110 (21.48%)	Nature of the organization/unit	Subdistrict office or township department	144 (28.32%)
	35-40	45 (8.79%)		County-level department	183 (35.94%)
	≥40	59 (11.52%)		City-level department	97 (19.14%)
Marital status	Unmarried	216 (42.19%)		Province-level department	44 (8.59%)
	Married	278 (54.49%)	Other	41 (8.01%)	
	Divorced	17 (3.32%)	Job category	Comprehensive management	339 (66.41%)
Educational attainment	High school and below	14 (2.73%)		Professional technical	83 (16.41%)
	Associate's degree	36 (7.03%)		Administrative law enforcement	59 (11.52%)
	Bachelor's degree	315 (61.72%)		Other	29 (5.66%)
	Master's degree and above	145 (28.52%)	Member of the Communist Youth League	79 (15.63%)	
Work tenure	≥2 years	103 (20.12%)	Political affiliation	Participants with a political background (including probationary)	357 (69.92%)
	2-5 years	137 (26.76%)		Democratic figures	8 (1.56%)
	5-10 years	123 (24.22%)		Masses	66 (12.89%)
	10-15 years	78 (15.43%)			
	15-20 years	22 (4.3%)			
	≥20 years	47 (9.18%)			

3.2. Measurement of variables

3.2.1. Transformational leadership measurement

Transformational leadership was measured using three items from the idealization dimension and four from the inspiration dimension, adapted from Chen et al.^[17]. These items were based on the seven-item charismatic leadership scale developed by Waldman et al.^[67], derived from Bass and Avolio's^[49] Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Such as: My immediate supervisor demonstrates determination in accomplishing objectives. Each scale in the questionnaire uses Likert 4-level score, with 1 to 4 indicating strong disagreement to strong agreement. The reliability of the scale was 0.917.

3.2.2. Civil servants' voice behavior

The measurement of civil servants' voice behavior utilized the scale developed by Liang and Farh^[35], comprising 6 items. Such as: I suggest new projects beneficial to the organization or department. The reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.920.

3.2.3. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy was measured using Hui et al.'s translation of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) developed by Luthans et al.^[68]. It includes 6 items, for example 'I believe I can contribute to organizational decision discussions'. The reliability coefficient was 0.92.

3.2.4. Work tenure

Work tenure refers to the duration of employment, categorized into six levels (1= \leq 2 years, 2=3-5 years, etc.) aligned with China's civil service promotion system. Although categorization may reduce statistical power, it reflects organizational dynamics^[23].

Factors such as gender, age, marital status, educational level, political affiliation, administrative rank, nature of the unit of service, and job category were coded as dummy variables and treated as control variables in regression models^[69].

4. Data analysis results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

Among the four main variables in this study, work tenure does not require discriminant validity testing. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess discriminant validity among transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and voice behavior. The multi-factor model's validity was tested using Amos software, confirming structural validity and selecting the optimal model.

As shown in Table 2, the confirmatory factor analysis results demonstrate a good fit between the observed data and the three-factor model ($X^2=656.436$, $df=149$, $RMSEA=0.082$, $CFI=0.931$, $TLI=0.921$). All standardized factor loadings are significant at the 0.01 level, confirming strong convergent validity. Alternative models show poor fit with the empirical data, indicating good discriminant validity among the three constructs.

To examine potential common method bias, a method factor was introduced into the baseline model (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Results reveal no significant improvement in model fit after including the method factor ($\Delta X^2=330.747$, $\Delta df=19$, $p>0.05$), suggesting minimal method bias in the four-variable model.

Table 2: Comparison of Measurement Models (N=512).

	Models	X^2	df	X^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Three factors	Three-factor model	656.436	149	4.406	0.931	0.921	0.082
	Combination of transformational leadership and self-efficacy	2312.856	151	15.317	0.705	0.666	0.167
Two factors	Combination of self-efficacy and voice behavior	1749.407	151	11.585	0.782	0.753	0.144
One factor	Integration of the three variables into a single factor	3282.505	152	21.595	0.573	0.519	0.201

4.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients of the variables. Significant positive correlations were found between transformational leadership and voice behavior (r=0.436, p<0.05); transformational leadership and self-efficacy (r=0.413, p<0.05); self-efficacy and voice behavior (r=0.595, p<0.05); self-efficacy and work tenure (r=0.129, p<0.05); work tenure and voice behavior (r=0.139, p<0.05). H1 is preliminarily validated, while other hypotheses require further analysis.

Table 3: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Coefficients.

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	1.55	0.498	1											
2. Age	2.56	1.21	-0.174**	1										
3. Marital status	1.61	0.552	-0.044	0.586**	1									
4. Educational attainment	3.16	0.663	0.119**	-0.300**	-0.172**	1								
5. Work tenure	2.85	1.485	-0.150**	0.885**	0.612**	-0.336**	1							
6. Administrative rank	1.51	0.769	-0.157**	0.392**	0.284**	0.113*	0.396**	1						
7. Nature of organization/unit	2.32	1.2	0.044	0.091*	0.064	0.083	0.095*	0.102*	1					
8. Job category	1.56	0.904	-0.07	0.045	0.064	-0.128**	0.026	-0.037	0.277**	1				
9. Political affiliation	2.12	0.822	-0.052	0.312**	0.338**	-0.192**	0.291**	0.03	0.087*	0.098*	1			
10. Transformational leadership	3.0801	0.68916	-0.088*	0.016	-0.014	-0.055	-0.004	0.091*	-0.018	0.052	-0.023	1		
11. Civil servants' voice behavior	2.8424	0.65109	-0.110*	0.174**	0.125**	-0.108*	0.139**	0.128**	-0.052	0.078	0.046	0.436**	1	
12. Self-efficacy	3.1722	0.539	-0.178**	0.171**	0.115**	-0.065	0.129**	0.133**	-0.033	-0.02	-0.015	0.413**	0.595**	1

Note. N=512; Male=1, Female=0; High school and below=1, Junior college=2, Bachelor's degree=3, Master's degree and above=4; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

4.3. Hypotheses testing

In addition to including the main and moderating effect-related variables, all three models in Table 4 control for civil servants' gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, administrative rank, organizational affiliation, job category, and political affiliation. To verify the three hypotheses, this study constructed four interaction terms after centralizing the variables: (1) Transformational leadership ×Self-efficacy; (2) Transformational leadership×Work Tenure; (3) Self-efficacy×Work Tenure; (4) Transformational leadership×Self-efficacy×Work Tenure. The results are shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Regression Analysis Results.

Predictor variables	Civil servants' voice behavior					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	t values	Estimate	t values	Estimate	t values
Intercept	2.87	0.22	0.149	0.235	0.032	0.238
Gender	-0.034	-0.834	0.034	0.962	0.036	1.015
Age	0.114	2.098	0.053	1.12	0.074	0.963
Marital status	0.049*	0.987	0.016	0.371	0.019	0.428
Educational attainment	-0.029	-0.656	-0.025	-0.656	-0.027	-0.695
Administrative rank	0.039	0.859	0.03	0.758	0.019	0.479
Nature of the current organizational unit	-0.075	-1.802	-0.063	-1.747	-0.061	-1.692
Job category	0.064	1.549	0.089*	2.446	0.086*	2.351
Political affiliation	-0.005	-0.122	0.027	0.724	0.024	0.654
Transformational leadership	0.422***	10.654	0.219***	5.768	0.222***	5.838
Self-efficacy			0.497***	12.818	0.504***	12.888
Work tenure					0.007	0.086
Transformational leadership×Self-efficacy			0.07*	2.001	0.068	1.938
Transformational leadership×Work tenure					-0.007	-0.171
Self-efficacy×Work tenure					0.022	0.545
Transformational leadership×Self-efficacy×Work tenure					0.079*	2.134
	<i>F</i> =3.777		<i>F</i> =32.464		<i>F</i> =24.606	
	<i>R</i> ²=0.057		<i>ΔF</i> =28.687		<i>ΔF</i> =-7.858	
			<i>R</i> ²=0.417		<i>R</i> ²=0.427	
			<i>ΔR</i> ²=0.36		<i>ΔR</i> ²=0.01	

Note. N=512; the related variables have been centralized; regression coefficients are standardized; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

From Model 1 in Table 4, transformational leadership shows a significant positive correlation with

civil servants' voice behavior ($\beta=0.422$, $t=10.654$, $p<0.001$). In Model 2, the interaction term between transformational leadership and self-efficacy also exhibits a significant positive correlation with voice behavior ($\beta=0.07$, $t=2.001$, $p<0.05$), supporting H1 and providing evidence for H2.

To illustrate the moderating effect more clearly, the simple slope method was employed (Aiken and West, 1991), dividing self-efficacy into high and low levels based on mean \pm standard deviation. The results are presented in Figures 2 and 3. Regression analysis reveals that when self-efficacy is one standard deviation below the mean, transformational leadership correlates positively with voice behavior ($\beta=0.095$, $SE=0.066$, $p<0.05$). When self-efficacy is one standard deviation above the mean, the correlation remains significant ($\beta=0.192$, $SE=0.037$, $p<0.001$). Figure 2 visually confirms this moderating effect, showing parallel lines with steeper slopes for high self-efficacy compared to low self-efficacy, further supporting H2.

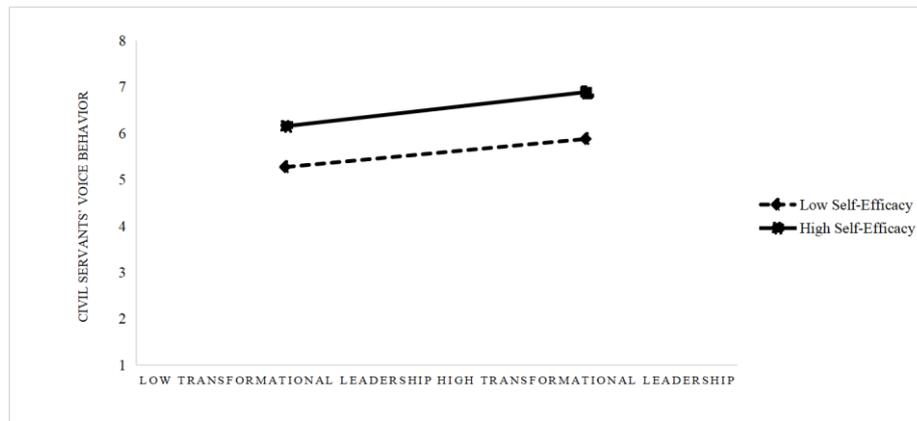


Figure 2: Moderating Effect of Self-Efficacy.

Note. A slope difference test confirmed a slightly stronger correlation between transformational leadership and voice behavior at high self-efficacy ($\beta=0.192$) compared to low self-efficacy ($\beta=0.095$), $\Delta\beta=0.097$, $p<0.05$.

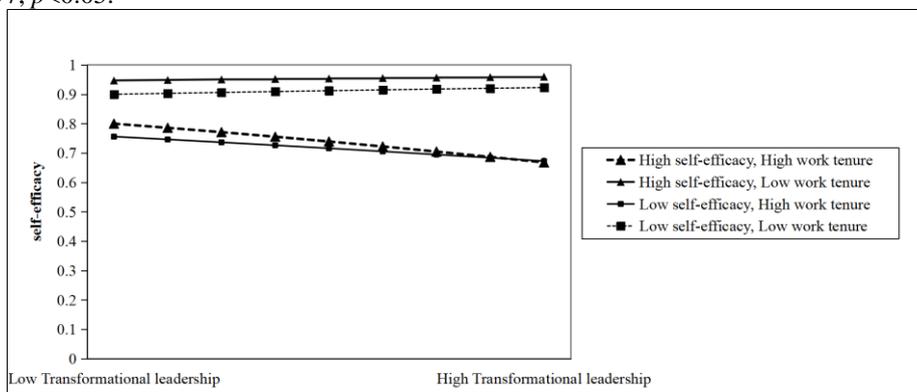


Figure 3: Moderating Effect of Self-Efficacy and Work Tenure Interaction Term.

Note. Y-axis represents self-efficacy. Slope statistics: High self-efficacy/low tenure: $\beta=0.079$, $p<0.05$; Low self-efficacy/high tenure: $\beta=-0.12$, $p=0.08$. Lines and labelling styles: Triangles=high self-efficacy, squares=low self-efficacy.

The high-order moderation model test (Model 3 in Table 4, Figure 3) indicates that the three-way interaction between transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and work tenure significantly predicts voice behavior ($\beta=0.079$, $t=2.134$, $p<0.05$). Following Long et al.'s^[70] validation method for three-dimensional interactions, this suggests that work tenure moderates the role of self-efficacy in the relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior. Simple slopes analysis reveals that when self-efficacy and work tenure are high or low (one standard deviation above or below the mean), transformational leadership exerts a marginally positive but statistically significant effect on voice behavior under specific conditions: high self-efficacy with low work tenure, or low self-efficacy with low work tenure ($\beta=0.079$, $p<0.05$). Figure 3 illustrates the joint impact of self-efficacy and work tenure, showing that the steepest slope occurs when self-efficacy is high and work tenure is short. The negative association between transformational leadership and voice behavior among high-tenure employees may reflect job complacency or institutional inertia, consistent with Schneider et al.'s^[71] ASA framework.

Therefore, H3 aligns with the observed data.

5. Conclusions and discussion

5.1. Theoretical significance

While prior studies predominantly examined corporate employees, civil servants operate within distinct bureaucratic contexts where hierarchical structures may suppress voice behavior^[31]. This disparity has resulted in an incomplete theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between leadership styles and voice behavior. This paper takes 512 Chinese grassroots civil servants to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior under the different moderating effects of self-efficacy and work tenure. The findings reveal: First, there is a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership and civil servant' voice behavior. Second, unexpectedly, the moderating effect of self-efficacy varied with work tenure. High work tenure correlated with a negative relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior among those with high self-efficacy, possibly due to entrenched routines reducing receptivity to leadership influence^[23]. The theoretical significance of this paper is reflected in several aspects:

Firstly, this study innovatively analyzes the mechanism linking transformational leadership and voice behavior, enhancing research on the positive effects. It investigates how self-efficacy affects civil servants' expectations about voicing opinions, and their decision-making process regarding speaking up. Grounded in self-determination theory and social exchange theory, it incorporates work tenure to examine limitations on the moderating effect of self-efficacy. By constructing a three-dimensional interaction model, it examines how self-efficacy and work tenure interactively moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior. In organizational behavior research, work tenure is often considered as a control variable rather than a crucial moderator, yet its impact on employee' perceptions and behavior varies. The negative association between transformational leadership and voice behavior among long-tenured employees may reflect job complacency or resistance to change, aligning with Schneider et al.'s^[71] attraction-selection-attrition framework.

Ultimately, it expands knowledge of factors promoting voice behavior by validating the positive catalytic effect of transformational leadership in high self-efficacy contexts. Incorporating civil servants into the analysis broadens the investigation scope and deepens understanding of mechanisms influencing their voice behavior.

5.2. Practical implications

This study reveals the positive relationship between transformational leadership and civil servants' voice behavior. The practical implications are as follows: Firstly, transformational leadership positively relates to voice behavior. Organizations should prioritize cultivating leaders with transformational traits and provide necessary training to enhance their effectiveness. Managers should foster a transformational leadership style within teams to create a motivating and equitable work environment that encourages employees to express their opinions. Secondly, while self-efficacy plays a moderating role, its significance should be interpreted cautiously due to modest effect sizes. This suggests that alongside focusing on leadership styles, organizations must also consider employees' psychological states and perceptions of their capabilities. Thirdly, when cultivating voice behavior, organizations should pay particular attention to new employees. Providing appropriate support and opportunities is crucial for enhancing their sense of belonging and self-efficacy and facilitating knowledge sharing across age groups. For senior employees with longer tenures, it is essential to design fair HR principles and procedures for equitable treatment at every stage. Providing development opportunities and career advancement paths while recognizing contributions effectively promotes proactive voice behavior and valuable suggestions for organizational change. Enhancing the quality of employee voice involves integrating leadership styles, individual cognitive abilities, and work tenure to align individuals with roles effectively. These insights offer management recommendations for improving voice behavior and driving efficient public sector reform.

5.3. Research limitations and future directions

This study explores the relationship between transformational leadership and voice behavior, as well as the moderating effects of self-efficacy and work tenure. However, improvements are needed. First,

self-efficacy was subjectively assessed, which may not fully reflect employees' actual abilities. Future research should include objective measures to enhance reliability. Second, the sample is limited to civil servants, reducing generalizability. Including other professional groups could validate the model's robustness. Third, while work tenure was examined as a higher-order moderator, future research could also incorporate other factors into the three-dimensional model to better understand its interactions with transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and voice behavior.

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