

From Silence to Voice: How Ethical Leadership Influences Employees' Promotive Voice Behavior Through Feedback Seeking Behavior and Role Ambiguity

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Abstract: This study focuses on two key dimensions—employees' psychological cognition and behavioral motivation—to examine the dual effects of ethical leadership on employees' promotive voice behavior. A questionnaire survey was conducted among workers from various industries in China, and data from 396 valid responses were analyzed. The findings supported our hypotheses, indicating that employees' feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity fully mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior. Specifically, we found that ethical leadership enhances promotive voice behavior by fostering employees' feedback-seeking behavior and by reducing their role ambiguity. These results demonstrate that ethical leadership indirectly influences promotive voice behavior by strengthening employees' behavioral motivation and alleviating their negative perceptions of roles. This study contributes significant theoretical and practical insights into the exploration of leadership and employees' voice behavior for organizational improvement and offers valuable directions for future research.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Promotive Voice Behavior; Feedback Seeking Behavior; Role Ambiguity; Conservation of Resources Theory

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1.Introduction

In today's fast-paced and competitive organizational environment, fostering employee proactivity and innovation is critical for sustaining long-term success (Abdul-Azeez et al., 2024). Among various forms of proactive work behaviors, promotive voice behavior has garnered significant attention in organizational behavior research. Promotive voice behavior refers to employees' voluntary and constructive expression of ideas, suggestions, or concerns aimed at improving organizational processes or performance (Memon & Ooi, 2024; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). This behavior not only enhances organizational adaptability and innovation but also contributes to fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Despite its importance, the factors influencing promotive voice behavior, particularly those shaped by leadership, remain an area of active investigation. Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and concern for the well-being of employees, has emerged as a key determinant of various positive organizational outcomes (Subedi & Bhandari, 2024). Ethical leaders serve as role models, demonstrating behaviors that align with ethical principles and creating an environment where employees feel respected,

valued, and psychologically safe (Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2023). Such an environment can empower employees to engage in promotive voice behavior. However, the mechanisms underlying this relationship remain insufficiently explored.

Two potential mediating factors—feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity—may help elucidate how ethical leadership influences promotive voice behavior (Gong et al., 2019). Feedback-seeking behavior, which refers to employees' proactive efforts to gather information about their performance and organizational expectations, can enhance their confidence and clarity about contributing meaningfully to organizational objectives. Ethical leadership, by fostering trust and openness, may encourage employees to actively seek feedback, thereby supporting their engagement in promotive voice behavior. Role ambiguity, on the other hand, refers to the lack of clarity about job responsibilities and expectations. High role ambiguity can hinder employees' willingness to express ideas or take initiative due to uncertainty or fear of misalignment with organizational goals (Alshemmari, 2023). Ethical leadership may mitigate role ambiguity by providing clear guidance and consistent communication, thereby facilitating conditions where employees feel confident to share constructive ideas.

Building on these perspectives, this study seeks to investigate the mechanisms through which ethical leadership impacts promotive voice behavior, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity. By addressing these mediating effects, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how ethical leadership fosters proactive and constructive employee behavior. Additionally, it seeks to provide practical insights for organizations aiming to cultivate leadership practices that inspire innovation and improve workplace dynamics.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a valuable framework for understanding employee behavior in organizational contexts. Proposed by Hobfoll, COR theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain, and protect valuable resources such as energy, time, psychological safety, and social support (Hobfoll et al., 2016). Resources are not only essential for coping with demands but also for enabling individuals to pursue growth and achieve goals. When individuals perceive a gain in resources, they are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors. Conversely, resource loss or the threat of resource depletion can lead to stress, reduced motivation, and withdrawal from discretionary efforts.

In the context of ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior, COR theory suggests that ethical leaders play a pivotal role in creating a resource-enriching environment. Ethical leadership fosters trust, fairness, and psychological safety, which help employees preserve existing resources and gain new ones, such as confidence, clarity, and emotional support (Bhatti et al., 2021; Khairy et al., 2023). By alleviating stressors like role ambiguity and encouraging resource-building behaviors like feedback-seeking, ethical leadership reduces the perceived costs and risks of engaging in promotive voice. Employees are thus more likely to invest their resources in voicing constructive ideas, as they feel supported and secure in their roles (Carnevale et al., 2017). This theoretical perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between leadership, resource dynamics, and employee behaviors, providing a robust basis for understanding the mechanisms underlying promotive voice behavior.

2.2 Ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior

Ethical leadership plays a significant role in influencing employees' promotive voice behavior, which refers to employees proactively expressing ideas, suggestions, or concerns that aim to improve organizational practices or performance (Cheng et al., 2014). Ethical leaders, by definition, demonstrate behaviors grounded in moral principles such as fairness, integrity, transparency, and respect. These leaders model positive conduct and set the tone for the overall organizational culture, creating an environment where employees feel safe, supported, and encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas without fear of negative consequences. The relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior is largely driven by the trust and psychological safety that ethical leaders foster within their teams. When employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to feel confident in offering innovative ideas or raising issues that could lead to organizational improvement. This is because ethical leaders are typically seen as fair and just, treating employees with respect and valuing their input. As a result, employees are more inclined to speak up, knowing that their voices will be heard and appreciated, and that their contributions are likely to have a positive impact on the organization (Burris et al., 2013). Additionally, ethical leaders empower employees by encouraging their participation in decision-making processes and giving them the autonomy

to take ownership of their work. This sense of empowerment further motivates employees to engage in promotive voice behavior, as they feel that their ideas can genuinely influence outcomes. In this way, ethical leadership creates a culture where employees not only feel safe but are also motivated to contribute to the betterment of the organization.

Hypothesis 1. Ethical leadership has a positive impact on employees' Promotive voice behavior.

2.3 The mediating role of the feedback seeking behavior

The relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior can be partially explained through the mediating role of feedback-seeking behavior (Cheng et al., 2022; Ajmal et al., 2024). Feedback-seeking behavior, defined as employees' proactive efforts to obtain performance-related information, plays a crucial role in enhancing their understanding of job expectations, improving task performance, and fostering personal growth. Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and a genuine concern for employees' well-being, creates an environment conducive to feedback-seeking, which in turn facilitates promotive voice behavior.

Ethical leaders establish trust and psychological safety by demonstrating consistent, fair, and transparent behavior. Employees under ethical leadership are likely to feel valued and supported, reducing their fear of negative evaluations or repercussions when seeking feedback. This perception of psychological safety encourages employees to approach their leaders or peers to obtain constructive feedback on their performance or suggestions for improvement (Su et al., 2022). By seeking feedback, employees gain clarity about their roles, performance expectations, and areas for improvement, which increases their confidence and readiness to contribute new ideas.

Feedback-seeking behavior also allows employees to align their suggestions with organizational goals and priorities (Bălăceanu et al., 2021; Ajmal et al., 2024). This alignment is critical for promotive voice behavior, as employees are more likely to express ideas that are relevant and actionable when they have accurate and up-to-date information about organizational needs. Furthermore, feedback-seeking promotes a sense of empowerment and ownership, as employees who actively seek feedback often feel more in control of their work and more confident in their ability to influence organizational outcomes.

In the context of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, feedback-seeking behavior serves as a resource-building mechanism. Ethical leadership reduces the emotional and psychological costs associated with feedback-seeking, enabling employees to gain valuable resources such as knowledge, confidence, and clarity. These resources not only replenish employees' energy but also encourage them to invest in promotive voice behavior, which often requires additional cognitive and emotional effort.

Overall, feedback-seeking behavior acts as a bridge linking ethical leadership to promotive voice behavior. Ethical leadership fosters an environment where employees feel encouraged to seek feedback, and the knowledge and confidence gained through this behavior empower employees to engage in constructive, proactive expressions aimed at organizational improvement (Su et al., 2021). This mediating role underscores the importance of understanding feedback-seeking as a dynamic process that amplifies the positive effects of ethical leadership on employee outcomes.

Hypothesis 2. Feedback seeking behavior mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and Promotive voice behavior.

2.4 The mediating role of the role ambiguity

Role ambiguity refers to the uncertainty or lack of clarity employees experience regarding their job responsibilities, expectations, and how their performance is evaluated (Sawyer, 1992; Lin & Ling, 2018). It can create psychological discomfort and impede employees' ability to effectively engage in various workplace behaviors, including promotive voice behavior. Promotive voice behavior, which involves employees proactively offering ideas or suggestions to improve organizational functioning, requires confidence in one's role and a clear understanding of how their contributions align with organizational goals (Rasheed et al., 2017). Role ambiguity, therefore, can hinder employees from expressing their thoughts, as they may be unsure about their position within the organization or whether their input will be valued or understood.

Ethical leadership plays a critical role in alleviating role ambiguity by providing clear communication, consistent expectations, and transparency in decision-making (Al'Ararah et al., 2024). Ethical leaders model behaviors that prioritize fairness and clarity, ensuring that employees have a well-defined understanding of their roles and the criteria by which they will be evaluated. Ethical leaders also establish an open and supportive environment, in which employees feel comfortable

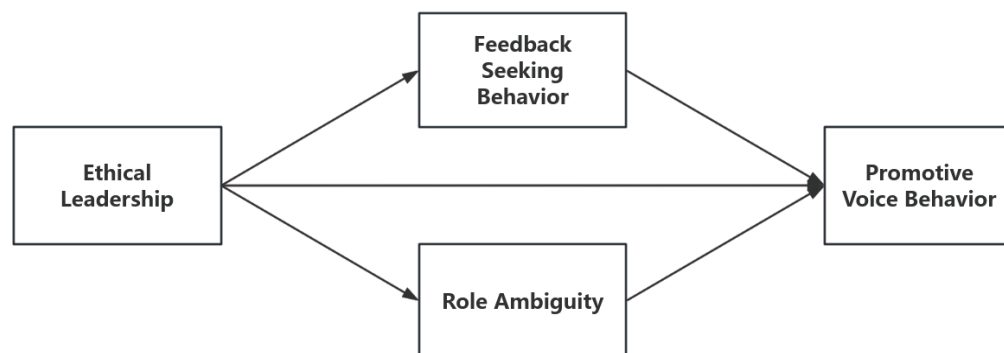
seeking clarification and voicing concerns about any uncertainties they might have regarding their roles. This clarity reduces the cognitive and emotional load associated with role ambiguity, allowing employees to focus their resources on engaging in proactive behaviors such as promotive voice.

When ethical leadership reduces role ambiguity, employees are more likely to feel confident in their job duties and organizational fit (Bouckennooghe et al., 2015). With a clearer sense of their role, employees are better equipped to assess how their suggestions align with organizational priorities, increasing the likelihood of them engaging in promotive voice. Furthermore, by reducing uncertainty about their responsibilities, employees experience a greater sense of psychological safety, which encourages them to share ideas without fear of negative evaluation or role conflict.

From the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, role ambiguity represents a significant drain on psychological resources (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2022; Maisonneuve et al., 2024). When employees experience role ambiguity, they must expend additional cognitive and emotional resources to navigate uncertainties and make sense of their responsibilities (Sung et al., 2017). This resource depletion reduces their ability to engage in proactive behaviors such as promotive voice. However, ethical leadership, by clarifying roles and expectations, helps preserve these resources and encourages employees to use their remaining resources to contribute to organizational improvement. Role ambiguity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior by influencing employees' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities (Li et al., 2020). Ethical leadership, by reducing role ambiguity, empowers employees to act with clarity and confidence, thereby fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable and motivated to express their ideas and suggestions. This mediation highlights the critical role of leadership in creating clear and supportive environments that enable employees to engage in behaviors that benefit both themselves and the organization.

Hypothesis 3. Role ambiguity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and Promotive voice behavior.

Figure 1. Research model.



3. Methods

In this section, we provide a detailed account of the data collection process undertaken to test our hypotheses. First, we outline the specific steps involved in the design and administration of the survey. Additionally, we summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and present an overview of the survey structure, including the measurement instruments used. This comprehensive approach ensures the reliability and validity of the data, establishing a robust foundation for the subsequent analysis.

3.1 Sample and Procedures

To test the hypotheses of this study, an online survey was conducted among workplace employees from mid-April to early May 2024. The participants consisted of workers from various industries in China, including manufacturing, finance, IT, construction, service, and trade sectors. Initially, a total of 412 responses were collected. After careful screening, responses deemed unreasonable or insincere due to significant inconsistencies in selected options were excluded. Consequently, the final analysis for this study was conducted using 396 valid responses.

The demographic analysis of 396 valid respondents yielded several insights. In terms of age distribution, respondents aged 31–35 accounted for the largest proportion (32.1%), followed by those aged 26–30 and 36–40, each comprising 20.2% of the sample. Smaller proportions were observed for respondents under 25 (10.9%), aged 41–45 (9.3%), and 46 or older

(7.3%). Regarding team size, the most common group was composed of 31–40 members (25.3%), followed by teams of 21–30 members (21%), 41–50 members (21.7%), 11–20 members (16.7%), and fewer than 10 members (15.4%). In terms of employment status, the majority of respondents (83.1%) were full-time employees, with the remaining 16.9% classified as non-regular employees. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with male respondents comprising 48.7% of the sample and female respondents accounting for 51.3%.

Educational background revealed that bachelor's degree holders represented the largest group (53.3%), followed by associate degree holders (26.8%), high school graduates (13.4%), and individuals with graduate degrees (6.6%). Concerning work experience, over half of the respondents (51%) reported 6–10 years of experience, while 33.3% had 1–5 years, 14.4% had more than 10 years, and 1.3% had less than 1 year. With respect to tenure with their current supervisor, 73.5% of respondents reported working with their current supervisor for 1–5 years, with 37.4% having 1–3 years of tenure and 36.1% having 3–5 years. Only 4.5% reported less than 1 year of tenure, while 22% indicated more than 5 years.

Finally, industry distribution showed that the trade industry accounted for the largest proportion of respondents (22.5%), followed by general enterprises (17.9%) and the service industry (15.7%). Other industries included the manufacturing industry (9.6%), the apparel industry (11.9%), the IT industry (4.5%), the financial industry (4%), and the construction industry (3.3%).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Ethical Leadership

To measure ethical leadership, this study utilized the 10-item scale developed by Brown et al. (2005), employing a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items from the questionnaire include: “My leader listens carefully to what employees have to say and values their ideas,” “My leader truly considers the best interests of employees when making decisions,” and “My leader is someone I can trust,” among others.

3.2.2 Feedback Seeking Behavior

To measure feedback-seeking behavior, this study employed a 5-point Likert scale based on the 5-item measure developed by VandeWalle et al. (2000). Sample items include: “I frequently ask my leader for feedback about the overall adequacy of my work performance,” and “I frequently ask my leader for feedback about the technical aspects of my performance on the job,” among others.

3.2.3 Role Ambiguity

To measure role ambiguity among employees, this study utilized a 5-point Likert scale based on the 5-item measure developed by Rizzo (1970). Sample items include: “I feel confident about how much authority I have in my job,” and “I have clear and well-planned goals and objectives for my job,” among others.

3.2.4 Promotive Voice Behavior

To measure employees' promotive voice behavior, this study employed a 5-point Likert scale based on the 5-item measure developed by Liang et al. (2012). Sample items include: “I proactively develop and make suggestions for issues that may influence my work unit,” and “I make constructive suggestions to improve the operation of my work unit,” among others.

3.2.5 statistical variable

In setting up the statistical variables, we first focus on the potential influence of age, gender, and employee status (formal vs. informal employees) on promotive voice behavior. The gender variable is coded as Male = 1, Female = 2; formal employees are coded as 1, while informal employees are coded as 2. Additionally, the educational level is encoded as follows: High school graduate = 1, Associate degree = 2, Bachelor's degree = 3, and Master's degree = 4. To further analyze the impact of leadership on promotive voice behavior, working time with supervisors and team size, including the supervisor, need to be considered. In statistical analysis, the working time of employees and their working time with supervisors are recorded and analyzed in “years.”

4. Results

In this study, statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0, AMOS 26.0, and the SPSS PROCESS v.4.2 statistical tools. Specifically, to assess the validity and reliability of the variables, SPSS 27.0 was used for basic statistical analysis,

exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis to validate the hypotheses. Additionally, AMOS 26.0 was employed to perform confirmatory factor analysis to examine model fit, and SPSS PROCESS v.4.2 was further used to conduct mediation effect analysis.

4.1 Reliability and Validity Verification

To verify the validity of the variables, this study employed principal component analysis for factor extraction and utilized the Varimax rotation method to conduct exploratory factor analysis. Additionally, to assess the validity of the questionnaire, exploratory factor analysis was performed. The results indicated that the KMO value of the survey data was 0.944, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The measurement model fit indices were $\chi^2 = 5618.538$, $df = 300$, and $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.01$). The p-value of Bartlett's test of sphericity was less than 0.05, confirming that the questionnaire data were suitable for factor analysis.

Furthermore, the validity of the entire questionnaire scale was evaluated. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha values for each variable were as follows: ethical leadership (0.933), feedback-seeking behavior (0.888), promotive voice behavior (0.870), and role ambiguity (0.861), all exceeding the general standard of 0.7. Thus, it can be concluded that the questionnaire designed for this study demonstrates a high level of reliability.

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

Factor	Measure	1	2	3	4
Ethical leadership	1. My leader listens carefully to what employees have to say and values their ideas.	0.717	0.112	0.123	-0.173
	2. My leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards in an appropriate manner.	0.764	0.220	0.149	-0.090
	3. My leader consistently maintains ethical behavior in his/her personal life.	0.746	0.132	0.149	-0.111
	4. My leader truly considers the best interests of employees when making decisions.	0.791	0.122	0.102	-0.122
	5. My leader makes decisions that are fair and take all relevant factors into account.	0.774	0.140	0.090	-0.116
	6. My leader is someone I can trust.	0.793	0.118	0.106	-0.099
	7. My leader frequently discusses business ethics or values with employees.	0.763	0.090	0.146	-0.067
	8. My leader sets an example of the correct behavior in terms of ethics for employees to follow.	0.753	0.091	0.141	-0.138
	9. My leader defines success not only by achieving results but also by ensuring that the methods used are ethical.	0.735	0.112	0.113	-0.168
	10. When making decisions, my leader asks themselves, "What is the right thing to do?"	0.776	0.107	0.037	-0.158
feedback seeking behavior	1. I frequently ask my leader for feedback about the overall adequacy of my work performance.	0.217	0.760	0.169	-0.198
	2. I frequently ask my leader for feedback about the technical aspects of my performance on the job.	0.176	0.761	0.184	-0.251
	3. I frequently ask my leader for feedback about my role expectations and how well I am meeting them.	0.137	0.773	0.224	-0.184
	4. I frequently ask my leader for feedback about my social behaviors in the workplace.	0.216	0.793	0.145	-0.091
	5. I frequently ask my leader for feedback about how well my values and attitudes align with those of the firm.	0.123	0.772	0.110	-0.223

Factor	Measure	1	2	3	4
Promotive voice behavior	1. I proactively develop and make suggestions for issues that may influence my work unit.	0.154	0.143	0.757	-0.189
	2. I proactively suggest new projects that could be beneficial to my work unit.	0.119	0.110	0.751	-0.151
	3. I raise suggestions to improve my work unit's procedures.	0.099	0.167	0.766	-0.140
	4. I proactively voice constructive suggestions that help my work unit achieve its goals.	0.209	0.166	0.783	-0.063
	5. I make constructive suggestions to improve the operation of my work unit.	0.172	0.165	0.802	-0.084
role ambiguity	1. There is a clear explanation of what I need to do at work.	-0.195	-0.172	-0.118	0.767
	2. I feel confident about how much authority I have in my job.	-0.166	-0.153	-0.174	0.747
	3. I have clear and well-planned goals and objectives for my job.	-0.164	-0.208	-0.071	0.781
	4. I know what my responsibilities are.	-0.145	-0.156	-0.064	0.763
	5. I know exactly what is expected of me in my role.	-0.164	-0.193	-0.260	0.695
	Eigenvalue	9.392	3.135	2.085	1.689
	% of variance	37.567	12.539	8.338	6.755
	% of cumulative	37.567	50.106	58.444	65.199
	Cronbach α value	0.933	0.888	0.870	0.861
	KMO = 0.944, Bartlett ($\chi^2 = 5618.538$, df = 300, p = 0.000)				

4.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

This study also conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the model's goodness of fit. As shown in Table 2, the research model, which includes ethical leadership (EL), feedback-seeking behavior (FSB), role ambiguity (RA), and promotive voice behavior (PVB), demonstrated good model fit. Specifically, the absolute fit indices indicated $\chi^2 = 316.182$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.175$, RMSEA = 0.021, CFI = 0.991, and IFI = 0.991.

According to Rigdon (1996), a model is considered to have a good fit when the ratio of χ^2 to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) is less than 3, CFI exceeds 0.9, and RMSEA is below 0.08. Based on these criteria, the research model (the four-factor model of EL, FSB, RA, and PVB) demonstrated a superior fit compared to alternative models 3, 2, and 1.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	No. of Factors a	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI
Baseline model	4 factors: EL, FSB, RA, PVB	316.182	269	1.175	0.021	0.991	0.991
Model 1	3 factors: (EL + FSB), RA, PVB	1169.471	272	4.300	0.091	0.835	0.836
Model 2	2 factors: (EL + FSB + RA), PVB	1762.840	274	6.434	0.117	0.727	0.728
Model 3	1 factors: (EL + FSB + RA + PVB)	2406.833	275	8.752	0.140	0.609	0.611

Note: EL = Ethical Leadership; FSB = Feedback Seeking Behavior; RA = Role Ambiguity; PVB = Promotive Voice Behavior; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = Comparative fit index, IFI = Incremental fit index.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

To investigate the correlations among the key variables, we conducted descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis. The results of the correlation analysis revealed that the Pearson correlation coefficients for the four variables used in this study were all above 0.1, with p-values meeting the significance criterion of $p < 0.05$. These findings indicate significant

correlations between the variables in the models.

Specifically, the independent variable, ethical leadership, showed significant positive correlations with the mediating variable, feedback-seeking behavior ($r = 0.413$, $p < 0.01$), and the dependent variable, promotive voice behavior ($r = 0.371$, $p < 0.01$), while showing a significant negative correlation with another mediating variable, role ambiguity ($r = -0.406$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, feedback-seeking behavior demonstrated a significant negative correlation with role ambiguity ($r = -0.495$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant positive correlation with promotive voice behavior ($r = 0.437$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, role ambiguity exhibited a significant negative correlation with promotive voice behavior ($r = -0.385$, $p < 0.01$). The relationships among all variables were consistent with our hypotheses. Subsequently, we used regression analysis to further verify these correlations. The specific results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis between variables

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	34.010	6.782								
2. Gender	1.510	0.500	-0.018							
3. Team Members	27.580	13.408	-0.004	-0.130**						
4. Tenure year	6.537	2.836	0.053	0.040	-0.057					
5. Education	2.530	0.806	-0.012	-0.061	-0.017	0.060				
Ethical Leadership	3.769	0.962	-0.067	0.057	0.004	0.042	-0.072			
Feedback Seeking Behavior	3.655	1.069	-0.002	-0.009	-0.074	0.075	0.028	0.413**		
Role Ambiguity	2.230	0.966	-0.046	-0.001	-0.028	-0.056	0.062	-0.406**	-0.495**	
Promotive Voice Behavior	3.700	1.020	-0.040	-0.005	-0.005	0.046	-0.046	0.371**	0.437**	-0.385**

N = 396, *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

Prior to conducting regression analysis, a preliminary collinearity diagnostic was performed to ensure the absence of multicollinearity issues. The results indicated that the variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1 to 1.5, confirming no multicollinearity concerns. To test the mediation hypotheses of this study, we adopted the stepwise regression approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

First, based on the results from Model 2 in Table 4, the independent variable, ethical leadership, exhibited a strong and significant positive relationship with the dependent variable, promotive voice behavior ($\beta = 0.369$, $p < 0.001$). Second, the results from Model 4 indicated that ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.183$, $p < 0.001$), the mediating variable feedback-seeking behavior ($\beta = 0.277$, $p < 0.001$), and the mediating variable role ambiguity ($\beta = -0.172$, $p < 0.001$) were all significantly associated with promotive voice behavior.

Furthermore, a comparison of the results from Models 2, 3, and 4 revealed that after including the two mediating variables (feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity), ethical leadership maintained a significant positive effect on promotive voice behavior. This indicates that the two mediating variables partially mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior. These findings provide empirical support for hypotheses 1, hypotheses 2 and hypotheses 3 of this study.

Table 4. Results of hierarchical regression analyses

Variable	Promotive Voice Behavior			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	-0.044	-0.018	-0.026	-0.037
Gender	-0.012	-0.031	-0.016	-0.016
Team Members	-0.004	-0.009	0.018	0.008

Variable	Promotive Voice Behavior			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Tenure year	0.052	0.034	0.017	0.013
Education	-0.050	-0.023	-0.041	-0.031
Ethical Leadership		0.369***	0.224***	0.183***
Feedback Seeking Behavior			0.345***	0.277***
Role Ambiguity				-0.172***
F	0.515	10.610	17.315	16.880
R ²	0.007	0.141	0.238	0.259
ΔR^2	-0.006	0.127	0.224	0.243

N = 396, *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

To further validate the mediating effects of feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity, this study utilized SPSS PROCESS v4.2 to conduct additional tests and analyses to determine whether significant mediating effects exist among the variables. The bootstrap method was applied with a 95% confidence interval (CI), and 5,000 resampling iterations were performed through the software to compute and verify the mediating effects. The detailed results of the analysis are presented in Table 5. The results showed that the total effect of ethical leadership on promotive voice behavior was 0.3938, with both the upper and lower bounds of the 95% CI being positive and excluding zero. This indicates that the total effect of ethical leadership on promotive voice behavior is significant. Furthermore, when feedback-seeking behavior served as the mediating variable, the direct effect of ethical leadership on promotive voice behavior was 0.2441, with the 95% CI also excluding zero, confirming the significance of the direct effect. Similarly, when role ambiguity served as the mediating variable, the direct effect of ethical leadership on promotive voice behavior was 0.2731, with the 95% CI excluding zero, further supporting the significance of the direct effect.

Finally, the indirect effect of the mediating path through feedback-seeking behavior (ethical leadership → feedback-seeking behavior → promotive voice behavior) was 0.1496, with both the upper and lower bounds of the 95% CI being positive and excluding zero, indicating the significant mediating effect of feedback-seeking behavior. Similarly, the indirect effect of the mediating path through role ambiguity (ethical leadership → role ambiguity → promotive voice behavior) was 0.1206, with the 95% CI excluding zero, demonstrating the significant mediating effect of role ambiguity. These results provide further evidence supporting the hypotheses of this study.

Table 5. Mediating Effect Bootstrapping Results

The mediation path	Effect	Standardized Estimate	BC 95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Total effect				
EL → PVB(M=FSB)	0.3938	0.0496	0.2963	0.4913
EL → PVB(M=RA)	0.3938	0.0496	0.2963	0.4913
Direct effect				
EL → PVB(M=FSB)	0.2441	0.0513	0.1432	0.3451
EL → PVB(M=RA)	0.2731	0.0522	0.1705	0.3758
Indirect effect				
EL → FSB → PVB	0.1496	0.0288	0.0970	0.2101
EL → RA → PVB	0.1206	0.0265	0.0739	0.1759

Note: EL = Ethical Leadership; FSB = Feedback Seeking Behavior; RA = Role Ambiguity; PVB = Promotive Voice Behavior. M=Mediator

5. Discussion

5.1 Overall Findings

This study aimed to explore the influence of ethical leadership on promotive voice behavior and identify the mediating effects of feedback seeking behavior and role ambiguity. The findings provide important insights into how ethical leadership fosters an environment that encourages employees to engage in constructive voice behaviors.

The results of this study confirm that ethical leadership plays a significant role in promoting employees' voice behavior, specifically in the context of innovative and constructive suggestions that contribute to organizational improvement. Ethical leaders, through their commitment to fairness, integrity, and transparency, create a work environment where employees feel respected and supported (Islam et al., 2024). This finding aligns with previous research that emphasizes the positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee proactivity. By demonstrating ethical principles, leaders enhance employees' trust and confidence, motivating them to share valuable insights without fear of retaliation or judgment. Ethical leadership acts as a critical catalyst for psychological safety, which is essential for promotive voice behavior. When employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to believe that their input will be valued, leading to increased engagement in voice behavior.

Feedback seeking behavior was identified as a key mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior (Zahoor et al., 2024). The findings suggest that ethical leadership encourages employees to seek feedback on their ideas and suggestions, which, in turn, enhances their willingness to voice opinions. This process is in line with social exchange theory, where the provision of support and guidance from ethical leaders prompts employees to engage in behaviors that foster mutual benefit. By actively seeking feedback, employees gain reassurance and validation for their contributions, further motivating them to engage in promotive voice behavior. Moreover, feedback seeking behavior provides employees with the opportunity to refine their ideas, ensuring that their contributions are relevant and well-received. This feedback loop not only reinforces the importance of voice behavior but also promotes a culture of continuous improvement within organizations.

Role ambiguity emerged as another significant factor mediating the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior (Bai et al., 2019). When employees experience clear role expectations, they are more likely to engage in voice behaviors, as they feel secure in their understanding of what is expected of them. Ethical leadership reduces role ambiguity by clarifying goals, expectations, and organizational values, thus providing employees with the guidance necessary to express their ideas confidently (Bouckennooghe et al., 2015). This finding supports the notion that reducing role ambiguity can enhance employee motivation and engagement. Ethical leaders, by setting clear expectations and fostering transparency, help alleviate uncertainty about job responsibilities and organizational goals, which, in turn, encourages employees to engage in promotive voice behavior.

5.2 Theoretical Implications and Practical Implications

This study extends the understanding of the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior by unveiling the mediating roles of feedback seeking behavior and role ambiguity. By doing so, it enriches the theoretical discourse on leadership behaviors that foster proactive employee actions. Specifically, the findings highlight that ethical leadership not only inspires employees through moral guidance but also reduces barriers to engagement by clarifying role expectations and fostering a culture of open feedback. This dual pathway offers a more nuanced understanding of how ethical leadership promotes a psychologically safe environment conducive to voice behaviors.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broader organizational behavior literature by integrating perspectives from COR theory, illustrating how leaders' ethical behaviors influence employees' cognitive and behavioral responses. These insights deepen our comprehension of the mechanisms that underlie the impact of leadership styles on organizational dynamics.

For practitioners, the findings underscore the critical importance of ethical leadership in fostering an organizational culture where employees feel empowered to express innovative ideas and constructive suggestions. Managers should prioritize ethical conduct and actively demonstrate fairness, integrity, and transparency to cultivate trust and psychological safety among employees (Malik, 2024). Organizations can also benefit from implementing structured feedback mechanisms and

clear role definitions to minimize role ambiguity, thereby enhancing employees' confidence and willingness to engage in promotive voice behavior. Training programs should be designed to develop ethical leadership competencies, with a focus on communication skills, active listening, and promoting an inclusive environment that values employee input.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study empirically reveals the positive impact of ethical leadership on employees' promotive voice behavior and demonstrates the significant mediating roles of feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity, several limitations remain.

First, the generalizability of the research findings is constrained by the characteristics of the sample. The data were primarily drawn from industries or regions within China, potentially limiting the applicability of the conclusions. The mechanisms underlying ethical leadership may vary across cultural contexts, organizational structures, and industry types (Brown et al., 2005; Resick et al., 2006). Future research should broaden the sample scope to include cross-cultural and cross-industry data to validate the robustness of these findings in diverse settings (House et al., 2004). Second, issues related to causality warrant further attention. This study employed cross-sectional data, which cannot fully eliminate the possibility of reverse causality or common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Longitudinal research designs or experimental methods should be utilized in future studies to explore causal relationships and the dynamic interplay among variables, thereby uncovering the long-term mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences employee behavior (Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Third, this study does not thoroughly examine individual differences among employees—such as personality traits, self-efficacy, or values—that may moderate the effects of feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity. These individual differences could significantly influence the effectiveness of ethical leadership. Future research should consider incorporating individual-level moderating variables, such as psychological safety or constructs from self-determination theory, to explore how personal characteristics shape the pathways through which ethical leadership exerts its effects. Moreover, the study falls short in addressing contextual factors. Organizational culture, work environment, and team characteristics may play critical roles in moderating the impact of ethical leadership on employees' promotive voice behavior. Future research should include organizational-level variables, such as perceptions of organizational justice or team climate, to investigate how contextual factors shape the relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice behavior.

Finally, the measurement of variables in this study relied heavily on survey-based self-reports, which are susceptible to social desirability bias and self-reporting inaccuracies. Future research could incorporate multi-source data, such as evaluations from supervisors and colleagues, behavioral observations, or text analysis, to enhance the objectivity and reliability of measurements. It is also worth noting that feedback-seeking behavior and role ambiguity may have an interactive or reciprocal relationship. For instance, proactive feedback-seeking could reduce role ambiguity, while lower levels of role ambiguity may, in turn, promote feedback-seeking behavior. Future studies could develop more complex models, such as cross-level mediation models or dynamic interaction models, to explore the potential reciprocal mechanisms between these two constructs.

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Conflict of Interests

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