Despotic Leadership and Employee Vigor: Mediating Role of Silence

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Abstract

The core aim of the current study is to investigate the relationship between despotic leadership and employee vigor via mediation of employee silence. The data for the current study is collected from employees working in public sector organizations. All in all, 400 questionnaires were distributed to employees while only 298 useful responses were received and used for analysis. The data analysis carried out using SPSS highlighted that the despotic leadership reduces employees' vigor at work. Upon further investigation it has been highlighted that silence mediates the relationship and partial mediation is supported by the findings. The findings provide a meaningful message about the possible negative outcomes of despotic leadership at work. The future directions are also provided at the end.

Key words: Despotic leadership, employee silence, public sector, vigor

Introduction

Leadership is one of the most popular topics in business and management literature (Zhang et al., 2021). Leader is one who has the ability to lead others (Maddux, 2018), therefore it's an act of persuading others towards achievement of some goal (Denis et al., 1996). Initially leaders were characterized as one who can lead others in the battlefield (Cortellazzo et al., 2019), but with passage of time the term was adopted in other fields (Vito & Sethi, 2020). In the field of social and management sciences, leadership has been studied with various theoretical lenses (Asif et al., 2022; Heath & McCann, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Witzel, 2019). These aspects include the traits, behaviors, situations and various styles that may have a bearing on others towards achievement of organizational goals (Azim et al., 2019; Deichmann & Stam, 2015; Zhang et al., 2021). This role of leadership has been valued for this role and it is expected that the role of leadership would remain important and pivotal for organizational success (Eva et al., 2019).

Past literature has considered leadership a positive aspect of work (Minh-Duc & Huu-Lam, 2019; Xu et al., 2017), while dark leadership has gained attention in the recent past (Oyerinde, 2020). Such leadership behaviors have negative effects on employee behaviors which untimely leads to negative workplace outcomes (Nauman et al., 2021). It is therefore the value of studying negative leadership behaviors that have been cherished (Hewawitharana et al., 2020). By valuing the role of negative leadership aspects, the current study aims to find the impact of despotic leadership on employee outcomes (i.e. vigor – a high level of energy at work). As past studies have highlighted that despotic leadership negatively influences employee outcomes e.g. it reduces performance (Nauman et al., 2021), influences psychological well-being (Raja et al., 2020) and distress (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022). This study proposes that despotic leadership may influence employee vigor negatively. This could be attributed to the fact that such leaders influence employees at psychological levels (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022; Raja et al., 2020), which is the basic premise for the emotional responses of individuals. As an outcome employee may feel pass through a situation of stress therefore the relationship may exist between despotic leadership and employee vigor.

This study also proposes that the relationship between despotic leadership and vigor is explained by the employee's silence. The relationship seems logical, as in presence of despotic leadership employees tend to feel isolated as the leader is more self-centered and focuses on personal achievements then the organizational level outcomes (Kasi et al., 2020). In such a situation employees tend to remain silent and avoid knowledge sharing at work, which ultimately leads to their withdrawal behavior (Kazmi et al., 2022). Albashiti et al., (2021) also found that silence works as an explanatory mechanism between despotic leadership and employee outcomes and often silence leads

to negative outcomes. A profound look at the literature highlights that mediating role of silence has been investigated in recent literature, for instance, it works between despotic leadership and creativity and outcomes (Kasi et al., 2020). It also works as a mediator between despotic leadership and withdrawal behavior (Kazmi et al., 2022). But how silence helps in explaining the relationship of despotic leadership and employee vigor (reduction in positive energies) is an area that has not gained due attention.

This study contributes to existing literature in many ways. The foremost of them is proposing and investigating the relationship of despotic leadership and its effects on the energy level of employees (vigor). Secondly, it covers the mediating role of silence which has not gained due attention from researchers in the past. Thirdly, the study uses conservation of resources (COR, Hobfoll, 1989) perspective as an underlying mechanism to explain the said relationship. Lastly, the sample of the study belongs to public sector organizations where the presence of despotic leadership is obvious and largely present. The following section covers literature and hypotheses development.

Hypotheses development

Working environment of an organization significantly influences employee actions at work and silence is one of such behaviors (Knoll et al., 2021). Employees' silence is of various types, but this study considers acquiescent silence as an outcome of workplace factors. It is defined as employee disengagement behavior in acquiring and sharing information to others (Wang et al., 2020). This form of silence may cause numerous negative workplace outcomes including affecting the workplace relations, performance and employee outcomes (Dehkharghani et al., 2022; Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). Employee silence leads to nourishment of a culture where no one would be willing to share knowledge (Hao et al., 2022), which may influence the working environment at all levels. Such an environment influences the overall performance of organizations, as such firms often fail to compete in the business environment (Lam & Xu, 2019). Therefore, the factors that lead to employee acquiescent silence are often considered by researchers.

One of such factors is the role of leadership, because leaders through their vision and actions create an environment of collaboration and support (Lam & Xu, 2019; Zehir & Erdogan, 2011). It has been observed that leaders through their positive behaviors can reduce the chances of silence (Bormann & Rowold, 2016; Zehir & Erdogan, 2011). But increased focus on material gains has increased the leadership focus from positive to negative workplace leadership styles (Lam & Xu, 2019). One of such styles is the despotic leadership which covers the leadership use of positive for personal gains instead of being considerate towards the followers and organizational goals (Kazmi et al., 2022).

The relationship between despotic leadership and employee silence seems logical, as the despotic leaders due to their authoritarian style and self-interests are regarded as someone who is not acceptable to employees (Xu et al., 2017). In presence of such a leader the employees tend to stay away from work (Manafzadeh et al., 2018), and therefore they may neither indulge in acquiring nor sharing of information that are important for the organization (Adeel & Muhammad, 2017). They remain silent because they feel that the information sharing may not benefit the organization as their leader is more focused on personal gains instead of the organizational goals (Martono et al., 2020). In the presence of such leaders, employees feel that it's better to remain silent, because such leaders may not consider the value of information sharing and employee involvement in organization-centric acts (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019). Based on the given facts it is to believe that the despotic leaders will increase the chance of employee silence.

The same can be assumed on the basis of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which proposes that employees tend to feel negative when they consider that there is threat to their resources. As the despotic leader works for self-interests, it is expected that the employee would tend to feel loss of a social resource at the workplace and may try to protect other resources (e.g. information), which may lead to increased level of silence at work. Based on the given discussion and theoretical premise following assumption is made:

H$_1$: Despotic leadership and employee silence are positively related

Employee silence does not appear to be the only outcome of workplace negative factors. It may offer numerous workplace outcomes (e.g. Bormann et al., 2016; Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). The silence does not give employees a chance to display their feelings about workplace (Milliken et al., 2003), and leads to stress at work (Dedahanov et al., 2016), burnout (Knoll et al., 2019; Sherf et al., 2021), emotional exhaustion (Knoll et al., 2019) and low level of job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2020). The given findings highlight that silence increases negative outcomes while reducing the positive outcomes. Therefore, the current study assumes that silence would reduce employee energy level (vigor) towards attainment of organizational goals. Vigor is defined as the high level of energy and resilience in wake of challenges (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigor is one of the basic elements of engagement which includes two other elements namely devotion and absorption. This study focuses only on vigor because it is directly linked with one's feelings about the environment because a bad environment influences one's energy levels (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011).

The silence is an employee's response towards a negative workplace environment and employees tend to feel that they cannot control things around them. This may create feelings of loss of energy or vigor. The same can be assumed using the

COR (Hobfoll, 1989) perspective. When employees are silent at work they tend to need a high level of cognitive and emotional resources to cope up the stress in the environment and maintain their silence (Knoll et al., 2019). Here they may require further resources as their personal resources are depleted in order to cope up with the silence requirements (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

As the despotic leaders work for self-fulfillment and do not value the employee and organizational level goals, it is expected that such leaders create a negative environment (Kazmi et al., 2022). The visible loss of resources leads to increase in stress and emotional loss of employees (Dedahanov et al., 2016; Sherf et al., 2016), that may lead to loss of positive energies (thus reduced vigor) (González-Romá et al., 2006). Therefore, it can be assumed that silence negatively influences the vigor of employees.

H_2: Employee silence and vigor are negatively related

The aforementioned discussion highlights that working environment influences employee behaviors and bad environment (e.g. negative leadership) refrains them from acquiring and sharing information at workplace (acquiescent silence) (Wang et al., 2020). This can be attributed to the fact that despotic leaders create an environment where the self-centeredness is nourished and employees tend to get negative vibes from such leaders and environment (Hao et al., 2022). In response to such a leader and employee may tend to avoid such acts that may benefit leader and organization and therefore may involve in silent behavior (Adeel & Muhammad, 2017; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019; Lam & Xu, 2019). The silence at the work, on the other hand, leads to numerous workplace outcomes. One of the major outcomes is employee vigor. This can be assumed on the grounds that silence does not allow employees to display their emotions at the workplace (Milliken et al., 2003), which increases stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout (Knoll et al., 2019; Sherf et al., 2021). All such aspects also reduce one's energy level at the workplace, which is a major factor of vigor. Based on these grounds, it is assumed that despotic leadership increases silence which reduces vigor, and the same is hypothesized below:

H_3: Employee silence mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and vigor

Material & Methods

The current study is an outcome of research endeavor which is carried out in public sector organizations. All in all, 400 questionnaires were distributed to public sector employees working in large services, finance and administrative departments. The data collected started in the month of July 2022 and completed in August 2022. 319 questionnaires were received back and upon evaluation it was found that 21 questionnaires were either incomplete or carelessly filled. The data was collected using snowball sampling technique.

The variables were operationalized using existing scales that have been widely used and valued in past studies. The seven items scale for despotic leadership was borrowed from the work of De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008), it covered items like "My leader is vengeful and seeks revenge when wronged". The scale for acquiescent silence was taken from the work of Dyne et al., (2003). It was five items scale and covered items like "I am unwilling to speak up with suggestions for change because I am disengaged". Vigor was operationalized using the three items scale of Schaufeli et al., (2006) which covered items like "At my work, I feel bursting with energy". All these measures were assessed on a five points scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The majority of the respondents were male (73%), with an average age of 27.5 years, had university degree (63%) and were working with the organization for less than five years (70%).

Data analysis and results

Before hypothesis testing, the data was tested for preliminary results including reliability, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results of all these analyses are shown in table 1 and 2, where table 1 highlights the descriptive statistics. Table 2 covers the results of correlation and reliability. All the measures have reliability values of above the threshold of .70 therefore all the measures are considered reliable. The correlation values highlight that despotic leadership is positively related with the employee silence (r= 0.31, p<.001), and negatively related with employee vigor (r=-0.22, p<0.05). Employee silence, on the other hand, is negatively related with the employee vigor (r=-0.30, p<0.05). These results prove that there is a relationship between variables of interest and therefore we may proceed with the next level of analysis.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation
Despotic leadership	3.45	0.715
Employee silence	3.57	0.581
Employee vigor	3.08	1.024

Table 2
Reliability and correlation analysis

	DL	ES	EV	Reliability
Despotic leadership	--			0.79
Employee silence	0.31**	--		0.73
Employee vigor	-0.22*	-0.30*	--	0.81

*p<0.05, **p<0.001

Table 3 highlights the regression results of the hypothesized model. It is evident from the table that despotic leadership negatively influences employee vigor (β = -.29, p<.05), and positively influences employee silence (β = .28, p<0.05). It is also evident that employees silence negatively influences employee vigor (β = -.19, p<0.05). These results highlight that H1 and H2 are supported. The mediation analysis also reveals that there is

Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported. The mediation results highlight that the indirect effect of employee silence between despotic leadership and employee vigor is significant (β = .10, p<0.05). The table also reveals that the direct effect is also significant, therefore partial mediation is proved and H3 is supported.

Table 3
Hypotheses Testing Outcomes

Relationships	B	SE	t-value	Bootstraps @ 95%		P
				LLCI	ULCI	
DL → EV	-0.29	0.052	6.35	0.402	0.604	0.003
DL → ES	0.28	0.068	5.17	0.427	0.592	0.014
ES → EV	-0.19	0.047	4.65	0.395	0.492	0.019
Indirect effects						
DL → ES → EV	0.10	0.032	3.31	0.400	0.553	0.020

Discussion

Leadership has been considered one of the most widely investigated topics in management literature (Zhang et al., 2021). Leadership is important as it helps in achieving goals by using others abilities (Denis et al., 1996; Maddux, 2018). Past literature has focused on the positive side of leadership while its negative or flip side has gained attention in the recent past (Minh-Duc & Huu-Lam, 2019; Oyerinde, 2020; Xu et al., 2017). One of the negative leadership approaches is despotic leadership, where the leader focuses on the attainment of personal goals (Nauman et al., 2021). Such leaders influence the way individuals work, act and react at the workplace therefore the researchers have started focusing on its negative outcomes (Hewawitharana et al., 2020). The current study focuses on the vary issues and assumes the relationship between despotic leadership and employee vigor (level of energy) explained through the silence of employees. Past studies have found that despotic leadership increases negative outcomes (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022) and reduces positive outcomes (Nauman et al., 2021; Raja et al., 2020). Considering these outcomes, the results of the current study reveal that despotic leadership reduces employee energy level (positive aspect of one self). Therefore, the findings of the study are consistent with the findings of Nauman et al., (2021) and Raja et al., (2020) as the

study results reveal that despotic leadership reduces the positive aspect of one's self. These results also highlight that the reduction in energy level is basically a psychological state, where the employee feels reduced in positive energies due to poor leadership. Hence the results support the past studies that focus on effects of despotic leadership on psychological level of employees (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022).

This study also proposes and investigates the mediating role of silence between despotic leadership and vigor of employees. The relationship is organic as well as empirically proved, because the despotic leaders are self-centered where they value self over others and therefore the employees have reduced level of outcomes (Kasi et al., 2020). Due to such a leader, employees tend to protect themselves by retaining knowledge and indulging in silence (Kazmi et al., 2022). The results support the past studies where it has been highlighted that silence may explain the relationship of despotic leadership and employee outcomes (e.g. Albashiti et al., 2021; Kasi et al., 2021; Kazmi et al., 2022).

Implications of the study

The study has some meaningful messages for both management and researchers. From a managerial perspective the study highlights that the administrative roles should be done by the leaders who are not despotic because such leaders reduce knowledge sharing at work which ultimately may lead to reduction in energy level of employees. Therefore, the management should focus on hiring and appointing leaders that are not despotic in nature. The top-level management in public organizations should also design leadership programs for the managers where they should be trained for their attitudes and behaviors. The leaders should be taught to be organizational and employee centric instead of self-centered leaders. This will add value to the organization and employees would tend to share more knowledge and become energetic at work.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings highlight and empirically support an under-investigated relationship of despotic leadership and employee vigor through the silence. The said relationship has not been proposed and studied in the past literature. Furthermore, the relationship is assumed using COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), which is supported by the current study because due to absence or loss of social resources (due to despotic leadership) employees tend to protect their other personal resources (e.g. remain silent) and feel reduction in their vigor.

Future directions and limitations

The study is carried out on a small sample from public organizations which may undermine the study results. Furthermore, the study is cross-sectional in nature and the sampling strategy is a snowball which may reduce the chances of generalization

of results. The future researchers should carry out the daily-diary study to see the daily effects and long-term effects to see the causality in befitting manners. The future researchers should also include samples from various sectors to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. The future studies could include other leadership aspects e.g. abusive supervision, narcissist leadership, and Machiavellian leaders that may have influence on employees. Other workplace outcomes can also be included in the model as this study focuses on the reduction of positive outcomes (e.g. vigor). The other outcomes may include the withdrawal behavior, negative megaphoning, and other negative outcomes of such leadership styles.

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