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# Follower Voice Behavior and Influence Over Leadership Competencies of SME Owner-Managers in Uganda: A Preliminary Analysis

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## Abstract

Drawing from Hirschman's articulation of voice as a force to keep leaders on their toes, this proposed study attempts to apply the exit-voice framework to the problem of Leadership competencies that has bedevilled many Ugandan SMEs. Using a mixed methods research approach, follower influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers shall be analyzed. The objective is to determine the extent to which follower voice behaviour influences leadership competencies of owner-managers. It's worth noting that this is purely a preliminary analysis which is based on existing literature before empirical conclusions. A detailed methodological stance that the empirical study will adopt is presented.

**Keywords:** *Follower Voice Behavior, Leadership Competencies, LMX, SMEs, Uganda.*

## 1. Background to the Study

As a top entrepreneurial country in the world according to the B2B marketplace Approved Index, Uganda's economy is largely dominated by SMEs and the government looks up to them for job creation, poverty eradication and prosperity, but along the way these SMEs face a plethora of leadership deficiencies which contribute to their early demise mostly before completing a year in operation (Rwakakamba, 2011 and Tushabomwe-Kazooba, 2006).

Given that SME success or failure is largely determined by their managers' competencies, Ugandan SMEs can survive and grow if the owner-managers possess the required leadership competencies yet little is really known about how leadership competencies of Ugandan SMEs leaders can be developed. Considering that SMEs are mostly run by owner-managers who have no formal qualifications in management and leadership (De Kok, Uhlaner, & Thurik, 2006), are generally less well educated and are less likely to be formally trained, they generally do not value traditional approaches to upskill their competencies such as taught leadership programs and text book knowledge , they face serious time and resource challenges (Walker, Redmond, Webster, Le Clus, 2007), they are overwhelmed by the daily demands of keeping the SME afloat and as such, they prefer informal and accidental learning in action (Massey et al, 2005), the inference therefore is that SMEs will continue to collapse unless specific effort is aimed at developing leadership competencies of owner-managers.

Transposing Hirschmanian notion of voice behaviour into the Ugandan SME situation helps to predict that followers rather than live with an ineffective leader or status quo are more likely to speak up and engage in voice behavior – defined as behavior that expresses constructive suggestions (promotive voice) and challenges (prohibitive voice) (Liang, Farh and Farh, 2012) to improve the leadership competencies of their owner-managers.

This perspective is backed by Meindl et al. (1985) who argued that followers construct the phenomenon of leadership and are critical to its development. It is also supported by Argyris, (1977); Detert & Burris, (2007); Edmondson, (2003); Morrison & Milliken, (2000), who argued that Voice has implications for managerial learning. Metcalf & Urwick, (2003) further argued that followers were active members of the leadership situation, a view also supported by Baker (2007); Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, (2007) who opined that followers impact leadership and related work outcomes. Meindl (1995), using a social constructionist approach in his "follower-centric perspective on leadership" similarly concluded that leaders are merely constructed through the thoughts and actions of the followers. So, when followers have useful information, they face a tough decision about whether or not to convey the information and consequently pull leader attention and the action of bringing forward this message is extra-role behaviour of voice (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Therefore this study attempts to establish the influence of Follower Voice Behaviour over Leadership Competencies in SMEs in Uganda.

Based on the evidence articulated above, Follower Voice Behaviour appears to present a more practical means of influencing leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers, yet little empirical research exists in the literature on this. Premised on Hirschman's exit–voice theoretical model whose application is yet to be tested on leadership competencies with an SME context, the proposed study attempts to shed light on the presumed influence of Follower Voice Behaviour over leadership competencies in Ugandan SMEs. These perceived influence will be subjected to empirical analysis. The empirical results could help SMEs to address deficiencies of Leadership competencies. More so, it could help leadership education providers such as universities, colleges and training organisations to improve the training and education they provide for SMEs. Further still, it could have useful implications for research, policy and the design of interventions seeking to develop leadership competencies of SME owner-managers.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Ugandan SMEs constitute up to 90% of the private sector, employing more than 2.5 million people and contributing over 70% to the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Uganda (Kidimu,2013, Rooks & Sserwanga, 2009). In simple terms Uganda cannot do without SMEs because they are the cornerstone of Uganda's economic growth (Rwakakamba,

2011; Ocici 2006). Given governments' support to the SME sector in terms of easy access to finance, support for increasing export activity and reduced regulation, one would expect the sector to be flourishing thus creating more jobs for the youths and boosting overall economic performance. However poor leadership and a lack of management abilities in SMEs has proven to be a menace thus turning Uganda into a grave yard of SMEs because averagely 78% of them don't live long enough to celebrate their first 'birthday' and if they do, only 8 percent make it beyond five years (Bruderl et al., 1992; Boden & Nucci, 2000; Walter et al., 2004; Rooks & Sserwanga, 2009, Rwakakamba, 2011).This quite clearly indicates prevalence of a crisis of essential competencies required for effective leadership in Ugandan SMEs. Such an ugly situation explains why the researcher is interested in investigating the relationship between follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies in Uganda SMEs.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to determine the extent to which follower voice behaviour influences leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Investigate the influence of promotive follower voice behaviour over leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.
- Examine the influence of prohibitive follower voice behaviour over leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.
- Probe whether Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) quality moderates the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.

## 4. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does promotive follower voice behaviour influence leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda?
- To what extent does prohibitive follower voice behaviour influence over leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda?
- To what extent does Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) quality moderate the relationship between follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies?

## 5. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The proposed study shall be guided by the Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory. Albert Hirschman in his book Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States argued that there are two types of response to unsatisfactory situations in one's firm, organization and the first is "exit" or leaving without trying to fix things and the second is "voice", that is, speaking up and trying to repair or fix things. Subsequently, this study adopts a recent typology of voice behavior by Liang, Farh and Farh (2012) who proposed two types of voice behavior: promotive and prohibitive. Promotive voice revolves around suggesting ideas for improvement, whereas prohibitive voice involves expressing concern and criticism.

By suggesting that followers can utilise their voices to keep leaders on their toes, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory potentially offers a broader understanding and explanation of how voice influences leadership competencies. While the theory provides an in-depth explanation of how followers can utilise voice to remedy or fix things, the context of this explanation may differ from sector to sector and from country to country. The "exit-voice" framework is therefore incomplete with respect to its application to leadership competence problems in SMEs. Subjecting it to validation in the SME sector is therefore important. The proposed study; for which this paper is a preliminary analysis, aims to undertake this validation in SMEs in Uganda

Another theory that underpins this proposed study is the Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory because of its acknowledgement of the importance of followers in leadership processes. In their analysis of the attention leadership literature has paid to the role of followers, (Howell and Shamir, 2005) noted that the LMX construct is exceptional because it acknowledges the importance of the role of followers in leadership processes, and it emphasizes that both leader and follower mutually determine the quality of the relationship (Howell & Shamir, 2005, p. 98). Unlike other leadership theories, LMX does not focus on the specific leader characteristics but focuses on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Lunenburg, 2010; Truckenbrodt, 2000).

Therefore by asserting that leaders do not interact with followers uniformly because of limited time and resources but instead establish close relationships with some (the in-group) while remaining aloof from others (the out-group) and that the high-quality relationships will lead to positive outcomes, LMX theory helps us to properly describe and predict enhanced leadership competencies in SMEs as a positive outcome of follower voice. More so by advocating for the development of mature partnerships between leaders and followers in order to gain access to the many benefits these relationships bring, LMX theory helps us to understand and predict leadership competencies enhancement as one such benefit of follower voice that is borne of such partnerships. Therefore the proposed study is partly based on the Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory.

For purposes of this paper, Follower Voice Behaviour is conceptualised as an independent variable and leadership competencies as the dependent variable. This conceptualisation has strong backing from several commentators. For example, Shamir (2007) argued that followers hold information and expertise needed by the leaders and thus called for a greater appreciation for the influence of followers' voice on leader-related outcomes. This is consistent with Howell and Shamir (2005) who argued that Followers are a main source of feedback in addition to providing validation of the actions of the leader (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Similarly, Axtell et al., (2000) argued that followers are often in an ideal position to help leaders due to their knowledge of the work situation, a view supported by Obolensky (2010) who maintained that followers have faster access to information and know what is going on around them, possibly better than their leaders.

Therefore by looking beyond Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, (2003) conceptualization of voice as a means by which employees help their organizations to innovate and succeed through the expression of constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas, the proposed study seeks to broaden the common conceptualization of voice as something that can elicit leadership

outcomes. This broadened perspective draws broadly from evidence contained in many studies that have recognized the critical role of voice in achieving positive outcomes such as team learning (Edmondson, 1999), improved work processes and innovation (Argyris & Schon, 1978), and crisis prevention (Schwartz & Wald, 2003), influencing the actions of leaders (Hirschman, 1970; Folger, 1977) and leader behavior and decision-making (Morasso, 2011; Liang, Fahr, and Fahr 2012).

On the other hand, the conceptualization of leadership competencies as an outcome of Follower Voice draws from the works of Mwangi et al. (2013), who in their study of leadership competencies associated with successful SMEs in Uganda and Kenya recommended eight (8) essential competencies closely linked to SMEs' success namely; visioning, building commitment, social capital, personal values, anticipation and resilience, resourcefulness, responsiveness, and entrepreneurial orientation.

This study seeks to integrate the two concepts of Follower Voice and Leadership Competencies to find answers to the crisis of leadership competencies in SMEs. However, it's conceptualised that leader-follower relationships could have an effect on the interface between Follower Voice Behaviour and Leadership Competencies in SMEs. Despite the fact that voice may be promotive and supportive, the relationship between the follower and leader may have the opposite effect on the leader. On the other hand, followers who demonstrate prohibitive voice behaviour could elicit positive response from the leader because of the moderating factor. For this study, it is conceptualized that the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers shall play a moderating role because the relationship between the two variables seems to be indirect. This moderating variable will be characterized by the highness and lowness of the relationship as theorized in the Leader-Member exchange theory.

**Conceptual Model for Development of Leadership Competencies**

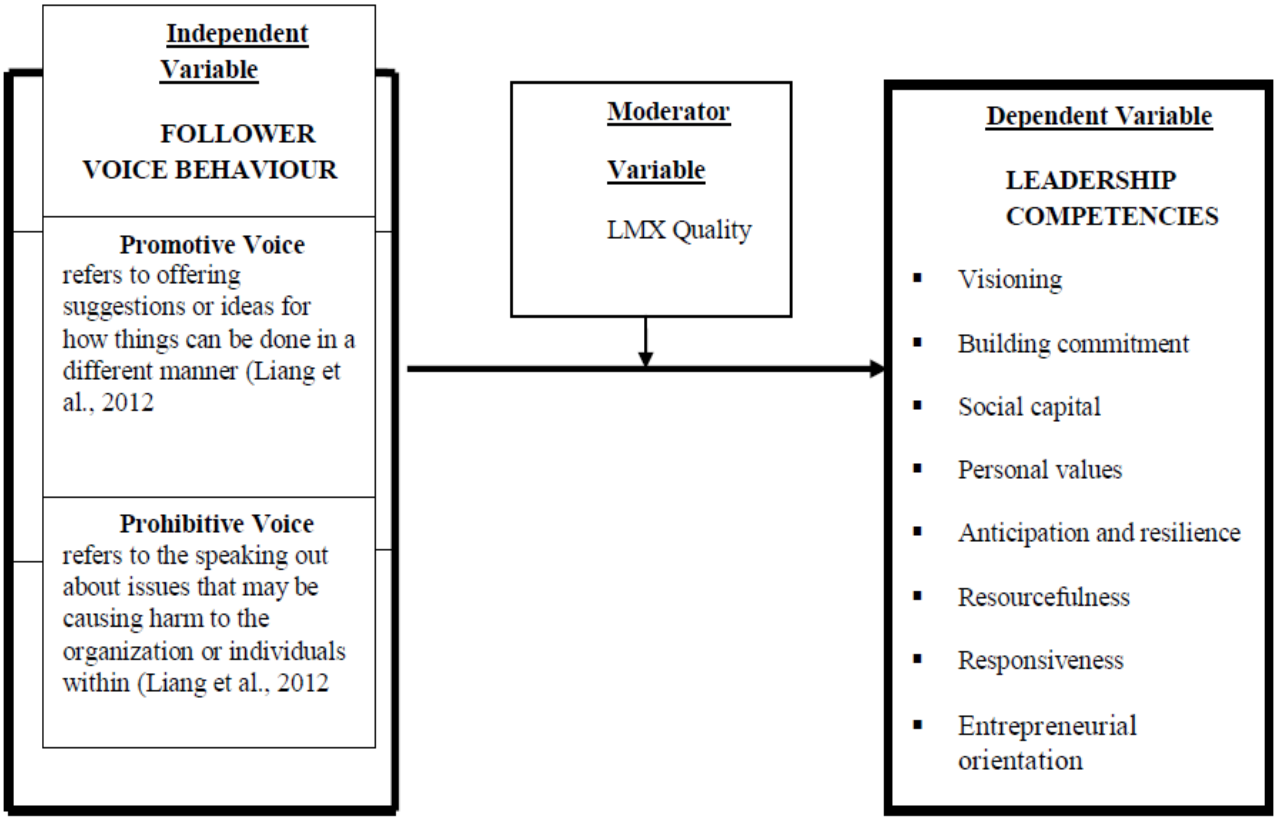


**Figure 1: Conceptual Model** *(adapted from Liang et.al, 2012, Dansereau et al, 1975 and Mwangi et al 2013)*

## 6. The literature and Research Gaps

Though not many attempts have been made to address problems of leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda, some attempts have been made outside Uganda to tackle such problems. For example training has been tried as a suitable way to enhance leadership competencies, however, evidence suggests that traditional training methods are not the most effective option for SMEs leaders because they lack time and have limited money; they think it does not relate to their business; some don't believe it will help and some are even hostile towards formal training (Byron, Parker & Harris 2002; Ibrahim & Soufani 2002).

Alternatively, informal learning within SMEs has been identified as a more pragmatic means of developing leadership competencies. For example Devins, Johnson, Gold and Holden (2005) identified informal, trusted networks, professional advisors and training providers as source of competence learning and development in SMEs. Gold & Thorpe (2008) proposed learning by doing, interacting and talking with others as a solution. While other scholars such as Lewis, Ashby, Coetzer, Harris and Massey (2005) and Devins et al (2005a) believed networks developed with a group of close others provides an important source of advice and support for SME leaders as this is cheaper (usually free) and considered trustworthy (Gold et al 2008), Yet, little empirical research exists in the literature on how Followers within these informal learning environments precisely influence leadership competencies which therefore demands further exploration in the proposed study.

### 6.1 Follower Voice behaviour

Ever since Hirschman (1970), pointed out the benefits of behaviors of speaking up in order to change things rather than live with an ineffective or inefficient status quo which he called employee voice and argued that it should be recognised as a force to keep management on its toes, research to-date has proved that voice expression is critical to organizational success (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), facilities learning (Edmondson, 1999) helps to improve things (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Liang et al., 2012), solves organizational problem (Milliken et al., 2003; Liang et al., 2012), promotes justice (Bemmels & Foley, 1996; Pinder & Harlos, 2001) and solves ethical misconduct (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008), or a strategic issue of importance (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). More so it has been linked to employee psychological well-being (Cortina & Magley, 2003), organizational justice perceptions (Avery & Quiñones, 2002), as well as improved team and organizational performances (Kim, MacDuffie, & Phil, 2010, Argote & Ingram, 2000, Mackenzie, Podsakoff & Podsakoff 2011). Furthermore, effectiveness in learning has been argued to be one of the most prominent outcomes of follower voice (Milliken & Lam, 2009). This strengthens the argument that Follower Voice Behaviour could indeed influence leadership competencies in SMEs.

Two gaps in literature have been identified here. The first one is that whereas Hirschman's popular exit–voice theoretical model has been applied for some time; research is yet to test its impact on leadership competencies particularly within SMEs in a developing country context. Secondly, voice has for long been examined as a single dimension construct. By adopting the expanded definition by Van Dyne et al. (2003) and heeding to Liang et al., (2012) calls for the need to broadly examine promotive and prohibitive aspects to understand if they might affect voice targets differently, the proposed study intends to close this gap. The empirical results of this study shall be important in confirming or contradicting the arguments being made in this preliminary analysis.

### 6.2 Promotive or Prohibitive Voice?

Considering that voice expression can take many forms, this study will borrow from Liang, Farh, & Farh (2012) by defining voice behaviour as having promotive and prohibitive contents where Promotive voice represents ideas for improvement focusing on what can go right while prohibitive voice represents concern and criticism focusing on what can go wrong.

Promotive voice has been proved to be associated with innovation and improvement in the workplace (Liang, et al., 2012) and as such, it is more likely to have positive effect on leadership competencies given that the good intentions behind it are easily recognized and generally interpreted as positive if the issue and solutions raised are valid (Cheung and Songqi, 2014).

On the other hand, prohibitive voice by seeking to stop harmful practices without providing solutions to the issues raised can be viewed as less constructive in nature and more like a complaint, which limits its effect on the voice targets (Liang, et al., 2012). Unlike promotive voice, the good intention behind prohibitive voice may not be so easily recognizable because raising concerns implies failure in the system and may involve placing blame on those that are responsible i.e. the supervisors themselves; (Liang et al., 2012). Because of the implicit blame in prohibitive voice, leaders may perceive this form of voice as a person-based rather than issue-based attack, similar to whistle-blowing (Cheung and Songqi, 2014) and as a result, they may view the voicers more negatively as troublemakers, be less receptive to their ideas, or even retaliate by rating them as poor performers (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesveran, 2005).

### 6.3 Follower Voice and Leadership Competencies

Poor leadership competencies have been linked to the attrition of many SMEs in Uganda and leadership competencies (skills and behaviors that contribute to superior performance, the society for Human Resource Management). To save Ugandan SMEs from this problem, Mwangi et al (2013) recommended eight must-have leadership competencies for SME leaders in Kenya and Uganda namely visioning, building commitment, social capital, personal values, anticipation and resilience, resourcefulness, responsiveness and entrepreneurial orientation. But, considering evidence that people who own/manage SMEs are generally less well educated and are less likely to be formally trained to learn and develop these competencies (Walker, Redmond, Webster, Le Clus, 2007), follower voice Behaviour is explored as a more practical means thru which leadership competencies in SMEs could be learned and developed.

The concepts of Follower Voice and Leadership Competencies have been studied separately and have received no integrated attention from scholars. But given that SMEs in Uganda are collapsing due to leadership competence problems, the relationship between the two variables need to be adequately explored particularly using Hirschmanian notion of voice. For lack of literature integrating the two concepts, scholarly work on Leader responsiveness to voiced issues and idea endorsement are pertinent to the understanding of the relationship between voice and leadership competencies because they arise as an immediate output of voice behavior given that the way voice targets respond to voice by either accepting or maintaining the status-quo is key in determining whether voice behavior can elicit any developmental contribution on the voice-targets.

Drawing from research of voice recipients' reactions to voice, Freeman and Medoff (1984) stressed the importance of leaders response in determining the outcomes that arise from voice and since then several theoretical (Dutton & Ashford, 1993) and empirical studies (Dutton et al., 2001; Andersson & Bateman, 2000) have examined the attention leaders pay to raised issues as key outcomes of voice. They collectively suggest that the first key outcome of voice is idea endorsement which (Burris, 2012) defined as "the leaders' decision to support, recommend, or implement a raised issue". It's alternatively referred to in literature as Managerial responsiveness, which Detert and Burris (2007) define as "subordinates' perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented and sometimes takes action to address the matter raised".

Followers decide on how they communicate displeasure or content to their leaders and literature suggests that leaders' reactions are influenced by the way voice is expressed either promotively or prohibitively (Liang et al., 2012). After voice is exerted, it is met with equal or inverse reactions from leaders and therefore to understand if voice

influences leadership competencies, it's paramount to devolve deeper into literature on Leadership responsiveness as an indicator of actions taken in response to concerns raised by followers though research examining specifically leaders' responses to follower voice has been limited and mostly focused on follower outcomes and showed mixed results. While some research suggested that leaders view those who speak up more favourably as better performers (Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008), implying that their voiced ideas are easily endorsed, others such as Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, (2001) found that follower voice may be negatively received leading to victimisation and career regression. According to Burris (2012) these contradictions are due to lack of empirical research that examines leaders' actual opinion toward the idea raised and the types of voice employed. Taking Burris's arguments seriously would imply that the direct influence of follower voice on leadership competencies depends on the way in which voice is raised because leaders may as a result have different responses toward the idea raised.

The objective of the proposed study therefore is to delve deeper into the effects of different forms of voice (promotive and prohibitive) and examine their impact on leadership competencies. Specifically, this explains why it's hypothesized that leaders endorse follower ideas when they employ promotive voice than when they employ prohibitive voices.

**6.4. Promotive voice behaviour and Leadership competencies**

Owing to the deficiencies in of leadership competencies in SMEs, there is without doubt a need for SME leaders to tap into the gold mine of their employee's promotive voice which is development-centric in nature and is primarily about progress, achievement, or construction of the current state rather than confrontation and impediment (Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012). Thus allowing employees to speak up could adequately challenge the leaders to upstage their competencies. According to Burris (2012), whether speaking-up conveys challenging or supportive content plays an important role in voice recipients' reactions. Combining results from multiple methods, he found out that promotive voice generated positive reactions compared to prohibitive voice content which caused negative reactions of recipients (less endorsement). Another empirical study by Cheung and Songqi (2014), proved that Promotive voice led to higher idea endorsement which is consistent with Liang, Farh, and Farh's (2012) view that promotive voice is generally better received than prohibitive voice, possibly because its good intention is more apparent when the focus of the voice is placed upon the improvements that can be made, not on the problem itself. They suggested that future research should replicate this study on a bigger sample of working adults with managerial experiences which this study attempts to replicate. Another study by Burris, Detert & Romney (2013), who contrasted the effect of supportive voice (suggestions that affirm existing organizational policy and procedures) and challenging voice (suggestions that alter, modify, or destabilize a generally accepted set of practices) on the manager's perception of threat and endorsement found out that supportive voice reduced the manager's perception of the threat, whereas challenging voice increased that perception and in turn, perception of threat reduced idea endorsement. Burris, Detert & Romney (2013), like Menon et al. (2006), illustrated that the manager's perception that a raised idea represented a threat was positively associated with whether voice was endorsed. They concluded that managers are less likely to endorse challenge-oriented voice as compared to supportive voice.

To the contrary, other scholars have argued that regardless of the voice type, managers are not always open to listening to their subordinates' voice because they fear negative feedback and hold implicit beliefs about employees and the nature of management (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This view is confirmed by Ashford et al. (2009), who stated that "managers are particularly prone to cognitive biases, such as heuristic information processing (the lack of attentional capacity to process complex voice-related information that requires systematic processing), confirmation bias (listening to information that affirms their opinions and disregarding information that challenges their opinions), and the fallacy of centrality ("If it was important, I'd know about it")". In addition, they argued that it is difficult for managers to accept constructive challenges due to their past success and positions within their organization; because accepting challenges could be perceived as a threat to their status and reputation.

Furthermore, empirical research by Morrison and Milliken (2000), Menon et al. (2006), and Ashford et al (2009) similarly concluded that managers are often unwilling to endorse raised ideas. For example Menon et al. (2006) who conducted empirical work using a series of laboratory studies that examined how individuals react to good ideas found out that individuals react differently to good ideas. An important insight this study generated is that whether the voice target would endorse or else reject the raised ideas depended on whether they saw the raised ideas as threats or opportunities. As such, endorsement was more likely when voice was not perceived as a threat to the leader.

Although some studies have examined managerial reactions and have reported positive outcomes associated with prosocial forms of voice (e.g., Whiting et al., 2008), others have had mixed results (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), and others have shown negative effects (Seibert et al., 2001). This study attempts to address these inconsistencies between promotive voice and managerial reactions with the hope that it expands research discussing similar dynamics.

In sum, the literature on promotive voice focuses on whether promotive voice behaviour elicits more leader attention and influence or not. Promotive voice is known to elicit positive responses from the voice targets but whether it can make a difference to SME leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda is not known. Hence the focus of investigations in this section is to find out whether promotive voices influence leadership competencies in Ugandan SMEs. If SMEs leaders are to run their SMEs competently, they might need to tap into the gold mine of employee ideas which are constructively voiced out to them with the objective of bringing positive change in the SME. However, considering that there is evidence of leadership incompetence in SMEs in Uganda, there is suspicion that leaders have limited avenues of enhancing their competencies and they do not take promotive voices of their followers seriously thus missing the chance to utilise such voices as opportunities to enhance their leadership competencies for the betterment of their SMEs. There is also suspicion that followers do not know how to package their messages in a constructive manner to elicit response from the leaders. To confirm this, the proposed study investigating the influence of promotive follower voice behaviour on leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda has to be done.

**6.5. Prohibitive voice behaviour and Leadership competencies**

In most cases followers for fear of loss of their jobs will not sit down and see the SME collapse and as such they will seek to actively champion important issues from below (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton &Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). This voice is mostly of whistle blowing or troubled causing nature and it's risky for the voicers because whistleblowers are often looked at as traitors and may face worse punishment than termination in psychological torture and they are likely to be treated with hostility. This by implication means leaders are not willing to listen to prohibitive voices and as such followers or employees are less likely to want to engage in prohibitive voice due to the fear of the negative consequences because not many leaders accept criticism especially in a context in which speaking up may be culturally discouraged (Xu Huang, Van de Vliert, and Van der Vegt, 2005).

The term prohibitive voice is commonly used to describe voice that encourages something bad to cease or reports a problem which Kassing (1998, 2000) defined as articulated dissent: "expressing dissent openly and clearly in a constructive fashion within organizations to audiences that can effectively influence organizational adjustment". Other definitions have focused on prohibitive voice as a means of stopping or changing objectionable state of affairs (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988; Withey & Cooper, 1989). Liang, Fahr, and Fahr (2012) referred to this type of voice as messages intended to express concern about existing practices, incidents, or behaviors that may harm the organization thus building on Van Dyne et al's (2003) broadened definition of voice as an expression of constructive suggestions as well as concerns. Liang et al (2012) argues that Prohibitive voice serves an important function for organizational health, primarily because such alarming messages place previously undetected problems on the collective agenda to be resolved or prevent problematic initiatives from taking place. Similarly Burris (2012) came up with what he termed as challenge-orientated voice which seeks to alter, modify, or destabilize a generally accepted set of practices.

In organizational settings such as those of SMEs in Uganda, prohibitive voice may potentially be more impactful than promotive voice because the process of developing innovative ideas and solutions may require substantial amounts of time and effort (Liang et al, 2012) which SME employees may not be able to afford. Additionally, the "prohibitive" aspect of voice calls harmful factors to a stop, thereby preventing the negative effects of process losses in a timely manner (Cheung & Songqi 2014). However prohibitive voice is more likely to be face-threatening to the manager, because it calls attention to a questionable decision the manager made (Klaas et al., 2012). More so, Prohibitive voice by challenging the status quo and existing procedures some of which may have existed for a long time but are ineffective employees risk being disliked by their leaders. Further still, Prohibitive voice, by focusing on the existing problem with no solution, also implies that the leader is at fault and is now responsible for addressing the issue, thus appearing more challenging and threatening. Previous research has suggested that employees who challenge the status quo without offering innovative suggestions may suffer negative response from managers and ultimately receive less career success (Seibert et al., 2001). A recent study by MacMillan, et al (2013) has also confirmed that prohibitive voice had little influence on leader attention and decisions compared to promotive voice.

Some scholars have argued that power holders in organizations often tend to implicitly believe that employees' voice is self-interested, less valuable, and harmful to unity and as such, they are likely to be less open to voice and may simply ignore it or provide a negative response to the employee's voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison & Rothman, 2009). Similarly, Prohibitive voice may also be resisted by recipients since it is likely to ask the receiving individual's to change something that they might currently be satisfied with and it may be interpreted as negative feedback of their achievement (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Other scholars similarly think that, due to its challenging and disruptive nature, prohibitive voice arguably has the potential to cause negative response (Bateman & Crant 1999). More still, Prohibitive voice recipients may regard speaking-up as a personal offense (Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013; Fast, Burris, and Bartel, 2014; Frese & Fay, 2001) and may see it "as being driven by personal ambition" (Bateman & Crant, 1999, p. 67); so, recipients may devalue the utility of the spoken message.

Sharek et al (2010) in their study reported that ideas which included solutions or those that present both supporting arguments and counter-arguments appeared more feasible to be acted upon by managers than prohibitive –problem-centric voices due to their whistle blowing or troubled causing nature which might not generate any positive attention and response. Another study by Cheung and Songqi (2014) which examined whether managerial responses to employee voice behavior are dependent upon the types of voice utilized found that employees receive lower idea endorsement, when they employ prohibitive voices. The results of this particular study might not be representative due to small sample size though the findings have important implications for how followers speak up in the workplace as leaders do not perceive all speaking-up behaviors equally.

An earlier and similar study by Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) found out that receiving negative feedback caused negative emotions in recipients, thus implying that receiving prohibitive voice that underlines problems and interruptions of the status quo is more likely to shape the negative emotional nature of voice recipients than promotive voice that emphasizes developments and occurrences of positive states, and vice versa. This is consistent with Liang et al.'s (2012) argument that the nature of promotive/prohibitive voice may determine voice recipients' attention when interpreting voice behavior from others. Jung (2014) similarly opined that voice recipients who encounter development-centric voice may pay more attention to positive signals embedded therein whereas those who receive problem-centric voice may pay more attention to negative signals of assertive voice at the relationship level (e.g., forcefulness, offensiveness).

In an empirical study, Burris (2012) also reported that "when individuals raise a challenge-oriented idea or an idea that challenges existing work procedures, managers mostly view these individuals as a threat to their power and authority, which reduces the likelihood of endorsement". But Cheung & Songqi (2014) rejected this notion and counter argued that not all prohibitive voice elicits negative response and that different types of challenging voice and certain ways of voicing may be less threatening than others. This lone view is in congruence with Burris, (2012) personal opinion that challenging voice could result in improvements to objective outcomes even if those who express it upset voice recipients who must engage in change.

In agreement with Burris (2012), this study shall therefore test the hypothesis that leader targeted prohibitive voice

has no influence on leadership competencies because it is not taken seriously by leaders and is therefore less effective in making a difference to leadership competencies as suggested by the debates above. This study shall also test Burris (2012) reverse assertion that challenging voice could result in improvements to objective outcomes even if those who express it upset managers who must engage in change. Given that less empirical research has explored "prohibitive" aspects of voice, or expressions of concern about existing or impending practices, incidents, or behaviors that may harm the organization, there is a need to more fully sample the prohibitive domains of voice to advance understanding of how leaders respond to it especially in SMEs in Uganda if it's to be useful.

For SME leaders to be competent in running their businesses, they need to give objective attention to prohibitive voices that mostly aim at bringing harmful leadership practices to a halt. However, considering that there is evidence of leadership incompetencies in SMEs in Uganda, there is suspicion that leaders do not take prohibitive voices seriously thus missing the opportunity to use such problem-centred but developmental voices to enhance their competencies. There is also suspicion that followers do not know how to package their messages in a solution oriented and constructive manner to elicit endorsement from the leaders. To confirm this, an investigation has to be done to establish the relationship between prohibitive follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.

### 6.6. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) as a moderating Variable

LMX theory proposes that leaders have different relationships with specific subordinates and the quality of relationships can influence attitudes and behaviors (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Where as positive LMX relationships are personal, intangible, and are exemplified by mutual trust and respect, negative LMX relationships are impersonal, driven by economic exchange, and exemplified by lack of trusting interactions and support (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997).

The relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential determinant of voice (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013). In particular, employees who maintain a positive relationship with the manager are less afraid to express voice, because they feel it is interpersonally safe to express ideas (Ashford et al., 1998; Edmondson, 1999; Detert & Burris, 2007). In contrast, poor relationship quality contributes to lower levels of psychological safety for expressing voice, resulting in a lower likelihood of voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974). Consistent with past research, it's therefore hypothesized that followers with more positive relationships with their leaders are more likely to speak up and influence their competencies of their leaders because their ideas are more likely to be endorsed.

A quasi-experimental field study by MacMillan etal (2013) which explored how follower voice, leader regulatory focus and leader-member exchange (LMX) affect leader attention and decision-making found out that the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower influenced leader interest and decision-making directly and moderates the path between follower voice type and leader decision-making. Prior studies have shown, in general, a positive relationship between LMX and Prosocial behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995; Zhu, 2012) thus suggesting that the higher the relationship, the more likely that followers are motivated to speak up with the intention of helping the leaders identify the issues. In contrast, employees with low-quality LMX relationships often receive less support and have fewer chances to exchange opinions with their leaders (Graen& Cashman, 1975).

Similarly, Baer (2012) looked at how employees get their ideas implemented in the workplace and concluded that implementation was more likely when there were strong 'buy-in' relationships. Whiting, et al. (2012) further demonstrated the significant roles of several communication factors such as the characteristics of the message content, voice provider, and voicing context in evaluations of voice behavior and found out that voice-provider trustworthiness and solution-incorporating voice messages were the strongest communication factors that elicit positive reactions i.e. Participants gave more favorable evaluation to the voicers who were trustworthy and who suggested specific solutions.

The review of literature shows that leader-follower relationships thus affects voice outcome especially when the voice targets are the leaders. Despite the fact that voice may be promotive, the relationship between the followers and leaders may determine its effects on leadership competencies. Though available literature seems to portray that a low LMX follower might have challenges in voicing suggestions to leaders, there is no evidence to suggest that the perceived association between high LMX and low voice and vice visa has been empirically tested from a leadership angle. To prove the hypothesis that the relational quality between voicers and their targets in the form of LMX will moderate the relationship between voice and leadership competencies, an investigation has to be done in SMEs in Uganda.

## 7 Synthesis of the Literature Review

Based on Hirschman's exit–voice theoretical model whose impact on leadership competencies especially in SMEs in Uganda is yet to be empirically tested, this proposed study examines the influence of follower voice behaviour over leadership Competencies in SMEs in Uganda. It specifically argues that follower's level of voice behaviour predicts his/her level of influence over the owner-mangers leadership competencies.

From the review of literature, it comes out clearly that followers who practice promotive voice behaviour are likely to have higher impact on leadership competencies of their SME leaders than those who practice prohibitive voice behaviour. Contrarily, it is equally noted by some other scholars that promotive voice may not necessarily yield positive response from the recipients though why leaders fail to tap into this gold mine of constructive employee ideas is quite ironical and could be a subject of future research. This contradiction is worth validating within the context of SMEs in Uganda. The study would therefore like to go ahead and test the relationship between these variables and further the debate with reference to SMEs in Uganda.

Further still from literature, we draw the lesson that although engaging in prohibitive voice is risky owing to its problem-centric and troubled-causing nature and that leaders do not accept criticism even if it's well intentioned, other scholars argue that this might not necessarily be the case if the leaders are focused and objective enough to benefit from

the developmental feedback. This implies that SMEs suffering from low leadership competencies might actually need more of prohibitive voices. These contradictions are worth validating in SMEs in Uganda.

In sum, the review of literature has provided a backing for the research in that there is a perceived positive relationship between follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies, and that followers practicing Promotive voice behaviour are more likely to have strong influence over leadership competencies of their leaders than those who practice Prohibitive voice behaviour though Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) quality is likely to moderate the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda.. The researcher would therefore like to go ahead and prove the proposed relationship between these variables and test the hypotheses, with reference to SMEs in Uganda.

## 8 The Proposed Methodology

Descriptive cross-sectional survey design and a mixed method approach are considered to be appropriate for this study (Kumar 2005:77, Tuckman (1994: 238). Considering the nature of data required, the study will concurrently adopt quantitative and qualitative approaches. This is recommended by Amin (2005) especially where the study involves investigating opinions of a large number of people. Quantitative approach shall be used to generate quantifiable data to explain the relationship between the study variables whereas Qualitative data shall be collected to capture views and opinions of respondents under study. The triangulation of the two approaches shall help to generate both qualitative and quantitative information about the subject matter and this will enhance validity and reliability of the study.

The study will be carried out in 50 SMEs in Eastern Uganda which are identified through SME networks due to the unavailability of registers of data about SMEs in these districts which is not strange given that Rooks & Sserwanga's (2009) had warned earlier that a robust population is difficult to ascertain in studies involving SMEs in Uganda because most of them are not registered. The study population shall therefore compose of 50 SME leaders and 500 followers from Mbale, Tororo and Busia. This population is chosen because they are the key players who are in position to give accurate views on the influence of follower voice behaviour on leadership competencies. Subsequently, a total sample size of 50 leaders and 392 followers were derived using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table of sample size determination. Considering that the problems faced by SMEs are similar across national boundaries (Watkins 1983), this sample size is deemed to be representative and able to give accurate views concerning follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies in Ugandan SMEs. The selection of the sample size to be used in the study was done as explained in table 1 below:

**Table 1: Sample Size Selection**

| Category of population | Population of SME Leaders | Sample Size | Sampling method | Population of SME Followers | Sample Size | Sampling method |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manufacturing | 10 | 10 | Purposive sampling | 100 | 80 | Simple Random |
| Trade/Financial | 10 | 10 | Purposive sampling | 100 | 80 | Simple Random |
| Agribusiness | 10 | 10 | Purposive sampling | 50 | 44 | Simple Random |
| Education, Health & Social Services | 10 | 10 | Purposive sampling | 150 | 108 | Simple Random |
| Accommodation & Food Services | 10 | 10 | Purposive sampling | 100 | 80 | Simple Random |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | | **500** | **392** | |

S**ource**: Modified based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970), Table Guide for Sample Determination

The study will use both probability and non-probability sampling techniques (Amin, 2005) and will employ a purposive sampling method and simple random sampling strategy. Peil (1995) contends that non-probability sampling is used when adequate sampling frames are not available which apparently happens to be the case in Eastern Uganda where registers of data about SME do not exist. Therefore for the purpose of this study, a total of 50 SME leaders shall therefore be selected purposively to participate in the study alongside 392 followers' selected using simple random sampling technique so that each follower has an equal probability of being selected to participate.

A triangulated approach involving multiple methods of; questionnaire survey as well as interviewing methods shall be used to collect Primary data from the field to supplement secondary data from journals, textbooks and periodical reports among others. The study shall adopt two types of instruments namely; structured questionnaires and interview guides. Before administration of the tools, the researcher will rigorously test for the validity and reliability of the instruments to ensure that each item has a Content Validity Index (CVI) of at least 0.6 and a reliability analysis using Crombach alpha coefficient of at least 0.7. This is to meet acceptable standards suggested by Synodinos (2003) who argued that the higher the validity and reliability of an instrument, the more truthful and consistent the data collected by it will be.

With the use of "SPSS", quantitative data will be subjected to percentages and frequencies to help show the distribution of the respondents on each of the independent and the dependent variables. Correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation co-efficient formula and multiple regression analysis shall be used to test the hypotheses in order to determine the influence of follower voice behaviour influences leadership competencies in SMEs in Uganda. ANOVA shall be used to test the influence of the combined independent variables on the dependent variable. Rank order analysis shall be performed to determine the influence and significance of each component of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The qualitative data gathered through interviews shall be categorized, interpreted and analyzed

according to the themes. This data shall be used to triangulate and corroborate findings obtained from quantitative data analysis.

## 9 Anticipated Findings and Implications of the Study

The proposed study attempts to establish the influence of Follower Voice Behaviour over Leadership Competencies in Ugandan SMEs. It relies on Hirschman's exit-voice and loyalty theory as an active problem-solving strategy and the LMX model to predict that the empirical results will support the hypotheses developed and findings are likely to indicate that follower voice behaviour has influence over leadership competencies and that promotive voice behaviour has significant influence over leadership competencies than prohibitive voice behaviour and that, the relationships between the two measures is moderated by the relationship between the two parties.

The findings would be consistent with predictions of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory which presumes that followers who are dissatisfied with leadership competencies will use their voice to improve things through communication via complaint, grievance or proposal for change (Hirschman, 1970), so they will seek to actively champion important causes from below before decline and failure (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton &Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). The findings are also expected to confirm that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership competencies than prohibitive voice (Burris, 2012; Cheung and Songqi, 2014; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013). The same findings would also be consistent with LMX theory which proposes that the relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013).

It is hoped that the study would be useful in contributing to the development of literature in the field of Leadership particularly in SMEs in a developing country context. Theoretically, the study will further understanding of how to address Leadership problems in SMEs particularly in Uganda. It will also validate and extend Hirschman's exit voice and loyalty theory. Specifically, it will attempt to inform current thinking about the influence of voice on Leadership competencies within SMEs in Uganda. Through a detailed literature review and synthesis, suggestions intended to frame a future; empirical research agenda which is SME focused shall be fronted. The practical significance of this study will be realized in its ability to inform leaders' and practitioners' understanding of the phenomenon of follower voice and its impacts on leadership competencies. This will be of particular interest to those charged with the development, oversight, or modification of policies and guidelines that contribute to SME success.

## 10 Conclusion

The two concepts of Follower Voice Behaviour and Leadership Competencies have been examined separately which has left a void in organizational literature especially in SMEs in developing countries where there is mounting concern over high SME mortality rates due to deficiencies in leadership competencies. This study attempts to relate Follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies in Uganda using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and; to draw important lessons for SME survival and prosperity.

The study will answer the research questions that have been set. We expect follower voice behaviour to have significant influence over leadership competencies in SMEs. In the same vein, Promotive voice behaviour is expected to influence leadership competencies more than prohibitive voice behaviour. The Findings of this study will thus identify and escalate the need to integrate follower voices into leadership competence enhancement strategies. The study will also contribute to the body of knowledge on leadership development in SMEs in a developing country through validation of Exit Voice and Loyalty theory and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory.

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