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Leader motivating language – The fuel for employee vitality

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This study investigates the impact of organizational culture on employee vitality determined by leader motivating language. It is common knowledge that organizations are known for the culture they develop and maintain for their employees' well-being and vitality. The prime focus of learning organizations is to provide their employees with a vibrant culture where they feel comfortable and grow as professionals. Culture alone does not guarantee employee satisfaction and vitality – there are other factors that play a role. From all the different factors, in this study, leader motivating language is taken as a pivotal one, which can either disturb or improve employee vitality at work. The theoretical background is built on the motivating language theory, which provides a model, helping to understand how the language leaders use, that is, speech communication affects the organization's employees. A survey was conducted to collect data from various banks and multinational firms in Pakistan through random sampling – 270 responses from people working in these sectors, for which all the three variables, leader motivating language, organizational culture, and employee vitality, could be measured easily, were analysed. The respondents' average length of service in their company was nearly five years and their mean age was 26.2 years. The results of this study show that leader motivating language has a positive impact on employee vitality at work and strengthens the relationship between organizational culture and employee vitality.

KEYWORDS: organizational culture, leader motivating language, employee vitality

Organizations these days are becoming more vibrant and fast-paced, and being aware that employees should be treated well has become the need of the hour. It is not about ‘personnel management’ anymore but about ‘human capital management’ because humans, that is, employees are considered an organization’s most valuable resource. Due to the globalization of businesses and ‘cutthroat’ competition amongst enterprises, it is essential for employees to remain upbeat and deliver their best. However, the pressure at work can be so intense that it sometimes becomes difficult to be ‘on top of your game’. This is where leadership comes into play – effective leaders set the direction for their team members in such difficult and uncertain times and boost their morale.

An organization’s culture is not developed in a day; it takes years to inculcate ethical values. The organization’s employees start living those values every day and practise them in every task they perform at work. Such practices that develop into habits, becoming second nature to the employees, make the organization’s overall culture. Organizational culture is so important that it is considered the key success factor of the top 100 companies from Fortune 500 (a list of 500 US public and private companies published by the *Fortune* magazine), based on the information employees provide about their workplace culture anonymously (*Levering* [2016]). Companies have been investing a decent amount of money to maintain a good organizational culture. Many of them look at the market leaders and best employers to see what they are doing differently and successfully and then follow their example, and in most cases, organizational culture becomes a critical component of success for them as well.

To bring about positive change and strengthen an organization’s culture, it is the leaders who are usually called for help – they act as catalysts for this. The culture alone is so critically important that even if external factors are not favourable for the organization, it can still hold its ground based on internal strengths. Former chief executive officer of Wells Fargo *John Stumpf* has described the importance of organizational culture thus: ‘It’s about the culture. I could leave our strategy on an aeroplane seat and have a competitor read it and it would not make any difference.’ (*Guerrera* [2008]) This means that strategies alone cannot do nothing if the organization’s culture is not fostering positivity. Employees are expected to be on top of their game, and for this, they need sufficient energy at work. Vitality is the energy that an employee feels within him/herself (*Ryan–Frederick* [1997]); at work, it is directly linked with mental health (*Nix et al.* [1999]), effective stress management (*Ryan–Frederick* [1997]), and high job performance (*Carmeli–Gittell* [2009]).

Research also suggests that higher vitality enhances people's resilience to physical and viral stressors, thereby making them less vulnerable to illness (*Ryan–Deci* [2008]).

Another aspect examined in the present study is leader motivating language. Leaders are the ones who influence their followers and set the right direction for them to achieve their goals successfully (*Aktas–Gelfand–Hanges* [2016]); they are also the driving force behind any successful team because they channel the efforts in the right direction. The topmost required skill a recruiter considers when selecting a candidate, particularly for a leadership role, is communication skill. Studies have shown that leaders spend almost 80% of their time communicating with their teams (*Mayfield–Mayfield* [2017]). As technology advances rapidly, and particularly during the ongoing pandemic when leaders have to communicate with their teams via Zoom, Skype, and other such platforms, effective communication skills are perhaps what keeps things on track. Therefore, this study examines how leader motivating language exercises influence over the relationship between organizational culture and employee vitality, because it is necessary to clarify whether motivating words from the leader strengthen or weaken the impact of an organization's overall culture on vitality at work.

1. Literature review and hypothesis development

1.1. Definition of organizational culture

Several researchers have defined organizational culture according to the context of their research. *Warrick*, in the famous book titled 'Lessons in Changing Cultures: Learning from Real World Cases' (*Warrick–Mueller* [2015] p. 4), has defined it as 'the (predominant) beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours, and practices that are characteristic of a group of people.' The term 'group of people' is widely used because the collective beliefs, norms, values, behaviours, and attitudes of people working in a group setting make a culture. *Schein*, considered a leading expert on organizational culture research, in 1996 defined it as 'set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and has learnt over a period of time.' (p. 9) He also employed the word 'group' for organizational culture in his research to define large-sized social settings and units; in a broader sense, the term could refer to an entire organization or a group of people of any size, such as a family, sports team, symphony, or even country. The point is that groups of people, regardless of size, are likely to form specific cultures. Organization researchers typically use the term 'organizational culture' in a broad sense to refer to the culture of the organization as a

whole or a unit of people in it working together (*Warrick* [2017]). People in organizations tend to adapt to a certain attitudinal and behavioural trend, which becomes a culture and norm over time.

There is still no single definition of organizational culture because most researchers and authors agree that this culture illustrates the underlying beliefs, way of doing things, and the value system that make up an organisation's infrastructure (*Cadden–Marshall–Cao* [2013]). *Kroeber* and *Kluckhohn* in 1952 defined culture as 'it consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional [...] ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.' (p. 181) *Wallach* in 1983 defined corporate culture as 'the shared understanding of an organization's employees – how we do things around here. These beliefs, values, norms, and philosophies determine how things work. They define expected standards of behavior, speech, presentation of self and "should".' (p. 29) More and more researchers have shared their understanding of organizational culture over time. In 1989, *Deshpande* and *Webster* defined it as 'shared values and beliefs that help members of an organization understand why things happen and thus teach them the behavioral norms in the organization.' (p. 4) In 1996, *O'Reilly* and *Chatman* provided in their [1983] paper a definition similar to that by *Wallach*: 'system of shared values defining what is important, and norms, defining appropriate attitudes and behaviors that guide members' attitudes and behaviors.' (p. 166)

In 1991, *Hofstede* defined organizational culture slightly differently: 'collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.' (p. 5) After 14 years, *Schein*, in 2010, again put forward a rather complex perspective of organizational culture when he defined it as 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.' (p. 17) Soon after *Schein*, *Cameron* and *Quinn* published their [2011] work, in which they wrote about leadership styles when defining culture as 'the dominant leadership styles, the language and symbols, the procedures and routines, and the definitions of success that make an organization unique.' (p. 17) In 2017, *Smircich* shared his perspective of organizational culture: 'Organizations do not have cultures, they are cultures; it is social or normative glue that holds an organization together.' (p. 344) From this point of view, we can state that organizations are entities embodying deep-rooted norms and values that make their cultures. Finally, *Groysberg et al.* [2018]

defined organizational culture in their paper as ‘the tacit social order of an organization: It shapes attitudes and behaviors in wide-ranging and durable ways.’ (p. 4)

Certain behaviours, attitudes, and ways of performing tasks, when repeated by an organization’s employees over a period, become the norm. If the employees are asked why they are performing a certain task or behaving in a certain manner, they would say this is how customs work at their company or this is what their organization’s ‘culture’ is. It is a collection of repeated behaviours that, over time, form a path for the organization’s newcomers to follow. Culture means to an organization what character means to a person, as it provides meaning, motivation, and direction to its employees (*Lee [2011]*).

As the above-mentioned definitions show, researchers have studied the characteristics of organizational culture – beliefs, ethical values, behaviours, and attitudes. Beliefs comprise the philosophies, thought processes, and paradigms in an organization that keep employees on track – they are mostly set by a leader in the organization because the employees look up to him/her for future course of direction. Ethical values are incontestable, not challenged by anyone and acceptable to everyone in the group, for example, honesty, fair play, integrity, high accountability, and truthfulness – these can be implemented anywhere in any organization because they are irrespective of region, race, gender, religion, and ethnic background. Then comes behaviour, or the general way people behave in an organization – a bad culture would influence employees not to share knowledge with one another, not to help one another, engage in mocking, abusive language, and harassment, etc.; in contrast, good behaviour means to be polite with one’s colleagues, treat them with respect, be helpful, keep promises, deliver one’s best, etc. Such behaviours, whether positive or negative, accumulate and form attitudes that become second nature to the organization’s employees. Those engaging in good behaviour and repeating it for a period develop a go-getting, inspiring, out-of-the-box, problem-solving attitude, which drives performance and well-being at the workplace.

1.2. Organizational culture and employee vitality

Vitality is defined as the feeling of aliveness and arousal of positive energy (*Ryan–Frederick [1997]*). You can experience vitality at work and home when both your mind and body are healthy and upbeat. It is an essential component of life and necessary to carry out one’s daily tasks. Vitality is more than being just physically active; it is about having a high spirit and morale (*Ryan–Frederick [1997]*). *Peterson and Park* in 2011 put vitality as approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated. Employee vitality refers to the extent to which an employee feels energetic

and positively charged compared with the others at the workplace (*Dutton–Heaphy* [2003]). People tend to be more energetic when their working environment is pleasant and encouraging – in other words, when they are feeling great and in high spirits at work. Vitality is said to affect one’s mood and self-control performance (*Muraven–Gagné–Rosman* [2008]). According to *Chen and Sengupta* [2014], vitality helps to increase creativity.

Furthermore, an extensive study on organizational culture has been conducted, classifying it into four categories based on an organization’s emphasis on performance and people: autocratic, laissez-faire, paternalistic, and high-performance (*Çağlar* [2012]). The autocratic culture puts more emphasis on performance and less on people – leaders make decisions only for achieving results, ignoring employee well-being. Organizations with such a culture are mostly centralized and the decision-making rests with the top management, with little or no input from the employees; they thus do not feel a sense of empowerment. Moreover, they have less room to be creative, and their innovative ideas may backfire. In the laissez-faire culture, emphasis on both people and performance is low. Leaders in such an organization hardly lead in the real sense and the functioning is erratic. Employees do not get to work in a challenging environment where they can bring out and deliver their best. While they have substantial freedom, there is no direction, and hence, eventually, they get frustrated when they fail to get results due to the lack of direction and effective leadership. The paternalistic culture focuses more on people and less on performance. Leaders in such an organization ‘go out of the way’ to keep employees comfortable – instead of striking a balance, they demonstrate excessive care for employees and ignore the company’s core objectives and deliverables; employees, once they sense it, start exploiting this attitude and become manipulative to avoid working and delivering. The high-performance culture is the most preferable with a balanced focus on both people and performance. Leaders provide a learning environment for employees where they are challenged to perform and grow personally and professionally. Such a vibrant culture fully capitalizes on employees’ strengths and provides them with the environment and facilities they need to perform well. This fosters innovation and creativity, and employees feel empowered to take initiative – they enjoy their work because there is open communication, teamwork, and collaboration (*Warrick–Mueller* [2015]).

Based on the above, we hypothesize that organizational culture shapes the way employees behave, work, and most importantly, feel in their organization.

H_1 : Organizational culture has a significant impact on employee vitality.

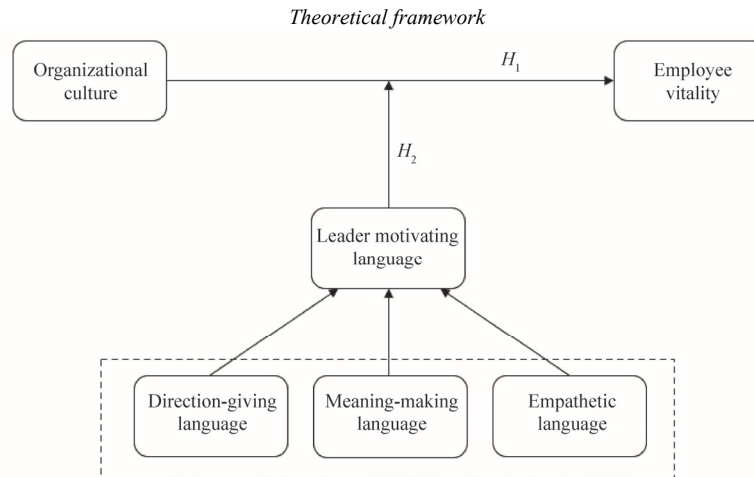
1.3. Motivating language theory and employee vitality

Leader motivating language refers to the language leaders use strategically with employees to motivate them (*Binyamin–Brender-Ilan* [2018]). No matter how competent, helpful, and empathetic they are, leaders need to convey this to their subordinates and choose the appropriate words to make an impact. Motivating language is a linguistic framework that illustrates the speech communication used by leaders to motivate the employees in their organization (*Mayfield–Mayfield* [2017], *Mayfield–Mayfield–Sharbrough* [2015]). Motivating language is rooted in *Austin's* [1975] speech act theory. *Sullivan* [1988] took this theory further, developing a complete model and naming it 'motivating language'. The speech act theory explains the different functions of motivating language, which has been classified thus: direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic (*Sullivan* [1988]). Motivating language provides leaders with the basis for using the most suitable communication with employees to motivate them at the workplace (*Madlock–Clubbs* [2019], *Mayfield–Mayfield–Kopf* [1995], *Sullivan* [1988]).

Leaders decide which type of motivating language to use with employees according to the situation. The motivating language theory (MLT), this study's primary underlying theory, provides a solid ground and a model explaining how a leader's language affects employees at the workplace. As already mentioned, *Sullivan* [1988] conceptualized MLT, and over time, several researchers have reconstructed and re-framed it according to their research context. In this study, the psycholinguistic framework proposed by *Sullivan* was used to determine the different leaders' motivating language types. The leader using direction-giving language provides clear information, sets a direction, eliminates uncertainty, and emphasizes goal achievement so that team members realize the importance of goals, rewards, and growth (*Madlock–Sexton* [2015], *Sullivan* [1988]); meaning-making language is that when a leader employs effective storytelling techniques, informal talk, and gossip, and tries to materialize employee expectations regarding organizational culture (*Sharbrough–Simmons–Cantrill* [2006]); in empathetic language, leaders use relatable stories from the organization, demonstrate extra care for employees by 'being in their shoes', and support them emotionally to ensure their well-being (*Mayfield–Mayfield* [2017]) – employees tend to engage more in work when leaders use such a language at the workplace, as it helps to improve their efficacy, increase their focus, and boost their morale and energy. The right level of zeal and energy to perform tasks optimally at the workplace is what vitality is all about.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that leader motivating language strengthens the relationship between organizational culture and employee vitality.

H_2 : Leader motivating language exercises influence over the relationship between organizational culture and employee vitality: the better the motivating language, the stronger the relationship.



2. Methodology

2.1. Sampling and procedure

For this study, we adopted a quantitative approach and conducted a survey. Five companies in Pakistan belonging to different industries were selected for data collection. The survey was sent to the head of each company's human resource department, who then emailed it to all the employees. Members of every department had an equal chance to participate, making it a simple random sample. A total of 360 responses were received, of which 270 were valid (response rate: 72.5%). The respondents assessed three dimensions (their organizational culture, how energetic they felt in office, and their leader for his/her motivating language).

2.2. Instruments

For organizational culture, *Wallach's* [1983] organizational culture index was used as by many other researchers (e.g. *Chen* [2004], *Kangas-Kee-*

McKee-Waddle [1999]). It comprises 24 items that describe the organization, divided equally under three dimensions (bureaucratic, innovative, and supportive; sample items: ‘My organization is challenging.’ and ‘My organization is procedural.’). The respondents rated the items on a 4-point Likert scale (1: it does not describe my organization at all; 4: it describes my organization), having a 0.90 Cronbach’s alpha.

For employee vitality, eight items were adapted from *Carmeli and Spreitzer* [2009]. The respondents were asked to rate their responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1: not at all; 5: to an exceptional degree; sample items: ‘When I am at work, I feel vital and alive.’ and ‘I feel a lot of excitement when I am doing my work.’). Cronbach’s alpha for this instrument is 0.91.

Leader motivating language was tested by adapting the instrument used by *Mayfield, Mayfield, and Kopf* [1998], which captures all three types of motivating language (direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic). Each type was measured through eight items on a 5-point Likert scale (1: never; 5: always). Cronbach’s alpha for direction-giving language is 0.94 (sample items: ‘My leader offers me helpful directions on how to do my job.’ and ‘My leader gives me useful explanations of what needs to be done in my work.’), for meaning-making language is 0.70 (sample items: ‘My leader shares news with me about organizational achievements and financial status.’ and ‘My leader provides me with helpful information about past changes affecting my work.’), and for empathetic language is 0.95 (sample items: ‘My leader shows trust in me.’ and ‘My leader asks me about my professional well-being.’).

2.3. Data analysis

Table 1 provides the total number of respondents by sex. Of the 270 valid answers, the proportion of female respondents is encouraging – almost 40% – giving a real picture of both male and female employees and their behaviours in different conditions.

Table 1

Frequency table – Valid responses by sex

Sex	Frequency	Proportion of valid responses (%)	Cumulative proportion (%)
Male	165	61.1	61.1
Female	105	38.9	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

It is also important to know the average age of employees in the surveyed companies. We found that more than half of the respondents were aged between 20 and 25, and those aged 41 and above were the least in the number.

Table 2

Frequency table – Valid responses by employee age group

Age group (years)	Frequency	Proportion of valid responses (%)	Cumulative proportion (%)
20–25	156	57.8	57.8
26–30	57	21.1	78.9
31–35	28	10.4	89.3
36–40	17	6.3	95.6
41 and above	12	4.4	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

Years of experience, another important descriptive variable gives us an insight into the type of people participated in the survey and their behaviours. The majority of the respondents are those with 0–5 years of experience, and they contribute the most to enable us to measure employee vitality at work.

Table 3

Frequency table – Years of employee experience

Years of experience	Frequency	Proportion of valid responses (%)	Cumulative proportion (%)
0–5	189	70.0	70.0
6–10	42	15.6	85.6
11–15	20	7.4	93.0
16–20	12	4.4	97.4
21 and above	7	2.6	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

All three instruments used to measure the three dimensions were tested for reliability. According to Table 4, Cronbach's alpha for all of them is above 0.75, indicating that the instruments are substantially reliable.

Table 4

Instrument reliability statistics

Dimension	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Employee vitality	0.913	8
Leader motivating language	0.962	24
Organizational culture	0.899	24

Table 5 shows the correlation between the variables – a figure close to 1.000 indicates a strong positive correlation. The correlation between the independent (IV) and dependent variables (DVs) is positive but weak, whereas that between IV and moderating variable (MV) and MV and DV is positive and strong. The table also presents the results of the one-tailed significance test, and in both cases, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5

Pearson correlation coefficients (N = 270)

Denomination		DV	IV	MV
Pearson correlation	DV	1.000	0.230	0.552
	IV	0.230	1.000	0.700
	MV	0.552	0.700	1.000
Significance (one-tailed)	DV	–	0.000	0.000
	IV	0.000	–	0.000
	MV	0.000	0.000	–

Note. Here and in Table 8, the following abbreviations are used: IV – independent variable; DV – dependent variable; MV – moderating variable.

In Table 6, the Durbin-Watson statistic shows a high autocorrelation in the sample. The goodness of fit, or the R^2 value, is around 35%, which is on the lower side but still acceptable. This means that the variation in the DV explained by IV and MV is around 35% in this model.

Table 6

Autocorrelation summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard error of estimate	Change statistics					Durbin-Watson statistic
				R^2 change	F change	df_1	df_2	Significant F change	
0.594*	0.353	0.348	5.395	0.353	72.725	2	267	0.000	1.899

* Predictors: constant, MV, and IV.

Table 7 demonstrates how well the regression equation predicts the DV. It displays the statistical difference between the population sets considered. The value of significance (p) is less than 0.05, which means there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Table 8 shows that the prediction of the regression model for DV is significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 7

ANOVA summary

Denomination	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	Mean square	<i>F</i>	Significance
Regression	4,233.160	2	2,116.580	72.725	0.000*
Residual	7,770.692	267	29.104		
<i>Total</i>	<i>12,003.852</i>	<i>269</i>			

* Predictors: constant, MV, and IV.

Note. ANOVA: analysis of variance.

Table 8

Path coefficients

Constant/variable	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient		Significance
	<i>B</i>	Standard error	β	<i>t</i>	
Constant	29.669	2.544		11.662	0.000
IV	-0.210	0.047	-0.308	-4.461	0.000
MV	0.003	0.000	0.767	11.122	0.000

3. Results

H_1 : Organizational culture has a significant positive impact on employee vitality. This implies the better the organizational culture, the higher the employee vitality.

H_2 : Leader motivating language exercises positive significant influence over the relationship between organizational culture and employee vitality. The results show that organizational culture has a stronger impact on employee vitality in the presence of leader motivating language – that is, leader motivating language positively enhances this relationship.

4. Conclusion

Vitality is extremely essential for employees to perform well. Companies are spending hefty amounts on research to find out how important vitality is and how it can be enhanced. This study provides a novel perspective of how different factors influence employee vitality and what helps to sustain it. It also shows that leader motivating language can be a great communication strategy to turn things around in any organization belonging to any industry. In Pakistan, there are many companies where the focus is more on results and profitability, and less on employees and their psychology and well-being. Such profitability that compromises employee well-being does not last long. In addition to providing employees with a vibrant organizational culture, it is also important for leaders to use motivating language with them. Such a communication strategy would not only enhance employees' morale but also increase their engagement and interest in work, resulting in improved well-being at the workplace. The findings of this study can be generalized to any industry and country.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations of the present research. The first one is related to data collection – data was collected through an online survey employing the snowball technique; it would have been better if we had had the opportunity to administer the survey ourselves, which would have allowed us to select people from a wide range of sectors. Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the employees could not be met in person – had it been possible to meet them, the mixed methods research design could have been used to get deeper insights into employee vitality and the factors influencing it.

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