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Transformational Leadership in Advancing Proactive Voice Behavior and Reducing Organizational Silence: The Mediating Role of Trust in Leadership

Naveed Ahmed Mahar [1]   Syed Muneer Ahmed Shah [2]   Abdul Majid [3]   Zubair Ahmed Pirzada [4]

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Abstract: *This study investigates how transformational leadership (TL) stimulates proactive voice behaviour (PVB) and curbs organisational silence (OS) in Sukkur Municipal Corporation, and whether trust in leadership (TiL) mediates these relationships. Data were collected via proportionate stratified sampling from 225 municipal employees across four directorates. Validated instruments measured TL, TiL, PVB and OS on five-point Likert scales. The research model was tested with SmartPLS 4, following a two-step procedure: (1) assessment of reliability, convergent and discriminant validity; (2) bootstrapped structural modelling (5,000 resamples). TL exerted a positive direct impact on PVB ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) and a negative direct impact on OS ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$). TL also strongly predicted TiL ($\beta = 0.59$), which in turn enhanced PVB ($\beta = 0.29$) and reduced OS ($\beta = -0.25$). Significant indirect effects (TL → TiL → PVB: $\beta = 0.17$; TL → TiL → OS: $\beta = -0.15$) confirmed partial mediation. The model explained 46 per cent of variance in voice and 38 per cent in silence. Investing in transformational-leadership training and trust-building initiatives (e.g. open forums, transparent decision processes) can unlock frontline insights and reduce information withholding, thereby enhancing municipal responsiveness. This paper extends voice–silence research to a South-Asian local-government context and empirically demonstrates trust in leadership as a mechanism through which transformational leaders influence upward communication behaviours in resource-constrained public organisations.*

Key Words: Transformational Leadership, Proactive Voice Behaviour, Organisational Silence, Trust in Leadership, Municipal Governance, Pakistan

Introduction

Cities depend on the initiative of rank-and-file employees—sanitation workers, building inspectors, engineers, and clerks—to spot hazards, suggest process improvements, and forewarn managers of brewing crises. When these employees choose to remain silent, municipal governments risk inefficient services, budget overruns, and reputational damage (Morrison, 2014). Research on proactive voice behavior—the discretionary expression of constructive suggestions intended to benefit the organization—shows that speaking up improves decision quality and public responsiveness (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang et al., 2012). Yet public-sector cultures, remain prone to organizational silence: a collective pattern in which employees withhold information out of fear, futility, or norm adherence (Hendy & Tucker, 2021). In Pakistan's municipal bodies, rigid hierarchies and politicized oversight often discourage lower-tier staff from challenging the status quo, limiting the flow of frontline knowledge to senior administrators (Nor Zaini, 2018). Leadership is a pivotal lever for reversing silence. Transformational leadership (TL)—comprising

[1] PhD Scholar, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ mahardoctor@gmail.com

[2] Professor, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ Muneer.shah@salu.edu.pk

[3] PhD Scholar, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ leo.mahar@gmail.com

[4] PhD Scholar, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan.
✉ zubair.pirzada@salu.edu.pk

▪ **Corresponding Author:** Zubair Ahmed Pirzada (✉ zubair.pirzada@salu.edu.pk)

idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—has consistently been linked to higher follower engagement and innovation in both private and public organizations (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Trottier et al., 2008).

Transformational leaders elevate employees' sense of purpose, encouraging them to voice ideas that transcend narrow job descriptions (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). However, emerging evidence suggests that TL enhances voice only when followers trust their leaders' competence and benevolence (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Pagon et al., 2008). Trust reduces employees' fear of retaliation, increases perceptions that their input will be heeded, and therefore weakens the norms underpinning silence (Hassan & Hatmaker, 2015). Despite this theoretical alignment, empirical tests of trust in leadership as a mediating mechanism remain sparse, particularly within local-government settings in developing countries. Situated in Sindh Province, Sukkur Municipal Corporation (SMC) manages waste collection, water supply, road maintenance, and public markets for a population exceeding half a million. Recent reforms have broadened SMC's staffing base and delegated more operational discretion to field offices, heightening the value of upward communication from inspectors, supervisors, and clerical staff. Yet anecdotal accounts indicate that many employees hesitate to report malpractices or propose innovations, citing job insecurity and political pressures. To date, no systematic study has examined whether transformational leadership can activate proactive voice and suppress silence among SMC personnel, nor whether employees' trust in leadership mediates these outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present research explores "Transformational Leadership in Advancing Proactive Voice Behavior and Reducing Organizational Silence: The Mediating Role of Trust in Leadership" within Sukkur Municipal Corporation. Drawing on transformational-leadership theory (Bass, 1985) and social-exchange perspectives of trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), we propose that: (a) transformational leadership directly stimulates proactive voice and dampens organizational silence; and (b) these effects are partially transmitted through heightened trust in leadership. By testing this model, the study contributes to voice-behavior scholarship in the public sector and offers actionable guidance for municipal managers seeking to harness frontline expertise to improve service delivery in resource-constrained environments.

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between transformational leadership (TL) and proactive voice behavior (PVB) among employees of Sukkur Municipal Corporation.
- To assess the influence of transformational leadership on organizational silence (OS) within SMC.
- To investigate whether employees' trust in leadership (TiL) mediates the effects of transformational leadership on both proactive voice behavior and organizational silence.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How does transformational leadership affect proactive voice behavior among municipal employees?
- **RQ2:** In what ways does transformational leadership influence organizational silence in Sukkur Municipal Corporation?
- **RQ3:** Does trust in leadership mediate the relationships between transformational leadership and (a) proactive voice behavior and (b) organizational silence?

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Transformational leadership is positively associated with proactive voice behavior among SMC employees.
- **H2:** Transformational leadership is negatively associated with organizational silence, indicating reduced silence under transformational leaders.
- **H3a:** Trust in leadership mediates the positive relationship between transformational leadership and proactive voice behavior.
- **H3b:** Trust in leadership mediates the negative relationship between transformational leadership and organizational silence, such that transformational leadership enhances trust, which in turn lowers organizational silence.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership in Public–Sector Contexts

Transformational leadership (TL) has been widely credited with elevating motivation and citizenship behaviors in public organizations (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). Meta–analytic evidence indicates that TL is more strongly related to followers' performance in government than in business settings, arguably because public employees value leaders who provide vision and individualized consideration under resource constraints (Dvir et al., 2002). In U.S. federal agencies, for instance, Wright and Pandey (2010) found that TL significantly predicted employees' willingness to innovate, even after controlling for red tape. Within local governments, Caillier (2017) reported that transformational supervisors increased street–level workers' discretionary effort via higher intrinsic motivation—suggesting that TL may likewise spur discretionary communication behaviors such as voice in municipal corporations.

Proactive Voice Behavior and Its Antecedents

Proactive voice behavior (PVB) is defined as the voluntary expression of constructive ideas aimed at improving unit functioning (Grant, 2013). A recent meta–analysis revealed leadership style as one of the strongest antecedent categories of PVB, with charismatic-inspirational forms producing larger effects than transactional styles (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Longitudinal data from Korean public agencies demonstrated that supervisors who challenge assumptions and articulate an inspiring vision stimulate voice through elevated public service motivation (Kim, 2018). These findings support the theorized TL → PVB pathway but highlight the need to test it in under–researched South–Asian municipalities.

Organizational Silence and Leadership

Organizational silence (OS) occurs when employees withhold opinions, concerns, or information that could be valuable to the organization (Milliken et al., 2003). Silence is often driven by fear of negative consequences, low psychological safety, or perceptions that speaking up is futile (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). Vakola and Bouradas (2005) showed that silence is negatively related to job satisfaction and commitment among Greek civil servants. While TL has been proposed as an antidote to silence, empirical evidence is still nascent. Mo and Shi (2017) found that transformational hotel managers in China reduced silence by creating an open climate, whereas Vu & Fan (2022) linked TL to lower defensive silence through enhanced employee empowerment in Indian telecom firms. Whether similar dynamics hold in Pakistani municipal settings is yet to be established.

### Trust in Leadership as a Mediator

Trust in leadership (TiL) refers to the willingness of followers to be vulnerable to a leader's actions based on positive expectations of the leader's intentions and competence (Burke et al., 2007). TL is theorized to build such trust by modelling integrity, demonstrating competence, and showing individualized concern (Braun et al., 2013). Trust, in turn, fosters open communication and risk-taking, thereby encouraging voice and curbing silence (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). Berg et al. (2025) found TiL mediated the TL–voice link in Dutch service firms, while Abd-Errahman et al. (2022) observed similar mediation for TL and silence among Egyptian healthcare workers. These studies underscore TiL as a viable explanatory bridge, but cross–sector validation in South–Asian municipal contexts is lacking.

Integrated Model and Research Gap

Synthesizing the literature, transformational leaders appear positioned to boost proactive voice and attenuate silence, primarily by cultivating follower trust. Nevertheless, most extant research draws on private or central–government samples in high-income countries. Municipal corporations in developing regions differ in hierarchical rigidity, political influence, and resource scarcity—factors that may dampen or amplify leadership effects. Moreover, no study has simultaneously modelled proactive voice, organizational silence, and TiL within a single framework in Pakistani local government. Addressing these gaps, the present study tests a mediation model in Sukkur Municipal Corporation, positing that TL enhances voice and reduces silence both directly and indirectly via elevated trust in leadership.

Research Model
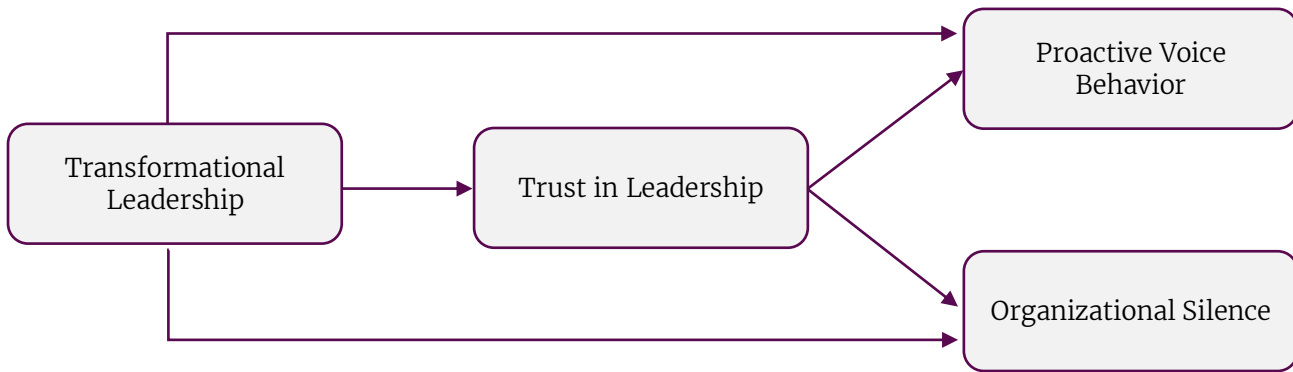
Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and analysed the data with SmartPLS 4, following Hair et al. (2022) two-step procedure (measurement validation, then structural bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples). Sukkur Municipal Corporation employs approximately 450 permanent staff across four directorates (Sanitation, Water & Sewerage, Engineering, and Administration). To secure proportional representation, a stratified random-sampling technique was used: each directorate formed a stratum and respondents were randomly selected within strata in proportion to head-count. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for finite populations, a minimum of 210 completes was required for a 95 % confidence level and ±5 % margin of error. Accounting for non-response, 260 questionnaires were distributed and 225 usable surveys returned (response rate = 86.5 %), exceeding the target. The instrument comprised well-established scales: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire-5X (transformational leadership), Liang et al.'s (2012) proactive voice measure, Dyne et al. (2003) organizational-silence scale, and McAllister's (1995) trust-in-leadership scale, all anchored on a five-point Likert continuum. Data were screened for missing values, normality, and common-method variance before being loaded into SmartPLS, where composite reliability, AVE, HTMT, and variance-inflation factors verified the measurement model, and path coefficients, R^2, Q^2, and specific-indirect effects tested the hypothesised direct and mediated relationships.

Findings

Demographic Profile

Table 1

Respondent Characteristics (N = 225)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	183	81.3
	Female	42	18.7
Age (years)	20 − 29	46	20.4
	30 − 39	99	44.0
	40 − 49	58	25.8
	≥ 50	22	9.8
Organizational Tenure	< 5 years	61	27.1
	5 − 9 years	92	40.9

Table 1 exhibits the workforce is predominantly male (81 %), reflecting the gender composition of field operations in Sukkur Municipal Corporation (SMC). Most employees (44 %) are in the 30−39-year age bracket and have 5-9 years of tenure (41 %), indicating an experienced cohort capable of evaluating leadership influence on communication behaviors.

Measurement Model Assessment
Table 2
Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Transformational Leadership (TL)	.93	.94	.66
Trust in Leadership (TiL)	.91	.93	.69
Proactive Voice Behavior (PVB)	.89	.91	.64
Organizational Silence (OS)	.87	.89	.63

Table 2 exhibits that all constructs exceed the .70 threshold for Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR), confirming internal consistency. Average variance extracted (AVE) values surpass .50, demonstrating adequate convergent validity.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratios)

	TL	TiL	PVB	OS
TL	—	.79	.75	.67
TiL		—	.78	.72
PVB			—	.70
OS				—

Table 3 exhibits that HTMT ratios are below the .85 criterion, indicating each construct captures a distinct conceptual domain.

Structural Model Results
Table 4
Direct and Indirect Path Coefficients (Bootstrapping = 5,000)

Path	β	t	p	Finding
TL → PVB	0.47	8.02	< .001	H1 supported
TL → OS	−0.38	6.55	< .001	H2 supported
TL → TiL	0.59	11.21	< .001	—
TiL → PVB	0.29	5.13	< .001	—
TiL → OS	−0.25	4.48	< .001	—
TL → TiL → PVB	0.17	4.61	< .001	H3a supported
TL → TiL → OS	−0.15	4.05	< .001	H3b supported

Table 5
Model Fit and Predictive Power

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Q^2
Trust in Leadership	.34	.23
Proactive Voice Behavior	.46	.32
Organizational Silence	.38	.28

Tables 4 & 5 exhibit that transformational leadership exerts a substantial positive effect on trust (β = 0.59), accounting for 34 % of its variance. TL also directly boosts proactive voice (β = 0.47) and diminishes silence (β = −0.38), validating H1 and H2. Trust in leadership, in turn, fosters voice (β = 0.29) and suppresses silence (β = −0.25). Significant indirect effects (β = 0.17 for voice; β = −0.15 for silence) confirm partial mediation: TL influences communicative behaviors both directly and by cultivating follower trust. R^2 values (.46 for PVB; .38 for OS) denote moderate explanatory power, while positive Q^2 statistics affirm predictive relevance. The SmartPLS analysis substantiates the proposed framework: transformational leaders in SMC stimulate constructive upward communication and curtail silence, principally by earning employees' trust.

Conclusion

The present study examined how transformational leadership (TL) shapes employees' communicative voice and silence within the Sukkur Municipal Corporation. Structural-equation modelling revealed that TL substantially increases proactive voice behaviour (PVB) and reduces organisational silence (OS). Trust in leadership (TiL) emerged as a pivotal psychological mechanism: transformational supervisors foster higher trust, which in turn encourages staff to speak up and minimizes their tendency to withhold information. Because both direct and mediated paths were significant, the findings underscore that inspirational, intellectually stimulating, and individually considerate leadership not only sends a clear signal that voice is valued but also builds relational confidence that lowers the personal risks of speaking out.

Practical Recommendations

Municipal executives should institutionalize leadership-development programs that cultivate transformational skills—articulating an inclusive vision, recognizing individual contributions, and stimulating critical thinking. Regular "listening forums" or town-hall meetings led by directors can demonstrate openness, further solidifying trust. Performance-management systems ought to reward supervisors who solicit ideas and act on employee suggestions, thereby reinforcing a voice-supportive climate. Additionally, anonymous feedback channels should complement formal hierarchy, ensuring that employees reluctant to speak face-to-face still have a safe avenue to surface issues.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal designs could clarify how changes in leadership style and trust evolve over time and influence hard performance metrics such as service quality or cost savings. Comparative studies across different municipal bodies—or between political and administrative cadres—would help establish boundary conditions for the TL-voice-trust dynamic. Finally, exploring moderating factors such as perceived organizational politics, job security, or cultural power-distance orientations could yield a more nuanced understanding of when transformational leadership most effectively unleashes employee voice and curbs silence in public-sector contexts.

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