

Do accidents speak louder than words?
Predictors of safety-specific voice

Sean Tucker¹, Nick Turner¹, Nik Chmiel², & Chris B. Stride³

How front-line workers respond to potentially dangerous work has implications for their own safety, the safety of others (e.g., co-workers), and organizational safety performance. While speaking out about a workplace hazard is fundamentally important to accident prevention (e.g., Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario, 2005), surprisingly little is known about the individual and situational predictors of safety voice. Our paper explores this important issue by considering the correlates of safety voice using a sample of urban bus drivers.

Hirschman (1970) defined voice in the work context as any effort by an employee to “change, rather than escape from, an objectionable state of affairs” (p. 30). We argue that when faced with potentially dangerous work situations only voice (e.g., telling a co-worker not to do dangerous work) and exit (e.g., quitting) are likely to be associated with positive safety outcomes (e.g., injury avoidance). Worker voice in the context of occupational safety is critically important because it alerts others on the frontlines and in management to potential hazards.

With few exceptions (e.g., Mullen, 2005), workplace safety research has overlooked the importance of worker voice in workplace safety. We use the term “safety-specific voice” to describe a range of ways that workers can “speak out” against potentially hazardous work; these ways may include filing a grievance about a workplace hazard, telling co-workers about unsafe work, refusing unsafe work, reporting dangerous work to government officials, and speaking out about a safety threat during a staff meeting. Proactive employee behavior has been broadly defined as improving work procedures and processes in self-starting, action-oriented ways (Parker, Williams & Turner, in press) and, in terms of safety, encompasses discretionary behaviours beyond straightforward compliance with safety regulations. We extend the current research, which demonstrates a management-centric bias towards safety communication, by considering the influence of both management and co-worker safety communication on worker safety voice.

We studied individual and situational predictors of safety-specific voice using a cross-sectional survey of urban transport drivers ($n = 213$) from the United Kingdom. Individual predictors included Big-5 personality traits and demographic information (e.g., age, experience). Situational predictors included driving accident record from the previous 6 months (drawn from company records), psychological distress, safety locus of control, alertness, co-worker safety voice, and management safety voice. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that age, co-worker safety voice, and personality openness positively predicted worker safety-specific voice, whereas psychological distress negatively predicted safety voice.

These results show that co-worker safety voice had a greater influence on worker safety voice than management safety voice. This finding suggests that future safety research should include both supervisory and non-supervisory influences on worker safety behaviours; indeed the latter may be more salient to workers.

Speaking out about dangerous work is critically important to preventing workplace injuries. While attention on employers is understandable given the current legal

responsibilities on employers for safety, research should aim for a more holistic and relational understanding of the web of workplace safety communication.

Institutional affiliations:

¹ Queen's School of Business, Queen's University, Canada

² School of Psychology, Queen's University, UK

³ Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield, UK