



## Leader-employee calling congruence and voice behaviour: The mediating role of perceived insider status

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**Abstract:** This study examined the relationship between leader-employee calling congruence on employees' voice behaviour. Participants were 173 leader-employee dyads from the Chinese service industry. They completed online surveys on calling, perceived insider status, and voice behaviour. Results from polynomial regression and response surface analysis showed that employees perceived insider status to be weaker with the low leader-low subordinate calling congruence, and stronger with high leader and high subordinate calling congruence. Employees perceived insider status is stronger in low leader and high subordinate calling incongruence compared with high leader and low subordinate calling incongruence. Perceived insider status plays a mediating role among calling congruence and voice behaviour. This study's findings suggest pathways of calling congruence on voice behaviour, which are important for promoting employee voice behaviour and guiding organisational recruitment in the workplace.

**Keywords:** calling; voice behaviour; perceived insider status; response surface analysis

### Introduction

How employees perceive their ability to have a voice in their work roles influences both their work well-being and personal lives. By having a voice in their work roles, employees may experience increased life satisfaction and a greater sense of thriving at work (Lee et al., 2021; Song et al., 2020). This would likely be true if they perceived their work roles as a calling.

Calling is a career approach where individuals view their work as central to their life's purpose and aimed at helping others or contributing to the greater good (Duffy & Dik, 2013). It consists of three elements: transcendent summons, purposeful work, and pro-social motivation (Dik et al., 2012). Shaped by personal abilities, social influences, and external factors such as values or a sense of destiny, and it can be self-oriented, other-oriented, or a mix of both (Duffy & Dik, 2013). With a higher calling, employees are more likely to take charge (Zhao et al., 2024) and engage in proactive behaviours by living their calling (Cai et al., 2022). However, research on work calling typically focuses on the subordinate's perspective, with less attention given to the leader's sense of calling. Yet, the alignment between an employee's sense of calling and that of their leaders would be important, especially when employees feel that they are being listened to. To date, there has been limited research on the alignment of calling between superiors and subordinates, and the pathways through which such alignment influences the outcomes of calling remain unexplored. Therefore, this study examined the influence of leadership calling and employee calling congruence on employees' voice behaviour in a mediation model.

### Voice behaviour in work calling

Voice behaviour refers to employees' concerns, thoughts, and recommendations regarding work-related issues,

intending to change or improve the current work situation (Liang et al., 2012). It is a discretionary, prosocial, and constructive extra-role behaviour. The predictors of voice behaviour include individual characteristics (Starzyk & Sonnentag, 2019), attitudes, and emotions (Wang et al., 2022), as well as leaders' style, behaviour, and personality (Weiss et al., 2018).

Voice behaviour is optimized when employees perceive a strong fit between themselves and their job or organisation (Erdogan et al., 2020), and when their work calling aligns with that of their leaders, although research on the latter remains insufficient.

Calling congruence involves a psychological process within the framework of person-environment fit theory (Cable & Edwards, 2004), by which the alignment in calling between leaders and employees can bolster employee perceived insider status. Perceived insider status refers to an individual's perception of belonging as either an insider or outsider within the organisation, reflecting their relationship with the organisation and the degree of personal space and acceptance they feel they have acquired within it (Masterson & Stamper, 2003). With insider status, employees feel like they are part of the work team and act according to leadership expectations to help their organisations thrive (Zhang et al., 2022). The psychological process from perceived insider status to voice behaviour involves the conservation of resources theory, indicating that employees with a stronger sense of insider status are more likely to engage in voice behaviour. The conservation of resources theory posits that individuals must acquire and preserve personal strengths and social connections, with those possessing more resources being more likely to invest in resource-enhancing activities (Hobfoll et al., 2018). On one hand, individuals use their existing resources to protect themselves, while on the other hand, they actively construct and maintain resources



**Table 1.** The four different scenarios of (in) congruence in leader-employee calling

		Leader calling	
		High leader calling	Low leader calling
Employee calling	High employee calling	Leader high-employee high congruence in leader-employee calling	Leader low-employee high incongruence in leader-employee calling
	Low employee calling	Leader high-employee low incongruence in leader-employee calling	Leader low-employee low congruence in leader-employee calling

to cope with potential resource losses (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Employees with a strong perception of insider status possess more resources, which they may leverage to build social networks that help them integrate more effectively into their work (Li et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2024). To preserve and enhance these resources, they may engage in voice behaviour to align with leaders' expectations, in order to achieve higher performance evaluations and social standing, ultimately leading to resource enhancement.

What has been lacking from the literature is an examination of how dyadic calling congruence between employee and leader impacts follower voice behaviour through perceived insider status.

#### *Dyadic matching in work calling*

According to the level of leader calling and employee calling, we propose four different matching scenarios as shown in Table 1: leader high-employee high, leader high-employee low, leader low-employee low, leader low-employee high. Leader high-employee high and leader low-employee low fall under the category of congruence, leader high-employee low and leader low-employee high fall under that of incongruence.

This study will address the following: first, between the two congruence scenarios, whether perceived insider status is higher in a high-high one than in a low-low one; and second, between the two incongruence scenarios, whether perceived insider status is higher when employees are at a higher level of calling than leaders in comparison to the opposite.

#### *Calling (in) congruence effects on perceived insider status*

Person-environment fit theory refers to the compatibility that arises when individual characteristics align with those of the work environment (Cable & Edwards, 2004). With a work calling fit, supplementary fit occurs between leaders and employees. Under different matching conditions, there can be either gains or losses of resources, which can affect employee behaviour. In case of a high degree of calling congruence between the employee and the leader, an employee may exhibit greater cognitive situational adaptability (Cable & Edwards, 2004). This alignment of calling promotes the formation of a "value consensus" and a shared communication system between the leader and subordinates, enhancing predictability in each other's behaviour, reducing ambiguity, and minimizing resource consumption. This facilitates supplementary

fit for resource gains, thereby encouraging employees to acquire insider status.

In case of a low degree of calling congruence between the employee and the leader, although alignment exists, it fails to meet the supplementary fit compatibility condition. Specifically, the leader has a low sense of responsibility and an absence of purpose, meaning, and work internal motivation, which will be transmitted to subordinates during interactions (Xie et al., 2019). Moreover, subordinates also exhibit a low sense of purpose, lacking internal motivation and meaning in their work, making it difficult to handle daily varied and complex tasks (Tosti-Kharas et al., 2024), inevitably diminishing subordinate perceived insider status.

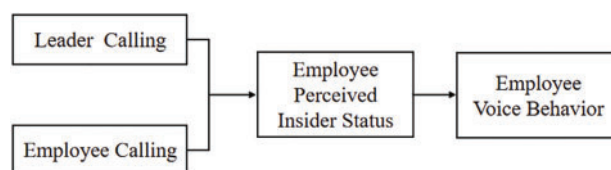
In cases of incongruence where leaders have a low sense of calling but subordinates have a higher one, motivated subordinates may invest more energy into work, complete unattractive tasks, and derive enjoyment from them (Tosti-Kharas et al., 2024), potentially elevating their perceived insider status. In contrast, in situations of incongruence where leaders have a high calling but subordinates have a low calling, leaders may exhibit strong prosocial behaviour and motivation to complete organisational tasks, while employees are less likely to actively engage in their work (Kim et al., 2023; Lian et al., 2021; Sawhney et al., 2020), potentially reducing their perceived insider status.

#### **Goals of the Study**

The study examined the effects of leader-subordinate calling congruence on employee voice behaviour, considering the mediating effects of employee perceived insider status. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model. Based on this conceptual model, we tested the following hypotheses:

H1: In situations of congruence in calling, high leader-high subordinate calling congruence is more likely to strengthen subordinate perceived insider status than low leader-low subordinate calling congruence.

H2: In situations of calling incongruence, low leader-high subordinate calling incongruence is more likely to

**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model

strengthen subordinate perceived insider status compared to high leader-low subordinate calling incongruence.

H3: Subordinates perceived insider status mediates the relationship between leader-subordinate congruence in calling and subordinate voice behaviour.

By hypothesizing and testing these relationships, we make a contribution to the dyadic matching of calling by examining the alignment between leaders' and employees' calling and its impact on voice behaviour.

## Methods

### Participants and setting

The participants were 43 leaders matched with 173 subordinates in China's services industry. Among the leaders, approximately 62.79% were male, the average age was 38.37 (SD = 7.90) years. Among the employees, approximately 68.21% were male, and the average age was 25.23 (SD = 9.36) years.

### Measures

Our study used internationally established scales with translation/back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) for English-based measures into Chinese. All scales were scores on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

### Calling

The 12-item Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) scale (Dik et al., 2012) includes three elements: transcendent summons, purposeful work, and pro-social orientation. Sample items included statements such as "I believe that I have been called to my current line of work," "I see my career as a path to purpose in life," and "I am always trying to evaluate how beneficial my work is to others." In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for scores from the CVQ scale was 0.96.

### Perceived Insider Status

The Perceived Insider Status (PIS) scale comprises 6 items (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Sample items included statements such as "I feel very much a part of my work organisation." In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for scores from the PIS was 0.94.

### Voice Behaviour

The 10-item Voice Behaviour Scale contains two dimensions: promotive voice behaviour and prohibitive voice behaviour (Liang et al., 2012). Sample items such as "Proactively suggest new projects which are beneficial to the work unit," and "Advise other colleagues against undesirable behaviours that would hamper job performance." In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for scores from the Voice Behaviour Scale was 0.95.

### Control Variables

Previous research (Morrison, 2023; Ng & Lucianetti, 2018) suggested that voice behaviour may be related to demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, and tenure. Therefore, we also controlled these variables for analysis.

## Procedure

The research ethics committee of Henan University approved the study. Participants consented to the data collection at two different time points. We ensured the confidentiality of participants' data. They completed the surveys online.

## Data analysis

This study conducted a discriminant validity test among the three factors of employee evaluation, and the analysis results are shown in Table 2. Among the various factor models, the three-factor model showed the best fit ( $\chi^2 = 449$ ,  $df = 321$ , RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.04) compared to the other two models, indicating good discriminant validity among the three variables in this study.

To test the hypotheses, we used the polynomial regression and response surface methodology (Edwards & Parry, 1993). This method examines the exact nature and extent to which congruence between predictor variables relates to the outcome variables (Edwards & Cable, 2009). By analyzing the three-dimensional surfaces, we gained a clearer interpretation of the data. The specific analysis is the mediator variable-perceived insider status (PIS) was regressed on the control variables and the five polynomial terms, that is, leader calling (LC), employee calling (EC), leader calling squared ( $LC^2$ ), leaders calling times employee calling ( $LC \times EC$ ), and employee calling squared ( $EC^2$ ). The values of LC and EC were mean-centered. The regression equation is as follows:

$$PIS = b_0 + b_1LC + b_2EC + b_3LC^2 + b_4LC \times EC + b_5EC^2 + e$$

To test the hypotheses, it is necessary to calculate the regression coefficients of the regression equation, as well as the slopes and curvatures of the response surface along the congruence line ( $X = Y$ ) and the incongruence line ( $X = -Y$ ). Specifically, the slope of the congruence line ( $b_1 + b_2$ ) is used to test Hypothesis 1, when the value of  $b_1 + b_2$  is significant and positive, Hypothesis 1 is supported. While the slope of the incongruence line ( $b_1 - b_2$ ) is used to test Hypothesis 2, when the value of  $b_1 - b_2$  is significant and negative, Hypothesis 2 is supported. For Hypothesis 3 testing, following the recommendation of Edwards and Cable (Edwards & Cable, 2009), the raw data are multiplied by regression coefficients in polynomial regression, and then summed to create a block variable, regression analysis and bootstrapping are used for testing.

## Results

### Correlation Analyses

All study variables' means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 3. Leader calling and employee calling were significantly related to employees' perceived insider status and voice behaviour.

### Calling congruence

Hypothesis 1 predicted that employee perceived insider status is higher when employees and leaders are aligned at a high level of calling as opposed to when they are aligned at a low level. As shown in Table 4, the slope along the congruence line is significant and positive (0.598,  $p < 0.01$ ),

**Table 2.** Model fit results for confirmatory factor analyses

Model	$\chi^2$	df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	SRMR
Three-factor model	449	321	0.05	0.97	0.96	0.04
Two-factor model	634	323	0.08	0.92	0.91	0.05
One-factor model	1835	324	0.15	0.69	0.67	0.09

*Note.*  $n = 173$ ; Three-factor model: employees' calling + perceived insider status + voice behaviour. Two-factor model: employees' calling + perceived insider status, voice behaviour. One-factor model: all variables are combined.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Level 1									
1. Leader calling	3.79	0.71							
Level 2									
2. Gender	1.32	0.47	−0.07						
3. Age	35.23	9.36	−0.05	−0.01					
4. Tenure	3.75	1.27	0.01	−0.05	0.56**				
5. Income	3.53	1.11	−0.01	−0.15	0.23**	0.29**			
6. Employee calling	3.35	0.96	0.31**	−0.06	0.26**	0.21**	0.54**		
7. Perceived insider status	3.50	0.91	0.20**	−0.12	0.18*	0.17*	0.42**	0.71**	
8. Voice behaviour	3.54	0.89	0.17*	0.17*	0.19*	0.21**	0.40**	0.65**	0.73**

*Note.*  $n = 173$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

indicating that the high-high congruence condition has higher perceived insider status than the low-low congruence condition. The response surface in Figure 2 also indicates that PIS is higher at the rear corner (high/high congruence) than at the front corner (low/low congruence), thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

### Asymmetric/incongruence

For testing the asymmetric incongruence effect (Hypothesis 2), the slope of the incongruence line ( $b_1 - b_2$ ) can be used for detection. As shown in Table 4, the slope along the incongruence line is significant and negative ( $-0.702$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that when an employee's calling is higher than his or her leader's, perceived insider status increases more sharply than it does when the employee calling is lower than the leader. This asymmetrical effect is also shown in Figure 2, in which perceived insider status is higher at the left corner than at the right corner, thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

### Perceived insider status mediation

To test the mediating effect of perceived insider status on the relationship between calling congruence and voice behaviour (Hypothesis 3), we used the block variable approach recommended by Edwards and Cable (Edwards & Cable, 2009). As shown in Table 5, the indirect effect was positive (0.51), and the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval excluded zero (0.41, 0.61), providing support for Hypothesis 3.

### Discussion

This study finds the following: high leader-high subordinate calling congruence is more likely to strengthen subordinate perceived insider status than low leader-low subordinate calling congruence; low leader-high subordinate calling incongruence is more likely to strengthen

subordinate perceived insider status compared to high leader-low subordinate calling incongruence; subordinate perceived insider status mediates the relationship between leader-subordinate congruence in calling and subordinate voice behaviour.

First, this study found high leader-high subordinate calling congruence is more likely to strengthen subordinate perceived insider status than low leader-low subordinate calling congruence. Employees with a strong sense of calling view their work as deeply meaningful, often feeling driven by a purpose or external force beyond personal gain (Chen et al., 2023). This strong connection to their role leads them to identify more closely with their profession, understanding its significance and what it represents to them on a deeper level compared to those with a lower or no sense of calling (Anglin et al., 2022). When leaders and subordinates share a similarly high sense of calling, it enhances the subordinates' engagement, motivating them to contribute more fully and fostering a sense of mutual trust and belonging within the organisation (Kim et al., 2023; Sawhney et al., 2020). Subordinates begin to see their role not merely as a job, but as an integral part of their own identity (Anglin et al., 2022). This process of internalization strengthens their perceived insider status, making them feel like valued and indispensable members of the organisation.

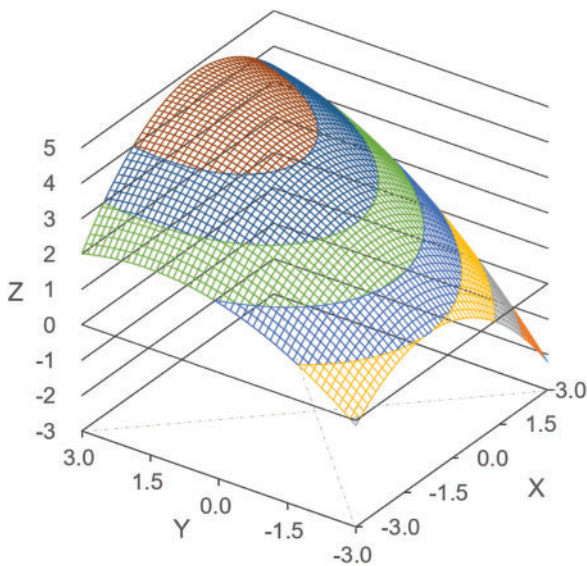
Second, this study found low leader-high subordinate calling incongruence is more likely to strengthen subordinate perceived insider status compared to high leader-low subordinate calling incongruence. When subordinates have a stronger sense of calling than their leader, it fosters a complementary fit within the leader-subordinate dynamic (Cable & Edwards, 2004). In this scenario, subordinates are more likely to actively seek out opportunities to acquire resources and support, leveraging their intrinsic motivation to contribute meaningfully to the organisation



**Table 4.** Polynomial regression results of the (in) congruence effects

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	2.248**	1.594**	1.861**
Gender	−0.107	−0.129	−0.152
Age	0.010	−0.001	0.001
Tenure	−0.003	0.010	0.016
Income	0.290**	0.013	0.003
Lead calling (b1)		−0.058	−0.052
Employee calling (b2)		0.658**	0.650**
Lead calling squared (b3)			−0.227*
Lead calling × Employee calling (b4)			0.098
Employee calling squared (b5)			0.038
Congruence line (LC = EC)			
a1 Slope (b1 + b2)			0.598**
a2 Curvature (b3 + b4 + b5)			−0.243
Incongruence line (LC = − EC)			
a3 Slope (b1 − b2)			0.702**
a4 Curvature (b3 − b4 + b5)			−0.435%**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.162	0.469	0.494
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.162**	0.307**	0.025*

Note.  $n = 173$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ . LC = leader calling, EC = employee calling.



**Figure 2.** Congruence effect and incongruence effect of leader and employee calling on perceived insider status. Note: X = leader calling; Y = employee calling; Z = perceived insider status

(Kim et al., 2023). The leader, even with a lesser sense of calling, may still provide the necessary resources, guidance, and autonomy that allow the subordinate to thrive. This type of incongruent matching can be beneficial for enhancing the subordinate's perceived insider status.

**Table 5.** Results from tests of indirect effects

Variable	Effect	Value	SE	95% CI	
				LL	LU
Voice behaviour	indirect	0.51	0.05	0.41	0.61
	direct	0.49	0.12	0.25	0.73
	total	1.00	0.11	0.84	1.26

Note. The bias-corrected 95% CI for the indirect effect using 1000 bootstrap samples.

Conversely, when a leader's calling exceeds that of the subordinate, leaders driven by a strong sense of calling may set high expectations based on their motivations, but if subordinates lack similar work motivation, this misalignment can increase psychological insecurity and lower their perceived insider status.

Third, this study found subordinate perceived insider status mediates the relationship between leader-subordinate calling congruence and subordinate promotive voice behaviour and prohibitive voice behaviour. Aligning with the leader's calling indicates that the employee shares the same values and work objectives as the leader. This alignment fosters a sense of unity and purpose within the team, providing subordinates with motivation, energy, and psychological security (Liu et al., 2021). Such fit is likely to enhance employees' perceived insider status, providing them with greater psychological resources, such as trust, self-esteem, and other resources (Sorlie et al., 2022). They will invest resources they have into value-added activities, and voice behaviour is just such an activity. Voice behaviour is an extra-role behaviour that aligns with leaders' expectations and enhances organisational effectiveness (Liang et al., 2012). It yields positive outcomes such as leadership recognition and high-performance ratings, resulting in resource gains (Morrison, 2023; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). Consequently, it is viewed as a crucial means for employees to acquire work resources. Thus, employees perceived insider status can encourage proactive behaviours such as speaking up and sharing ideas (Bundy et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2019).

### Implications for research and practice

The study findings have several practical implications regarding calling, voice behaviour, and recruitment. First, organisations should prioritize individuals with a strong sense of calling when recruiting employees and developing managers. Those with a low sense of calling have weaker intrinsic motivation, lower self-efficacy, and are more prone to burnout (Lian et al., 2021; Sawhney et al., 2020). In contrast, individuals with a high sense of calling demonstrate strong prosocial behaviour and motivation, and are more likely to engage in extra-role behaviour, benefiting the organisation's development (Cai et al., 2022). Therefore, organisations should take into account whether candidates possess a sense of calling when hiring and promoting employees.

Second, the study indicates that perceived insider status serves as a mediating variable between calling and employee voice behaviour, highlighting the importance of employees' psychological experiences. Therefore,

organisations should adopt humane management practices to enhance employees' perceived insider status, such as respecting employees, treating them fairly, and valuing their contributions. When employees feel valued, it boosts job satisfaction and organisational efficiency. Organisations may also consider offering training and development opportunities to strengthen their insider status, thereby improving overall performance and retention.

Third, person-leader fit and person-post matching is important for an organisation. Organisations should identify each individual's characteristics and place them in roles that align with their strengths. Mismatching can lead to individuals' resource depletion, which harms the organisation's interests and individuals' physical and mental health. Achieving proper person-post alignment and person-leader fit can effective teamwork, mutual success, and the efficient development of the organisation.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations in current research. First, the current study did not examine the influence of the moderating variables, such as organisational culture, justice, and other external factors. These variables may affect job performance and organisational citizenship behaviour (Schneider et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2019). In the future, we can further expand the boundary conditions between the above-mentioned relationships. Second, this study focused on a limited sample from the Chinese service industry, with no participants recruited from other sectors. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should consider incorporating a more diverse range of industries and a larger sample size.

### Conclusion

Our key findings were that (1) subordinate perceived insider status is higher when an employee is aligned with a leader at a high level of calling rather than when they are both at a low level, (2) subordinate perceived insider status is lower when a leader calling is higher than a follower rather than when a follower is higher than a leader, (3) subordinate perceived insider status mediates the relationship between the interplay of calling and voice behaviour. Our results extend the study of calling congruence in voice behaviour and guide organisational recruitment and human resource management practices.

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**Author Contributions:** The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Xiaolin Zhang, Shujie Li, and Enguo Wang; data collection: Xiaolin Zhang; analysis and interpretation of results:

Xiaolin Zhang, Shujie Li; draft manuscript preparation: Xiaolin Zhang, Shujie Li, and Enguo Wang. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

**Availability of Data and Materials:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Ethics Approval:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Henan Provincial Key Laboratory of Psychology and Behaviour. All participants provided written informed consent before participation in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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