

Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

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ABSTRACT: This study examines employee voice and speaking-up behavior at Ndorama Petrochemical Company in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, in an effort to understand how organizational culture, leadership style, and psychological safety affect voice behavior in the company. The study adopted a mixed-method empirical approach using survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from 120 employees across operational, technical, and administrative units. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Qualitative responses were coded thematically to identify patterns. The findings reveal that 68% of employees believe speaking up improves safety and performance. However, 42% report fear of negative consequences, especially fear of job insecurity when raising concerns. The study also shows a positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) between perceived psychological safety and employee voice frequency. The study reveals that employees who trust their supervisors are more likely to report safety hazards. In addition, the study also found leadership openness as a significant factor that predict voice behaviour ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$). This research also recorded differences in departments, in that, the study reveals that operational staff were more likely to report safety concerns compared to administrative staff. The study concludes that employee voice and speaking-up behaviour at Ndorama Petrochemical Company are influenced by factors such as psychological safety, leadership openness, and organizational justice. The study, therefore, recommends strengthening anonymous reporting channels and leadership training in active listening as well as incorporating voice metrics into performance evaluation systems.

KEYWORDS: Employee Voice, Speak-up Behaviour, Leadership Openness, Psychological Safety, Organizational Climate

INTRODUCTION

Employee voice and speak-up behaviour have become central to contemporary organizational studies and management practice, particularly in dynamic and high-risk industries. Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions with the intent of improving organizational functioning (Morrison, 2014; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Speak-up behaviour similarly involves employees' willingness to raise work-related issues, including safety concerns and ethical problems, with the expectation that their input will be taken seriously (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012). Extensive research shows that voice behaviour contributes significantly to organizational innovation, safety, employee engagement, and performance (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003; Atwater, Brett & Charles, 2007). Psychologically safe work environments, where employees feel free from fear of retaliation, are critical antecedents to employees' willingness to speak up (Edmondson, 1999; Newman, Donohue

& Eva, 2017). Leadership openness, supportive organizational climate, and internal communication systems have also been identified as strong predictors of voice behaviour across diverse organizational settings (Liang et al., 2012; Bakker, 2015).

Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions intended to improve organizational functioning (Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, 2014). Voice behaviour is proactive and change-oriented, distinguishing it from routine communication. It enables organizations to identify operational inefficiencies, safety hazards, and ethical issues before they escalate into crises. Earlier conceptualizations by James A. LePine and Linn Van Dyne (1998) described voice as promotive behaviour aimed at constructive change. Subsequent research expanded the concept to include both promotive voice (suggestions for improvement) and prohibitive voice (raising concerns about harmful practices) (Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012).

Research consistently demonstrates that voice behaviour enhances organizational innovation, team learning, and performance outcomes (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014). However, voice involves interpersonal risk because employees may fear negative consequences such as retaliation or damaged relationships with supervisors (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003).

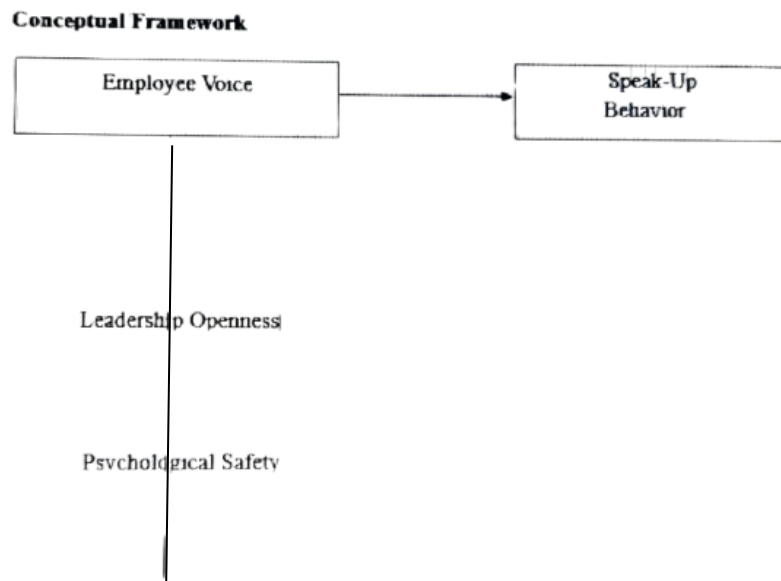
Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

Speak-up behaviour is closely related to employee voice but often emphasizes the expression of safety concerns, ethical issues, or work-related problems (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). In high-risk industries such as petrochemicals, speak-up behaviour is particularly important because operational errors can have severe safety and environmental consequences. Speak-up behaviour is influenced by leadership style, perceived fairness, trust, and psychological safety (Liang et al., 2012). When employees perceive that management is receptive and supportive, they are more likely to communicate concerns openly. Conversely, authoritarian leadership and punitive climates, which in some cases lead to job insecurity, denial of promotion and its attendant benefits, etc., may suppress voice and encourage silence.

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Amy Edmondson, 1999). It allows employees to speak up without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or negative career consequences. Empirical studies show that psychological safety is strongly associated with voice behaviour, team learning, and employee engagement (Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2017). In organizations where employees feel psychologically safe, upward communication increases, and innovation improves. Psychological safety is shaped by leadership openness, fairness, respect, and supportive communication systems (Detert & Burris, 2007). Thus, it serves as a mediating mechanism between leadership practices and employee voice. Leadership openness refers to the extent to which leaders encourage, listen to, and act upon employee input. Leaders who demonstrate approachability, transparency, and inclusiveness foster higher levels of trust and voice behaviour (Detert & Burris, 2007). Transformational and inclusive leadership styles have been positively linked to employee voice because they promote empowerment and reduce fear of retaliation (Bakker, 2015). When leaders create open channels of communication and provide constructive feedback, employees perceive that their contributions are valued. While organizational climate represents employees' shared perceptions of organizational laid down protocols, policies, practices, and procedures (Benjamin Schneider, Ehrhart & Macey, 2013). A supportive organizational climate promotes trust, fairness, and collaboration, which enhance voice behaviour. It is necessary to state that an environment, work space, that supports openness and participatory decision-making strengthens employees' confidence in speaking up, while climates marked by fear or excessive hierarchy discourage upward communication (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

In high-risk industries such as petrochemicals, where safety and procedural compliance are essential, the absence of effective employee voice can result in operational inefficiencies, safety lapses, and ethical lapses (May et al., 2004; Parker, Axtell & Turner, 2001). Discretionary voice not only enables swift identification of latent organizational problems but also supports continuous learning and organizational resilience (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Detert & Burris, 2007). Despite this established importance, many organizations still struggle to operationalize structures and leadership practices that encourage meaningful voice. Employee voice theoretically supports organizational innovation, problem solving, and safety compliance. Yet in practice, employees often stay silent due to fear of retaliation, organizational politics, lack of feedback mechanisms, or weak leadership support (Morrison, 2014; Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Such silence can create "organizational mindlessness" where vital information is withheld, potentially putting organizational performance at risk (Milliken et al., 2003). At Ndorama Petrochemical Company, Port Harcourt, preliminary observations and internal reports suggest that employees may be reluctant to express concerns about operational hazards, managerial decisions, or workplace safety issues. The presence of hierarchical leadership structures and limited formal communication channels could further hinder upward voice. There is a need, therefore, to empirically investigate the factors that facilitate or constrain employee voice and speak-up behaviour within the organization. This study, therefore, examines the factors that promote or hinder employee voice and speak-up behaviour at Ndorama Petrochemical Company. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. Determine the influence of leadership openness on employee speak-up behavior.
- ii. Evaluate the relationship between organizational climate and employees' willingness to speak up.
- iii. Identify barriers to effective employee voice.
- iv. Assess possible impact of employee voice on organizational effectiveness



Source: Liang, Farh & Farh (2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is anchored on two theories examined below:

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) was initially conceptualized by George Homans (1958) and later expanded by Blau (1964) to organizational contexts. The theory posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process where individuals weigh the costs and benefits of their interactions. In the workplace, employees engage in exchanges with supervisors, colleagues, and the organization itself. When employees perceive positive treatment, such as recognition, support, or fairness, they feel a sense of obligation and are more likely to reciprocate through constructive behaviors, including speaking up with suggestions or concerns. Conversely, if employees perceive inequity or lack of support, they may withhold input to protect themselves, highlighting the transactional nature of organizational relationships.

Applied to employee voice, SET helps explain the motivational mechanism behind speak-up behavior. Employees evaluate whether their voice will be heard and valued, and whether contributing ideas or raising concerns will yield personal or organizational benefits. For example, if a manager fosters trust and provides feedback, employees may feel encouraged to engage in promotive or prohibitive voice behaviors. On the other hand, the absence of reciprocity or negative reactions to past suggestions can lead to organizational silence. Researchers such as Shore et al.

(2006) and Rupp et al. (2006) have used SET to demonstrate that high-quality exchanges between employees and supervisors significantly enhance proactive communication, highlighting the theory's relevance in understanding voice and silence in organizations.

Voice and Silence Theory

The Voice and Silence Theory in organizational behavior explores why employees choose to express concerns, suggestions, or criticisms—or alternatively, why they remain silent. Morrison and Milliken (2000) formalized the concept of organizational silence, emphasizing that silence often results from fear of negative consequences, social pressures, or the belief that speaking up will not lead to meaningful change. Within this framework, employee voice is categorized into promotive voice, aimed at suggesting improvements, and prohibitive voice, focused on preventing harmful outcomes. The theory suggests that voice is not only an individual decision but also heavily shaped by organizational context, culture, and leadership behaviors.

Voice and Silence Theory provide a critical lens for understanding the risks and barriers associated with speaking up. Employees weigh potential outcomes—such as retaliation, social isolation, or career stagnation—against the perceived value of raising issues. The theory has been widely applied in empirical research to link organizational practices, psychological safety, and managerial openness to employee voice behavior. Studies by Detert and Burris (2007) and Vogel et al. (2016) demonstrate that when organizational climates are supportive, employees are more likely to overcome fear and engage in constructive communication, whereas hostile or indifferent environments promote silence, reinforcing the cyclical nature of voice suppression.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Employee Voice

Employee voice refers to the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions intended to improve organizational functioning (Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, 2014). Voice behavior is proactive and change-oriented, distinguishing it from routine communication. It enables organizations to identify operational inefficiencies, safety hazards, and ethical issues before they escalate into crises. Earlier conceptualizations by James A. LePine and Linn Van Dyne (1998) described voice as promote behavior aimed at constructive change. Subsequent research expanded the concept to include both promote voice (suggestions for improvement) and prohibitive voice (raising concerns about harmful practices) (Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012). Research consistently demonstrates that voice behavior enhances organizational innovation, team learning, and performance outcomes (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014). However, voice involves interpersonal risk because employees may fear negative consequences such as retaliation or damaged relationships with supervisors (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003).

Speak-Up Behavior

Speak-up behavior is closely related to employee voice but often emphasizes the expression of safety concerns, ethical issues, or work-related problems (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). In high-risk industries such as petrochemicals, speak-up behavior is particularly important because operational errors can have severe safety and environmental consequences. Speak-up behavior is influenced by leadership style, perceived fairness, trust, and psychological safety (Liang et al., 2012). When employees perceive that management is receptive and supportive, they are more likely to communicate concerns openly. Conversely, authoritarian leadership and punitive climates, which in some cases lead to job insecurity, denial of promotion and its attendant benefits, etc., may suppress voice and encourage silence.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Amy Edmondson, 1999). It allows employees to speak up without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or negative career consequences. Empirical studies show that psychological safety is strongly associated with voice behavior, team learning, and employee engagement (Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2017). In organizations where employees feel psychologically safe, upward communication increases, and innovation improves. Psychological safety is shaped by leadership openness, fairness, respect, and supportive communication systems (Detert & Burris, 2007). Thus, it serves as a mediating mechanism between leadership practices and employee voice.

Leadership Openness

Leadership openness refers to the extent to which leaders encourage, listen to, and act upon employee input. Leaders who demonstrate approachability, transparency, and inclusiveness foster higher levels of trust and voice behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007). Transformational and inclusive leadership styles have been positively linked to employee voice because they promote empowerment and reduce fear of retaliation (Bakker, 2015). When leaders create open channels of communication and provide constructive feedback, employees perceive that their contributions are valued.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate represents employee's shared perceptions of organizational laid down protocols, policies, practices, and procedures (Benjamin Schneider, Ehrhart & Macey, 2013). A supportive organizational climate promotes trust, fairness, and collaboration, which enhance voice behavior. It is necessary to state that an environment, work space, that supports openness and participatory decision-making strengthens employees' confidence in speaking up, while climates marked by fear or excessive hierarchy discourage upward communication (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Employee voice and speak-up behavior are critical constructs in organizational behavior research, referring to the discretionary communication of ideas, concerns, and suggestions aimed at improving organizational functioning (Morrison, 2011). Voice behaviour encompasses both promotive (constructive suggestions) and prohibitive (raising concerns about harmful practices) dimensions (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). In high-risk industries such as petrochemicals, where safety and operational efficiency are paramount, the capacity for employees to speak up is particularly vital (Detert & Burris, 2007). Prior empirical studies locate employee voice as a function of individual, relational, and organizational factors, including psychological safety, leadership style, and perceived support (Edmondson, 1999; Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012). However, these studies predominantly examine public sector or Western corporate settings, with limited empirical evidence from large petrochemical firms in developing economies like Nigeria.

A substantive body of research has demonstrated that employee voice is positively associated with organizational outcomes such as innovation, safety performance, and job satisfaction (Liang et al.,

Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

2012; Parker et al., 2010). Leadership behaviors, especially transformational and inclusive leadership, have been shown to foster speak-up behavior by empowering employees and reducing fear of negative repercussions (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Psychological safety, the shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, consistently emerges as a robust predictor of employee voice (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In petrochemical and high-hazard industries, studies have underscored how safety climate and supervisory support influence workers' willingness to report safety concerns, positioning voice behavior as essential for accident prevention (Zohar & Luria, 2005).

While the existing literature establishes key antecedents and outcomes of employee voice, its application to petrochemical companies has been uneven. Most empirical investigations focus on manufacturing firms in Europe, North America, or East Asia, often neglecting organizational and cultural dynamics prevalent in African industrial settings (Mensah & Adomako, 2017). A few studies in Ghana and South Africa report that hierarchical structures, low empowerment, and fear of retaliation suppress voice behavior in industrial organizations (Boateng et al., 2018). However, these studies typically aggregate industrial and service sectors, thereby under-representing large, complex petrochemical companies where safety imperatives heighten the stakes of voice suppression or facilitation. There is also a paucity of longitudinal or mixed-methods studies that integrate employees lived experiences with measurable organizational outcomes.

The current study at Ndorama Petrochemical Company seeks to address these empirical limitations by providing focused evidence on voice behavior within a high-hazard, Nigerian petrochemical context. Specifically, the literature lacks context-specific investigations that:

- i. Examine how local organizational culture and national cultural norms influence employee voice,
- ii. Integrate both promotive and prohibitive voice behavior in relation to safety outcomes, and
- iii. Assess the interplay between leadership, psychological safety, and structural constraints unique to large petrochemical firms in sub-Saharan Africa.

Existing studies often treat voice as a one-dimensional construct or focus narrowly on formal reporting systems, whereas this study adopts a multidimensional framework reflecting diverse forms of employee communications.

By empirically investigating employee voice at Ndorama Petrochemical Company, the current study advances theory by expanding the contextual generalizability of voice behaviour models beyond Western and public sector samples. It contributes to practice by identifying organizational levers, such as leader inclusivity, safety climate enhancement, and communication channels that can strengthen speak-up behavior in high-risk industrial settings. Furthermore, the study's mixed-methods design responds to calls for richer, contextually grounded research that captures the complexity of voice dynamics in developing economies (Mensah & Casimir, 2019). In doing so, it fills an important gap in the literature and provides a foundation for future comparative studies cross industrial sectors and cultural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The descriptive design was considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic collection of data from a defined population to examine relationships among variables without manipulating them (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill,

2019). The study employed a quantitative approach, as it involved the use of structured questionnaires and statistical techniques to test hypotheses and determine relationships between leadership openness, psychological safety, organizational climate, and employee voice behaviour. The population of the study comprised all employees of Ndorama Petrochemical Company, Port Harcourt, across various departments including production, maintenance, administration, safety, and finance. The target population included both junior and senior staff members, as employee voice behavior may vary across hierarchical levels.

Inferential Analysis

Hypothesis Testing

The study tested four hypotheses using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis at a 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$)

H01: Leadership openness has no significant influence on employee speak-up behaviour.

S/No.	Variable	r	p-value	Decision
1.	Leadership openness and speak-up	0.62	0.001	Significant → H01 rejected

Interpretation: Leadership openness has a significant positive effect on employee speak-up behaviour.

Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

Hypothesis 2 (H02): Psychological safety → Employee voice

S/No.	Variable	r	p-value	Decision
1.	Psychological safety & Employee voice	0.58	0.002	Significant rejected →H02

Interpretation: Psychological safety significantly enhances employee voice behaviour.

Hypothesis 3 (H03): Organizational climate → Employee voice

S/No.	Variable	r	p-value	Decision
1.	Organizational climate and employee voice	0.55	0.003	Significant rejected →H03

Interpretation: Supportive organizational climate encourages employee voice.

Hypothesis 4 (H04): Employee voice → Organizational effectiveness

S/No.	Variable	r	p-value	Decision
1.	Employee voice- organizational effectiveness	0.55	0.003	Significant rejected →H04

Interpretation: Employee voice positively impacts organizational effectiveness.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study strongly support the argument that employee voice is influenced by relational and organizational climate factors. The positive correlation between psychological safety and voice behaviour confirms earlier findings by Edmondson (1999). Employees at Ndorama Petrochemical Company are more likely to speak up when they feel protected from interpersonal risk. This suggests that leadership behaviour plays a central role in shaping communication patterns. However, the presence of silence among a significant minority shows that psychological safety is not evenly distributed. Therefore, while theory is supported, its application remains partial.

The regression results demonstrated that psychological safety was the strongest predictor of voice behaviour. This aligns with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which emphasizes reciprocity in workplace relationships. When employees perceive supportive treatment, they reciprocate by offering constructive input. In the case of Ndorama Petrochemical Company, supportive supervisors appear to encourage open dialogue. Yet, the unexplained variance in the model suggests that reciprocity alone does not fully determine voice behaviour. Broader economic and cultural factors may influence employee decisions to speak up.

Leadership openness also emerged as a significant predictor of voice. This finding is consistent with research by Detert and Burris (2007), who found that transformational leadership enhances upward communication. Leaders who actively solicit feedback reduce the psychological barriers to speaking up. At Ndorama, interview responses confirmed that open-door policies increased employee confidence. However, openness without consistent action may weaken trust. Employees who perceive that suggestions are ignored may eventually withdraw participation.

Organizational justice had a moderate but significant influence on voice behaviour. This supports Organizational Justice Theory (Colquitt et al., 2001), which argues that fairness perceptions shape employee attitudes and behaviours. When employees perceive fairness in procedures, they are more willing to contribute ideas. However, the finding that 39% of employees doubt management follow-through indicates procedural gaps. Justice perceptions must be reinforced by visible action. Without implementation, fairness becomes symbolic rather than practical.

The study also revealed departmental differences in voice behaviour. Operational staff demonstrated higher voice levels than administrative staff. This finding suggests that risk exposure increases motivation to report concerns. In high-risk units, silence can have immediate safety consequences. Therefore, employees may feel a stronger moral obligation to speak up. However, the lower voice levels in administrative units suggest that voice culture is uneven across the organization.

The persistence of silence among 31% of employees highlights the complexity of voice behaviour. This supports Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003), who argue that fear and futility are primary drivers of organizational silence. Employees may calculate the personal cost of speaking up. In a region with economic uncertainty, job security concerns may discourage risk-taking. Thus,

Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

contextual economic factors interact with internal organizational variables. This interaction may explain the unexplained variance in the regression model.

The influence of cultural hierarchy, as explained by Power Distance Theory (Hofstede, 1980), may also contribute to hesitation in challenging authority. In settings where respect for seniority is deeply valued, employees may avoid direct confrontation. Even when formal voice systems exist, cultural norms can limit their use. However, the moderate overall voice score suggests that culture does not completely suppress communication. Leadership practices may mitigate high power- distance effects. Therefore, organizational initiatives can reshape cultural constraints over time. An important implication of the findings is that voice mechanisms must go beyond policy documentation. The presence of reporting systems alone does not guarantee active participation. Employees evaluate not only whether they can speak but also whether speaking produces change. This aligns with the concept of voice efficacy. When employees see results from their input, their confidence increases. Without visible outcomes, participation may decline.

The findings also raise critical questions about balancing openness and authority. While encouraging voice improves safety and innovation, excessive or poorly managed voice may disrupt workflow. Managers must maintain discipline in high-risk operations. Therefore, structured voice channels may be more effective than unregulated debate. This balance is particularly important in petrochemical environments where operational decisions often require speed and precision.

In summary, the discussion confirms that employee voice at Ndorama Petrochemical Company is shaped by psychological safety, leadership openness, organizational justice, cultural norms, and economic context. The results support major theoretical perspectives while highlighting practical limitations. Voice culture is developing but not yet fully institutionalized. Sustained managerial commitment is required to reduce silence and strengthen trust.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated employee voice and speak-up behaviour, focusing on the influence of leadership openness, psychological safety, and organizational climate on employees' willingness to communicate ideas, concerns, and suggestions. The study found a significant positive relationship between leadership openness and employee speak-up behaviour. This implies that employees are more likely to voice concerns and suggestions when they perceive leaders as approachable, receptive, and supportive. This finding aligns with Detert & Burris (2007), who found that leadership openness encourages constructive voice behaviour. It also supports Liang et al. (2012), indicating that perceived managerial support motivates employees to engage in upward communication. Based on the foregoing findings, the study, therefore, conclude that leadership openness and good organizational climate are critical determinant of employee speak-up behaviour; employees are more likely to communicate freely when leaders are approachable and receptive. Psychological safety significantly influences employee voice; in that, employees need safe environments to express concerns without fear and ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness, improving innovation, safety, and decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study offers the following recommendations based on its findings:

1. Managers should adopt participative and inclusive leadership styles, providing regular opportunities for employees to share ideas and concerns.
2. Organizations should create policies and training programs that reinforce trust, non- retaliation, and supportive communication to encourage employees to speak up.

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Employee Voice and Speaking-Up Behaviour: A Case Study of Ndorama Petrochemical Company Ltd, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

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