

# **“New” UROP Proposal**

## **Title of Proposal**

Voice in Saudi Arabia, the measure of voice within Saudi Organizations

## **Problem/Topic of Research or Creative Work**

At work, employees often confront situations where they must choose: should they speak up about a potential problem, or remain silent? When they do choose to speak up, employee voice can be powerful and affect outcomes at all levels of the organization, including job attitudes, group innovation, and organizational performance (Brinsfield, Edwards, & Greenberg, 2009; Klaas, Olson-Buchanan, & Ward, 2012). Voice is a discretionary behavior through which employees communicate ideas, suggestions, or concerns about work-related issues to improve unit or organizational functioning (Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Promotive voice refers to offering suggestions for improvement, while prohibitive voice raises concerns over bad or unethical work practices (Liang et al. 2012, Morrison 2014). Voice is an important potential source of learning and innovation, that helps organizations adapt and survive in rapidly changing business conditions (Perlow and Williams 2003, Morrison 2011). When members are not willing to voice, the potential contributions of their diverse insights and expertise are lost. Employee voice is also key to ethical decision-making, as it is one pathway through which employees may engage in proorganizational dissent (Miceli & Near, 1992; Miceli et al., 2008).

Despite the wealth of research on voice in Western nations such as the United States, there has been little research on the voice in the Saudi Arabian cultural context. Voice in Saudi Arabia is likely to be different than in the West, because Saudi Arabia differs on several cultural dimensions by being high in power distance, cultural tightness, and context. As such, measures and conclusions about Voice in the existing literature are insufficient to understand voice behavior in Saudi Arabia. To address this important gap in the literature, we will utilize current research and survey collection to understand antecedents and forms of voice in Saudi Arabia. This data will allow us to compare and explain differences between voice in the Saudi and American cultural contexts. These results will be an important first step into voice research in Saudi Arabia and will provide important lessons on effective dissent in the Saudi work environment.

## **Relevant Background/Literature Review**

Research suggests that willingness to voice is heavily influenced by contextual factors, such as organizational culture and organizational norms (Morrison, 2011; Russell & Russell, 1992), which inform what behaviors are appropriate in the workplace setting (Whiting et al., 2012). As Kwon, Farndale, (2020) detail, "the combination of organizational and societal-level norms on voice signals occurs largely through the effect that cultural values have on how management perceives employee voice, which is also critical for understanding the organizational context experienced by employees (Kwon & Farndale, 2020, p. 6)". Because organizational culture and norms are heavily influenced by national culture (Kwon, Farndale, 2020), it is inappropriate to assume that research on voice in one cultural context (e.g. the West) will also apply to other contexts (e.g. Saudi Arabia). For example, cultural dimensions such as power distance- which is higher in Saudi Arabia than in the United States and other Western nations- could signal that a low-power employee voicing to a higher-power manager is considered improper (Kwon, Farndale, 2020).

## **Specific Activities to be Undertaken and Timeframe for Each Activity**

For this project we will be collecting data from Saudi Arabia and coding it to better understand how employees voice in this particular cultural context. We will put together an online survey in Arabic that can be distributed through online message boards, emails, and employee networks within Saudi Arabia. This survey will contain existing survey items measuring Voice, known precursors to voice in other contexts such as Psychological Safety and Impact, and open-ended questions where participants can freely describe strategies they use to voice in the workplace. We will be seeking data from 50 employees, though we will consider a larger sample if the opportunity arises. The timeline for the project stage is as follows:

**January 10 - 15:** Survey translation (English to Arabic) & set-up: 15 hours

**January 10 - 29:** coordination & communication with organizational research partners in Saudi Arabia - 10 hours

**February 1 - 10:** data posting, collecting, and monitoring - 10 hours

**February 10- 28:** Translation of open-ended responses to English - 40 hours

**March:** Qualitative coding of open ended responses - 30 hours

**April:** Writing and reporting findings- 15 hours

**Total estimated time: 120 hours**

## **Relationship of the Proposed Work to the Expertise of the Faculty**

### **Mentor**

This project builds on Dr. XXX's past research on cultural differences, power, and employee voice, by examining voice in the understudied Saudi Arabian cultural context. Dr.

XXX has previously overseen research in several other Middle Eastern countries (e.g. Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon), for a project measuring cross-cultural patterns in group stereotyping (Durante et al., 2017). More recently, Dr. XXX has begun collaborating with other researchers at the University of Utah, Drs. XX and XX, to study contextual factors that influence employee voice, such as racial microaggressions and peer incivility. The current project will continue this line of work, by examining how a different contextual factor- the Saudi cultural context- impacts when, why, and how employees voice at work. This research takes advantage of Dr. XXX's expertise in culture and voice, and my in-depth cultural knowledge of Saudi Arabia as a Saudi native, to advance the field's understanding of voice behavior in non-Western cultural contexts. We contribute to diversity and inclusion in the field of management, both by building and utilizing diverse research teams, and by exploring workplace voice behavior in previously understudied and underrepresented populations.

## **Relationship of the Proposed Work to Student's Future Goals**

From a young age, I've always dreamed of having an impact on my community. My family is a great inspiration to my journey in life; I looked up to my siblings and their social impact. With the support of my family and Dr. XXX, I want to pursue a Ph.D. in cross-cultural management and communication, in order to help bridge cultural divides in our everchanging and intertwined global economy. I'm fortunate to be bilingual and bicultural in both the Saudi and American cultures, and this is an advantage that I would like to utilize in this project and my future graduate studies. The UROP experience will be an important growth opportunity for me to learn about conducting ethical research in cross-cultural settings, before I enroll in a graduate program. In addition, past research experience is a necessary component of a strong PhD program application, so participating in the UROP program is an important step towards my educational and professional goals. This research project will enable me to understand my culture more and to be a part of the growth and

development of Saudi Arabia. I'm saddened that there is little to no research about Saudi, and I hope to be a change in that respect.

## **References**

- Morrison, E. W. (2011) 'Employee Voice Behavior: Integration and Directions for Future Research', *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 373-412.
- Van Dyne, L. and LePine, J. A. (1998) 'Helping and voice extra-role behaviors: Evidence of construct and predictive validity', *Academy of management journal*, 41(1), 108-119.
- Morrison, E. W. (2014) 'Employee voice and silence', *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 173-197.
- Kwon, B. and Farndale, E.(2020) 'Employee voice viewed through a cross-cultural lens.' *Human resource management review*, 30(1) p100653