

# The Usefulness of Tenacity in Spurring Problem-Focused Voice: The Moderating Roles of Workplace Adversity

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## Abstract

**Purpose** Drawing from conservation of resources theory and affective events theory, this article examines the hitherto unexplored relationship between employees' tenacity levels and problem-focused voice behavior, as well as how this relationship may be augmented when employees encounter adversity in relationships with peers or in the organizational climate in general.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** The study draws on quantitative data collected through a survey administered to employees and their supervisors in a large manufacturing organization.

**Findings** Tenacity increases the likelihood of speaking up about problem areas, and this relationship is strongest when peer relationships are characterized by low levels of goal congruence and trust (relational adversity) or when the organization does not support change (organizational adversity). The augmenting effect of organizational adversity on the usefulness of tenacity is particularly salient when it combines with high relational adversity, which underscores the critical role of tenacity for spurring problem-focused voice behavior when employees negatively

appraise different facets of their work environment simultaneously.

**Implications** The results inform organizations that the allocation of personal energy to reporting organizational problems is perceived as particularly useful by employees when they encounter significant adversity in their work environments.

**Originality/Value** This study extends research on voice behavior by providing a better understanding of the likelihood that employees speak up about problem areas, according to their levels of tenacity, and explicating when this influence of tenacity tends to be more prominent.

**Keywords** Voice behavior · Tenacity · Workplace adversity · Conservation of resources theory · Affective events theory

## Introduction

Employees can contribute to organizational effectiveness through voice behaviors, such that they speak up about how the current organizational situation can be improved (Van Dyne et al. 2003; Venkataramani and Tangirala 2010). Voice behaviors are useful for both the organization and the employees themselves, in that they may fuel employees' satisfaction and motivation (Greenberger and Strasser 1986; Parker 1993), contribute to their career development (Siebert et al. 2001), and enhance their ability to meet their job requirements (Fuller et al. 2007; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). For example, with problem-focused or prohibitive voice, the employee reports on specific problem areas or failures in the organization (Liang et al. 2012), which in turn implies the need to find solutions to current organizational issues. Such voice behaviors have clear benefits,

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but speaking up about specific problems also may be perceived by others as disruptive or upsetting (Milliken et al. 2003; Van Dyne et al. 1995), especially if the changes recommended through this voice behavior threaten the privileges that other organizational members currently enjoy (LePine and Van Dyne 1998).

To encourage problem-focused voice behaviors and ensure that they can overcome the potential barriers to change, a key catalyst may be the tenacity levels that employees exhibit. *Tenacity* is a personal trait that reflects employees' sustained allocation of goal-directed energy to work tasks (Baum and Locke 2004). The perseverance and enhanced energy levels that characterize tenacious people can lead to several positive outcomes, such as effective leadership (Bass and Stogdill 1990; House and Shamir 1993), the achievement of growth-oriented goals (Baum and Locke 2004), and enhanced sales performance (Avila and Fern 1986). To the best of our knowledge though, no studies address how tenacity might influence the likelihood that employees engage in energy-consuming, problem-focused voice behaviors. This omission has important practical relevance, because it prevents organizations from understanding how the tenacity of their employees might produce the resolve necessary to enable them to pinpoint problem areas *and* withstand sustained resistance to or criticism of their voice behaviors (Van Dyne et al. 2003). Furthermore, tenacity has some overlap with the personality dimension of conscientiousness, which stimulates voice behaviors (Crant et al. 2011; LePine and Van Dyne 2001, 1998), though it differs in that it excludes the short-term dependability aspect of conscientiousness (Crant et al. 2011) and focuses instead on employees' persistent, long-term efforts to undertake challenging work activities (Baum and Locke 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, this study seeks to identify both how and when employees' tenacity enhances their propensity to engage in problem-focused voice behaviors. To anchor our arguments, we draw from two core theories: conservation of resources (COR) theory, which uses anticipated resource gains or losses to explain work behaviors (Hobfoll

1989, 2001), and affective events theory (AET), which acknowledges the influence of the negative feelings that employees experience when they appraise their work environment as unfavorable (Weiss and Beal 2005). According to COR theory, employees engage in positive work behaviors, such as voice, when they can leverage their personal resources to obtain additional resources through these behaviors (Boon and Kalshoven 2014; Hobfoll 2001). Tenacity is one such personal resource, in that it reflects the discretionary energy employees can draw from to achieve valuable, long-term work goals (Baum and Locke 2004). In COR theory, the achievement of resource or performance gains through positive work behaviors is particularly useful when employees experience adverse work conditions that seem likely to generate future resource losses (Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). Similarly, AET suggests that the allocation of personal resources to performance-enhancing work behaviors will have greater anticipated value when employees appraise their work environment more negatively and fear that it undermines their ability to meet their job requirements (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). With this theoretical foundation, we investigate how two aspects of workplace adversity—a relational aspect marked by low goal congruence and trust in peer interactions (Leana and van Buren 1999) and an organizational aspect manifested in an organizational climate that opposes change (Scott and Bruce 1994)—might invigorate the positive effect of employees' tenacity on problem-focused voice behavior. The positive relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice seemingly should be stronger to the extent that employees believe their colleagues have different goals or cannot be trusted and when the organizational climate is rigid and not open to new ideas.

In turn, we contribute to extant voice research by investigating an unexplored driver of employee voice (tenacity) and explicating when tenacity is most likely to spur voice. According to the existing exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect framework (Hirschman 1970; Rusbult et al. 1988), voice is just one of four possible behavioral reactions to difficult work conditions. Exit implies leaving the organization, by searching for a different job or quitting; loyalty means passive waiting and hoping for improvement; and neglect captures reduced interest or effort. Compared with loyalty and neglect, voice is an active instead of passive response, and compared with exit and neglect, voice is a constructive instead of destructive response (Si and Li 2012). The active, constructive nature of voice makes it a particularly interesting type of behavior, for which high tenacity levels might be instrumental. Furthermore, previous research acknowledges that personal characteristics, such as personality traits (Crant et al. 2011) or duty and achievement orientations (Tangirala et al. 2013), influence

<sup>1</sup> Conscientious people focus on controlling the immediate, short-term outcomes of their actions; perseverance and the long-term focus of tenacity thus are qualities that conscientious people may or may not have (Duckworth et al. 2007). Tenacity is closer to the concept of grit, which refers to people's perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al. 2007). In describing the effect of grit on academic performance, Duckworth et al. (2007) highlight the relevance of Baum and Locke's (2004) tenacity scale for conceptualizing grit; they chose to develop a new measure so that the concept was directly applicable to the adolescents they studied. However, this previous research shows that grit has incremental predictive validity, beyond conscientiousness, for explaining outcomes such as work engagement (Suzuki et al. 2015), educational achievement (Duckworth and Quinn 2009), and psychical exercise (Duckworth et al. 2007).

employee voice in general, but no studies investigate the role of employees' tendency to allocate sustained energy to work tasks (tenacity) in activating *problem-focused* voice behaviors, irrespective of the challenges they might invoke. This omission is significant in light of the strong resistance that reports of organizational malfunctioning likely generate among other organizational members (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Milliken et al. 2003). Our focus on problem-focused voice thus aligns with calls to devote attention to the *type* of information conveyed through voice efforts (Morrison 2011)—in this case, information that brings specific organizational problems into the open instead of focusing on organizational improvements in general (Liang et al. 2012).

We further postulate that the salience of this positive effect of tenacity for stimulating problem-focused voice behavior is particularly high when employees confront significant adversity in their work environment, whether due to poor peer relations (Leana and van Buren 1999) or a rigid organizational climate (Scott and Bruce 1994). These forms of adversity are manifested in three moderators—goal congruence, trust, and organizational support for change, or their lack—that together provide a parsimonious, comprehensive view of how employees' negative appraisal of their work environment may increase their perceptions of the usefulness of leveraging their tenacity to engage in problem-focused voice (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). The glue that binds the three moderators is that any deficiency in one of them is likely to instill significant uncertainty in employees, in terms of their ability to perform their job tasks successfully (De Clercq et al. 2013; Yuan and Woodman 2010). We also extend this view to consider how the *simultaneous* interplay of the different sources of workplace adversity, such as relational and organizational adversity, might invigorate the value of tenacity—an approach that has received little attention in previous COR (Hobfoll 2011; Wright and Hobfoll 2004) or AET (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996) applications. That is, we postulate that the invigorating effect of organizational adversity (limited organizational support for change) on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice is particularly strong when employees *cannot* rely on supportive peer relationships (marked by goal congruence and trust).

Finally, by investigating the usefulness of tenacity for spurring problem-focused voice behaviors in unfavorable work situations, we extend previous research that has focused on the *direct* effects of workplace adversity on positive work behaviors—such as perceptions of unfairness that increase voice due to the desire to express concerns about unfairness (Goldberg et al. 2011) or to restore equity following injustice (Avery and Quinones 2002)—and on negative work behaviors, as reflected in findings of a

positive relationship between perceptions of injustice and counterproductive work behaviors (Jones 2009). With our approach, organizations can identify the circumstances in which employees are most likely to apply their personal energy to activities that can resolve organizational malfunctions (Morrison 2011). The proposed invigorating effect of workplace adversity on the relationship of tenacity with problem-focused voice thus offers the insight that anticipated solutions to identified problem areas, achieved through problem-focused voice, can help tenacious employees address the negative feelings caused by adversity (Hobfoll and Shirom 2000; Weiss and Beal 2005).

### Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Problem-focused voice behaviors can benefit the organization and the idea proponents. For example, bringing negative situations into the open can stimulate organizational learning (Argyris and Schon 1978) and change (Morrison and Milliken 2000). For idea proponents, identifying and speaking up about problem areas can add to their work motivation (Parker 1993), increase their career progress (Seibert et al. 2001), and contribute to their ability to meet performance requirements (Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Despite these positive outcomes, such voice behaviors also are challenging, so idea proponents may require sustained energy to engage in them (Liang et al. 2012). For example, organizational leaders may disagree about whether the issues raised present actual problems or whether the voice is well intentioned (Maynes and Podsakoff 2014), and they may discard employees' input out of fear of a loss of power when the problems are tied directly to them (Morrison 2011; Van Dyne et al. 1995). Speaking up about problem areas also can damage idea proponents' own standing in the organization, to the extent that their activities violate current organizational rules and norms (Milliken et al. 2003).

Because energy is needed to address these challenges, it is important to understand how employees' personal energy reservoirs may stimulate their propensity to speak out about problems (Hobfoll 1989). Previous research on the role of individual factors in spurring voice has examined the Big Five personality traits, indicating positive effects of conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness but negative effects of neuroticism (LePine and Van Dyne 2001), as well as traits such as duty and achievement orientation (Tangirala et al. 2013). We focus instead on employees' tenacity or "sustained goal-directed action and energy even when faced with obstacles" (Baum and Locke 2004, p. 588), because of its likely benefits for prompting such behaviors. In leadership research, tenacity spurs successful leaders (Bass and Stogdill 1990; House and Shamir 1993), and in entrepreneurship literature, Baum and Locke

(2004) show that higher tenacity leads to greater venture growth, by stimulating entrepreneurs' new resource skills, self-efficacy, and vision communication. Tenacity also reduces investors' perceptions of the risk that entrepreneurs will not use their funds effectively (Allison et al. 2013). Shifting these findings to a different realm, we predict that tenacity might have a critical influence on the likelihood that employees voice their opinions about organizational problems too.

Moreover, we postulate that the gains that tenacious employees expect from their problem-focused voice behaviors should be particularly strong when they experience significant workplace adversity in undertaking their job activities. This invigorating effect of workplace adversity on the tenacity–problem-focused voice relationship echoes the COR theory argument that resource or performance gains, accumulated through positive work behaviors, are particularly useful when those gains help protect employees against the threat of resource loss due to adverse work conditions (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). Similarly, according to AET, the allocation of personal energy to performance-enhancing work behaviors, such as voice, can be instrumental for countering negative feelings that employees experience through their exposure to unfavorable work conditions (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Thus, AET points to various negative emotions resulting from adverse work conditions, such as frustration, anger, or guilt (Weiss et al. 1999); we focus on the *fear* they may generate in employees, associated with the difficulty of achieving adequate job performance.

In turn, we consider that workplace adversity may stem from two main sources: relational and organizational. First, relational adversity is the extent to which employees *cannot* draw from supportive relationships with peers to meet their performance requirements. We consider both cognitive and affective aspects (Leana and van Buren 1999). A lack of goal congruence among employees reflects the extent to which they have different goals or ideas about their organization's future (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). In the presence of low goal congruence, employees focus on their own priorities, with little incentive to cooperate or share their knowledge bases with one another (Pinto et al. 1993; Song and Song 2010). The affective component instead pertains to a lack of trust among employees (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). If peer relationships are characterized by low levels of trust, employees believe their colleagues will not keep their promises and would take advantage of them if doing so met their own interests (Rousseau et al. 1998). Second, organizational adversity is the extent to which employees believe organizational decision making is rigid and not open to change. It may create negative feelings in employees, because it hampers their flexibility to meet their job requirements and tends to

be perceived as limiting their personal development or career prospects (Scott and Bruce 1994; Yuan and Woodman 2010).

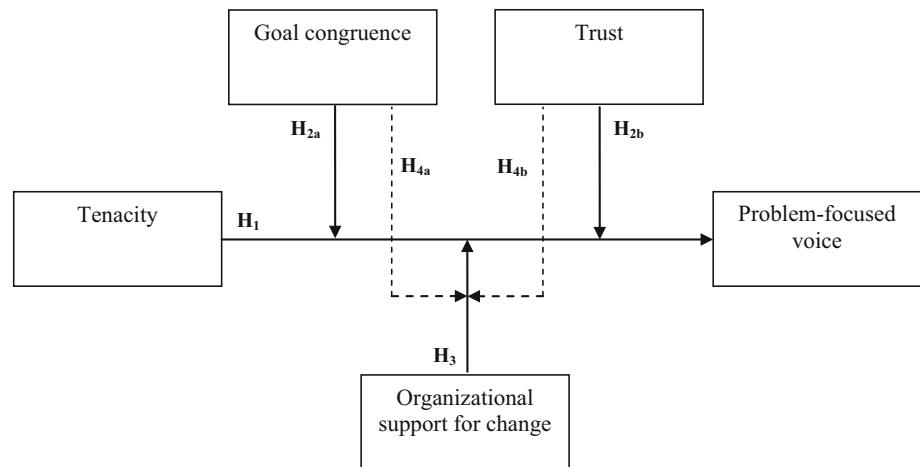
Our theoretical framework and its underlying hypotheses are in Fig. 1. The baseline relationship pertains to the positive link between employees' tenacity and problem-focused voice behavior. We posit that this link also is augmented by the three sources of adversity: limited goal congruence or trust in peer relationships and limited organizational support for change.

## Hypotheses

### Tenacity and Problem-Focused Voice

We predict a positive relationship between employees' tenacity levels and their propensity to speak up about problem areas. Tenacity should increase employees' propensity to speak up about organizational problems, because they expect their allocation of personal energy to behaviors that lead to appropriate solutions to generate performance gains, in the form of an enhanced ability to meet their job requirements (Baum and Locke 2004; Hobfoll 2001). Moreover, reporting problem areas requires significant efforts from employees (Morrison 2011), which can be facilitated by greater tenacity, because this personal resource increases the ability to allocate sustained personal energy to challenging work tasks (Baum and Locke 2004). In particular, voice behaviors prompt organizational changes, particularly if they entail corrections of organizational failures, so they may provoke resistance from other organizational members who feel threatened by the changes (Liang et al. 2012; Van Dyne et al. 2003). In turn, employees' tenacity should prevent them from stopping their voice behaviors, even if they anticipate that this identification of problem areas might be met with skepticism (Baum and Locke 2004). Thus, employees with high tenacity likely persevere and speak up, despite resistance.

Conversely, employees with low tenacity levels may not possess the energy needed to undertake the challenging task of speaking up about problem situations (Baum and Locke 2004). They are less able to cope with the anticipated negative reactions to their reports of problem areas, which undermines their motivation to voice their opinions (Liang et al. 2012; Van Dyne et al. 1995). They allocate their energy to easier activities instead of investing significant time to address the difficult, negative situations (Milliken et al. 2003; Quinn et al. 2012). In short, with low tenacity, employees may not have the necessary energy or motivation to speak up about problem areas and likely fear the severe skepticism with which their opinions might be received.

**Fig. 1** Conceptual model

**Hypothesis 1** There is a positive relationship between employees' tenacity and problem-focused voice.

### Moderating Role of Relational Adversity

The anticipated usefulness of tenacity for spurring problem-focused voice behaviors may depend on the adversity that employees experience in their relationships with peers. Such relational adversity can be cognitive, such as when employees have different goals, or affective, as when employees believe their colleagues cannot be trusted (Leana and van Buren 1999). These two conditions increase the threat of future resource losses and the fear that employees cannot meet their job requirements (Hobfoll 1989), because they diminish high-quality knowledge sharing among organizational peers and the opportunities for employees to draw from their peers' expertise to enhance their own performance (De Clercq et al. 2013; Wells and Kipnis 2001). Yet tenacious employees should be more strongly motivated to apply their personal energy to speak up about problem areas, in that the anticipated solutions (i.e., performance gains) might compensate for the knowledge deficiencies associated with poor interpersonal relationships (Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). Thus, following the logic of COR theory, we predict that the usefulness of tenacity for speaking up about problem areas increases to the extent that relational adversity, a critical source of resource loss, is high.

The positive interaction between tenacity and relational adversity in predicting problem-focused voice is also consistent with AET (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), in that the allocation of personal energy to speaking up about problem areas may appear helpful for *improving* the quality of poor peer relationships. For example, the concern that colleagues may have conflicting ideas about where the organization is heading strategically or that others might take undue credit for offered contributions may stimulate

tenacious employees to engage their peers directly to find a collective solution that addresses these unfavorable situations (Baum and Locke 2004; Morrison and Milliken 2000). The more negatively employees appraise their relationships with organizational peers, due to either incongruent goals or limited trust, the more valuable it becomes to apply significant energy to share concerns about problem areas, to find adequate solutions to this relational adversity (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Conversely, in the absence of relational adversity, tenacious employees perceive less need to apply their energy in engaging colleagues to find solutions to adverse work relationships, so the perceived value of leveraging significant personal energy to communicate about problem areas should decrease.

**Hypothesis 2** The positive relationship between employees' tenacity and problem-focused voice is moderated by their perceptions of relational adversity—as reflected in low levels of (a) goal congruence and (b) trust—such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of relational adversity.

### Moderating Role of Organizational Support for Change

The expected value of tenacity for spurring problem-focused voice behaviors also might increase in conditions of high organizational adversity, such as when the organization offers limited support for change (Scott and Bruce 1994). Employees who perceive that their organization is rigid and not open to new ideas about how to do their jobs will be more motivated to allocate their personal energy to behaviors that might remove organizational hurdles that prevent them from meeting their job requirements (Quinn et al. 2012). For example, employees who believe that existing organizational procedures do not allow them to

change the ways they work to meet preset performance standards may feel compelled to use their personal energy to find supporters who will help them lobby for greater job autonomy (De Clercq et al. 2011). This invigorating effect of organizational adversity is consistent with the premises of COR theory. To the extent that employees feel threatened in their ability to find novel ways to fulfill work obligations, due to organizational rigidity, they will be particularly motivated to invest personal energy to seek resource gains that might accrue from pinpointing organizational malfunctioning (Boon and Kalshoven 2014; Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). Conversely, when employees do not experience organizational adversity, their tenacity should have less motivational value in terms of spurring extensive efforts to expose problem areas.

Similarly, when organizational decision making is perceived as rigid, employees may develop negative feelings toward their employer, because they have limited freedom to find novel ways to perform their job tasks (Scott and Bruce 1994). In this case, they may experience a stronger need to invest personal energy in sharing their frustration with colleagues, to diminish these negative feelings (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). For example, speaking up about problem areas might trigger other organizational members to share their expertise or ways to perform adequately, even in the presence of organizational rigidity (Liang et al. 2012). Thus, applications of personal energy to these behaviors should be useful for overcoming the fear of underperformance due to this unfavorable organizational condition. Conversely, when faced with limited organizational resistance to change, employees have less need to allocate their personal energy to engaging colleagues in helping them reduce fears; the associated flexibility already makes them feel more positive about the ways in which they can meet their job requirements (Scott and Bruce 1994). The tenacity–problem-focused voice relationship thus should be weaker to the extent that employees have little need to draw support from other organizational members to cope with strict limitations on novel ways to perform their jobs.

**Hypothesis 3** The positive relationship between employees' tenacity and their problem-focused voice is moderated by their perceptions of organizational adversity (low organizational support for change), such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of organizational adversity.

This positive moderating effect of organizational adversity also should be particularly strong in conditions marked by high relational adversity, which suggests a three-way interaction among tenacity and the two sources of workplace adversity. When poor peer relationships discourage employees from asking for constructive feedback about how to meet their job requirements—whether due to incompatible goals or the fear that such feedback will be

used against them later (De Clercq et al. 2013; Leana and van Buren 1999)—employees likely worry more about meeting their job obligations. According to AET, employees' belief that their organization does not allow for flexibility in how they undertake their job should be experienced as particularly stressful or threatening in situations with limited peer support, so their motivation to channel personal energy into pinpointing and solving organizational problems, which might mitigate these negative feelings, becomes extremely valuable (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). That is, when the challenge of extreme organizational rigidity about how employees can undertake their job tasks gets exacerbated by unsupportive peer relationships, the allocation of personal energy to reporting problem areas becomes particularly important.

The reinforcing effect of the two types of workplace adversity also aligns with COR theory, which argues that initial resource losses can lead to negative resource spirals when different sources of resource loss operate *simultaneously* (Hobfoll 1989; Wright and Hobfoll 2004). For our study, this logic suggests that when tenacious employees cannot draw from supportive peer relationships (one source of resource loss), their diminished ability to execute daily jobs due to organizational rigidity (another source of resource loss) becomes invigorated (Yuan and Woodman 2010). This escalation of negative experiences then increases their motivation to channel their personal energy into problem-focused voice behaviors, which might provide some novel insights into how to resolve the excessive workplace adversity (Liang et al. 2012). In contrast, when tenacious employees can count on their organizational peers to help them meet work demands, they will be less preoccupied with the presence of a rigid organizational climate that opposes change, so the anticipated value of allocating their personal energy to problem-focused voice behaviors should be mitigated (Wright and Hobfoll 2004).

**Hypothesis 4** The invigorating effect of employees' perceptions of organizational adversity (low organizational support for change) on the positive relationship between their tenacity and problem-focused voice is moderated by their perceptions of relational adversity—as reflected in low levels of (a) goal congruence and (b) trust—such that the invigorating effect is stronger at higher levels of relational adversity.

## Research Method

### Sample and Data Collection

Research that includes multiple organizations must account for the various external and competitive pressures that

affect the time employees have available to engage in positive work behaviors (Hodson 2002). To avoid the potential effects of unobserved differences in the external environment, we collected data from employees working for a single organization, namely a smelting company in the northern part of Mexico. This organization, founded in 1979, manufactures custom steel parts for heavy equipment and machinery.

The data collection relied on two surveys, distributed in two rounds. First, we asked 120 randomly selected employees who worked either in a purely operational function (e.g., production, quality control, packaging) or a more supportive function (e.g., planning, accounting, sales) to assess their tenacity, the extent to which they shared similar goals with organizational peers, whether their peers could be trusted, and whether their organization supported change. The company's internal functioning, which encompasses an integrated system that seeks to optimize employee activities across the entire value chain, requires close interactions with organizational peers, so this empirical context is relevant for assessing constructs that assume some minimum level of work interdependence among employees. For example, an integrated quality control system requires employees to coordinate their efforts to meet the performance standards set by the company's top management, ranging from the input side (i.e., selection and processing of raw materials) all the way to the delivery of high-quality end products to industrial customers. Furthermore, the strong organizational culture that characterizes the company's internal functioning promotes strong collaboration among different functions and assigns significant weight to the collective contributions of employees to organizational effectiveness.

We received 109 responses, for a response rate of 91 %, reflecting the strong support for this study by the organization's top management. The average respondent was 34 years of age and had worked for the organization for 7 years; 36 % were women; 71 % worked in an operational function<sup>2</sup>; and 36 % had managerial responsibilities (i.e., other employees reported to them).

Second, we surveyed the immediate supervisors (11 in total) of each first-round respondent to ask them about the extent to which these employees spoke out about problem areas in their organization. The number of respondents per supervisor ranged between 3 and 17.

The surveys, originally prepared in English, were translated into Spanish. To avoid cultural bias and ensure validity, the Spanish versions were back-translated into

English (Brislin et al. 1973). We pretested preliminary versions of the two surveys with two different sets of employees who did not participate in the actual data collection. By incorporating the feedback from these employees into the revised surveys, we increased the readability of the questions and the data quality. For both survey rounds, we guaranteed the participants complete confidentiality, repeatedly assured them that there were no right or wrong answers, and asked them to answer the questions as honestly as possible to minimize the possibility that their responses would be subject to social desirability or acquiescence biases (Spector 2006). To mitigate the threat of social desirability biases even further, we also asked the respondents to return their surveys directly to us and ensured them that only aggregate results would be communicated with the organization after the study was complete.

## Measures

The items for the four focal constructs came from previous research and used seven-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”).

### *Problem-Focused Voice*

With our focus on employees' propensity to speak up about problem areas (instead of areas for improvement), we measured problem-focused voice with five items from Liang et al.'s (2012) scale of prohibitive voice, such as “This employee speaks up honestly about problems that might cause serious loss to the organization, even when/though dissenting opinions exist” and “This employee dares to voice opinions on things that might affect efficiency in the organization, even if that would embarrass others” (Cronbach's alpha = .90).

### *Tenacity*

We measured tenacity with five items used in previous research (Baum and Locke 2004). Employees indicated, for example, whether “I can think of many times when I persisted with work when others quit” and “I continue to work hard on tasks even when others oppose me” (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

### *Moderating Variables*

To capture the presence of workplace adversity, either relationship (i.e., low goal congruence and low trust) or organizational (i.e., low organizational support for change), we assessed variables in contrasting directions, such that respondents indicated the extent to which their work

<sup>2</sup> The response rate for employees who worked in an operational function equaled 92 % (77 participants of 84 employees), and that for employees who worked in a supportive function was 89 % (32 participants of 36 employees).

environment was characterized by high levels of these features. First, we captured employees' *goal congruence* with organizational peers with four items used in previous research (De Clercq et al. 2013). Two example items were "My colleagues and I share a similar vision regarding the organization's future" and "My colleagues and I think alike on most issues with respect to the organization" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ). Second, we assessed the extent to which employees believed their colleagues were *trustworthy* with five items used in prior literature on intrafirm trust (De Clercq et al. 2013). The employees indicated, for example, whether "My colleagues would not take advantage of me, even if the opportunity arose" and "My colleagues always keep the promises they make" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). Third, to measure employees' perceptions of *organizational support for change*, we used four items adapted from Scott and Bruce's (1994) scale of innovation support, such as "My organization can be described as flexible" and "My organization is open to having its people come up with new suggestions" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ).

#### Control Variables

We controlled for gender; men tend to exhibit higher voice rates than women (Detert and Burris 2007; LePine and Van Dyne 1998). We also controlled for *age* (in years), *organizational tenure* (in years), and *hierarchical level* (a binary variable equal to 1 when other employees reported to the respondents), because previous research suggests that more experienced or skilled employees may feel more confident about their ability to engage in voice (Burris et al. 2008; Detert and Burris 2007; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008b). Furthermore, we controlled for employees' *job function*, that is, whether their responsibilities were primarily operational (i.e., directly related to physical production) or supportive, with the former as the base category, and for their perceptions of *work interdependence* (one item that captured whether they depended on their colleagues to be able to do their work well). These last two control variables reflect our acknowledgment that employees' tendency to speak up about problem areas might depend on the nature of their job roles and the extent to which voice behaviors may be useful for other organizational members, respectively (Morrison 2011).

We assessed the validity of the five focal constructs with a five-factor measurement model, using confirmatory factor analysis (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). The fit of the measurement model was good:  $\chi^2_{(185)} = 266.83$ , Tucker-Lewis index = .91, confirmatory fit index = .94, and root mean squared error of approximation = .06. In support of the convergent validity of the five constructs, the factor loadings of the respective items in the measurement model

were significant ( $t > 2.0$ ; Gerbing and Anderson 1988). Moreover, we found discriminant validity among the constructs. For each pair generated from the constructs, we checked for any significant differences in the Chi-square values of the constrained model (correlation between the constructs set to equal 1) versus the unconstrained model (correlation between the constructs was set free). The Chi-square differences were significant for all the pairs ( $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} < .384$ ), which suggested discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988).

## Results

Table 1 contains the zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics. Table 2 provides the regression results.<sup>3</sup> Model 1 included the control variables, Model 2 added tenacity, and Model 3 added the three moderators: goal congruence, trust, and organizational support for change. Models 4–6 added the tenacity  $\times$  goal congruence, tenacity  $\times$  trust, and tenacity  $\times$  organizational support for change interaction terms, respectively. Previous research indicates that it is appropriate to include multiple interaction terms separately, because the simultaneous inclusion of multiple interaction terms in one model can mask true moderating effects (Aiken and West 1991; De Clercq et al. 2014; Zahra and Hayton 2008). Finally, Models 7 and eight added the three-way interaction terms (tenacity  $\times$  organizational support for change  $\times$  goal congruence and tenacity  $\times$  organizational support for change  $\times$  trust), together with the two corresponding sets of constitutive two-way interactions, as recommended by Aiken and West (1991). For both the two- and three-way interaction terms, we adopted the well-established approach to mean center the product terms (Aiken and West 1991).

In support of our baseline prediction that employees' personal energy levels fuel their likelihood to speak up about problem areas, Model 2 revealed that tenacity related positively to problem-focused voice ( $\beta = .595$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in strong support for Hypothesis 1. Although they are beyond our theoretical focus, the results in Model 3 also indicated a direct positive effect of organizational support for change on problem-focused voice ( $\beta = .282$ ,

<sup>3</sup> An assessment of the interclass correlation coefficients of goal congruence (ICC[1] = .04 and ICC[2] = .29), trust (ICC[1] = .05 and ICC[2] = .36), and organizational support for change (ICC[1] = .02 and ICC[2] = .20)—three constructs that arguably capture group-level phenomena—indicated that hierarchical linear modeling was not appropriate to test the study's hypotheses. The low ICC values might arise because the survey questions asked employees to assess their colleagues and organization in general, not a specific department. Therefore, we tested the hypotheses with ordinary least squares regression analyses.

**Table 1** Correlation table and descriptive statistics

|  | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5     | 6       | 7      | 8      | 9     | 10   | 11    |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|---------|--------|--------|-------|------|-------|
| 1. Problem-focused voice               |        |        |        |        |       |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 2. Tenacity                            | .575** |        |        |        |       |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 3. Goal congruence                     | .311** | .442** |        |        |       |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 4. Trust                               | .252** | .279** | .563** |        |       |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 5. Organizational support for change   | .508** | .356** | .490** | .396** |       |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 6. Gender                              | -.057  | -.140  | -.137  | .000   | -.140 |         |        |        |       |      |       |
| 7. Age (1 = female)                    | .169   | .272** | .128   | .051   | .048  | -.355** |        |        |       |      |       |
| 8. Organizational tenure               | .091   | .122   | .030   | .071   | .018  | -.203*  | .548** |        |       |      |       |
| 9. Hierarchical level (1 = managerial) | .093   | .087   | .037   | .051   | -.009 | -.238*  | .075   | .126   |       |      |       |
| 10. Job function (1 = operational)     | .071   | .074   | .135   | .125   | .197* | -.023   | -.238* | -.197* | .061  |      |       |
| 11. Work interdependence               | .070   | .160   | .196*  | .410** | .132  | .061    | -.005  | -.012  | -.023 | .140 |       |
| Mean                                   | 5.434  | 5.167  | 5.305  | 5.044  | 4.756 | .358    | 33.908 | 6.551  | .358  | .706 | 5.171 |
| SD                                     | .993   | .936   | 1.364  | 1.317  | 1.248 | .482    | 8.912  | 5.584  | .482  | .458 | 2.132 |

Notes: *N* = 109

\* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01

**Table 2** Regression results (dependent variable: problem-focused voice)

|  | Model 1 | Model2  | Model3  | Model4             | Model 5  | Model 6  | Model 7  | Model 8           |
|--|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| Gender (1 = female)  | -.152   | -.070   | .000    | .023               | .021     | .051     | .103     | .153              |
| Age  | .011    | -.008   | -.004   | -.003              | -.002    | .000     | .002     | .004              |
| Organizational tenure  | .018    | .020    | .018    | .016               | .021+    | .008     | .009     | .005              |
| Hierarchical level (1 = managerial)  | -.015   | -.042   | .011    | -.005              | -.014    | .066     | .072     | .044              |
| Job function (1 = operational)   | .157    | -.008   | -.117   | -.058              | -.065    | -.076    | -.050    | -.040             |
| Work interdependence   | .024    | -.012   | -.031   | -.033              | -.027    | -.003    | .008     | .004              |
| H <sub>1</sub> : Tenacity  |         | .595*** | .472*** | .421***            | .404***  | .378***  | .394***  | .386***           |
| Goal congruence  |         |         | -.075   | -.105 <sup>+</sup> | -.073    | -.071    | -.063    | -.097*            |
| Trust  |         |         | .063    | .080               | .075     | .025     | -.018    | -.011             |
| Organizational support for change  |         |         | .282*** | .279***            | .258***  | .235***  | .188***  | .208***           |
| H <sub>2a</sub> : Tenacity × Goal congruence                                     |         |         |         | -.084*             |          |          | .094*    |                   |
| H <sub>2b</sub> : Tenacity × Trust   |         |         |         |                    | -.137*** |          |          | .072              |
| H <sub>3</sub> : Tenacity × Organizational support for change                    |         |         |         |                    |          | -.242*** | -.188*** | -.196***          |
| Organizational support for change × Goal congruence                              |         |         |         |                    |          |          | -.033    |                   |
| Organizational support for change × trust  |         |         |         |                    |          |          |          | -.071*            |
| H <sub>4a</sub> : Tenacity × Organizational support for change × goal congruence |         |         |         |                    |          |          | .049*    |                   |
| H <sub>4b</sub> : tenacity × Organizational support for change × trust           |         |         |         |                    |          |          |          | .038 <sup>+</sup> |
| R <sup>2</sup>   |         | .069    | .445    | .590               | .610     | .643     | .737     | .758              |
| R <sup>2</sup> change  |         | .376*** | .145*** | .020*              | .053***  | .147***  | .174***  | .168***           |

Notes: *N* = 109; unstandardized coefficients (two-tailed *p*-values)

<sup>+</sup> *p* < .10; \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01

$p < .001$ ), whereas the effects of goal congruence and trust were not significant.

Models 4–6 supported the hypothesized invigorating effects of adverse work conditions on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice. That is, the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice was stronger at *low* levels of goal congruence ( $\beta = -.084$ ,  $p < .05$ ), trust ( $\beta = -.137$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and organizational support for change ( $\beta = -.242$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in support of Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 3, respectively. To clarify the nature of these interactions, we plotted the effects of tenacity on problem-focused voice for high and low levels of the three moderators in Fig. 2a–c. The plots indicate that the relationship of tenacity and problem-focused voice was stronger at low, compared with high, levels of the three moderators.

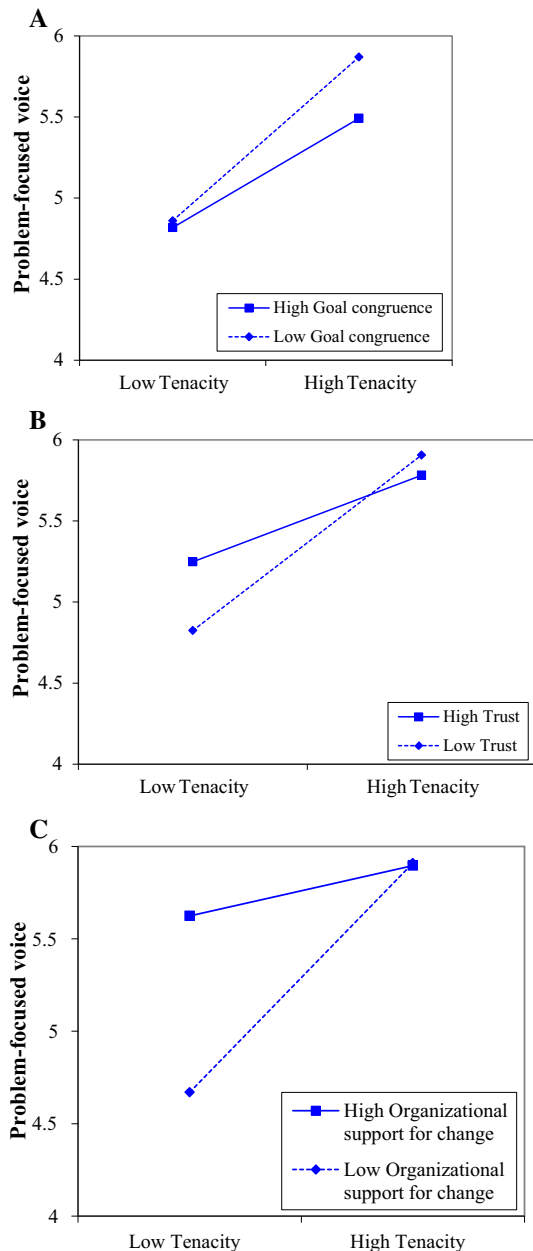
Moreover, we found support for Hypothesis 4a in the significant three-way interaction among tenacity, organizational support for change, and goal congruence in Model 7 ( $\beta = .049$ ,  $p < .05$ ). To clarify this interaction, we plotted the moderating effect of organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice at high versus low levels of goal congruence in Fig. 3. At low levels of goal congruence (Panel b), the two lines in the interaction plot were less parallel than those at high levels of goal congruence (Panel a). Thus, the importance of organizational adversity (i.e., low organizational support for change), in terms of invigorating the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice, was greater when it combined with high levels of relational adversity (i.e., low goal congruence). The results for Hypothesis 4b echoed those of Hypothesis 4a, though the effect was relatively weaker: The invigorating effect of organizational adversity (i.e., low organizational support for change) was somewhat stronger at *low* levels of trust ( $\beta = .038$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Figure 4 provides additional detail about this three-way interaction effect. When trust was low (Panel b), the two lines in the interaction plot were less parallel than when trust was high (Panel a), indicating that the invigorating effect of organizational adversity on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice was more salient when combined with high relational adversity.

## Discussion

This study adds to voice behavior research by elaborating how employees' tenacity—or their tendency to allocate sustained goal-directed energy to their work tasks, irrespective of the challenge of these tasks (Baum and Locke 2004)—informs their propensity to speak up about problem areas. The limited prior attention to this issue is somewhat

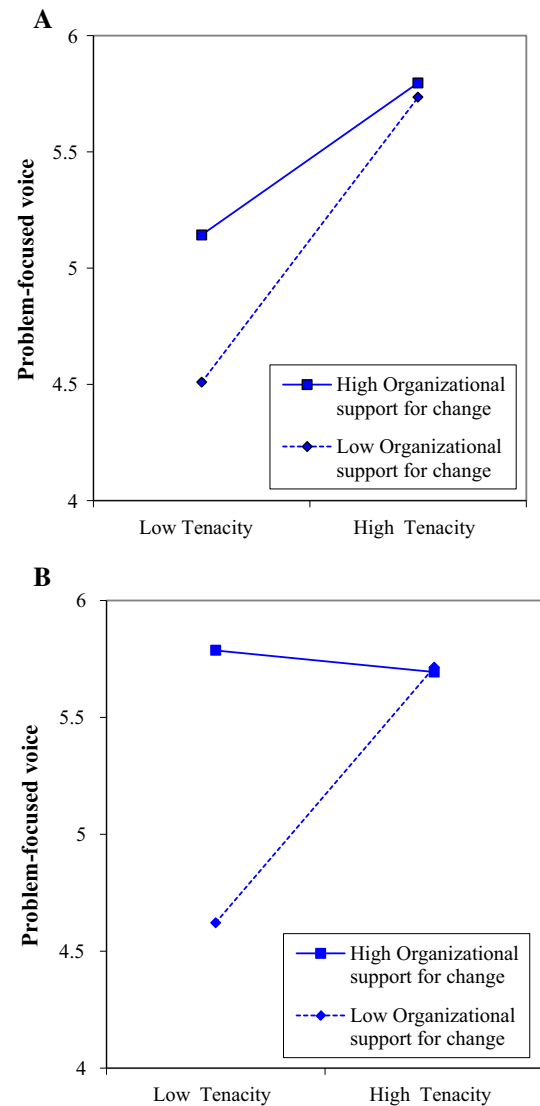
surprising, because the identification of problem areas can be perceived as confrontational by other organizational members and be met with significant criticism or resistance (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Van Dyne et al. 2003), such that substantial personal energy is required to counter this challenge. Drawing from COR theory (Hobfoll 2001) and AET (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), we investigated how the translation of tenacity into enhanced problem-focused voice behaviors—which should produce solutions to problem areas and thus enhance employees' ability to meet job requirements—is particularly salient when employees experience adverse work conditions that may instill the fear that they cannot perform their job tasks successfully. We focused on the challenges associated with the presence of limited goal sharing or trust in relationships with organizational peers (Leana and van Buren 1999) and limited organizational support for change (Yuan and Woodman 2010). We also argued for the presence of *interdependent* moderating effects of these sources of workplace adversity, such that the increased allocation of personal energy to problem-focused voice behavior when limited organizational support for change exists should be particularly strong when employees cannot draw on supportive peer relationships. Our research largely supports these theoretical arguments.

Identifying problem areas can generate positive results for the organization and idea proponents (Parker 1993; Seibert et al. 2001; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Yet such problem-focused voice also consumes significant energy and creates challenges related to others' resistance to any change associated with the anticipated solutions to the problems (Liang et al. 2012). These challenges are mitigated for employees who can draw on their own high tenacity levels. Consistent with COR theory, employees who are persistent and have a long-term focus when allocating personal energy to challenging work activities, irrespective of the resistance that these activities may encounter, are more likely to speak up about problem areas, because they anticipate significant performance gains from their activities (Boon and Kalshoven 2014; Hobfoll 2001). The positive relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice complements previous research that suggests conscientiousness stimulates voice behaviors in general (Crant et al. 2011; LePine and Van Dyne 2001). Conscientiousness refers to the tendency of hard-working employees to be dependable and in control of their jobs (Crant et al. 2011; Duckworth et al. 2007); tenacity instead has a longer-term focus and is particularly useful for undertaking challenging behaviors that can generate significant, sustained resistance (Baum and Locke 2004), such as reports about organizational failures that are perceived as direct threats to those organizational members who are responsible for the failures (Liang et al. 2012).



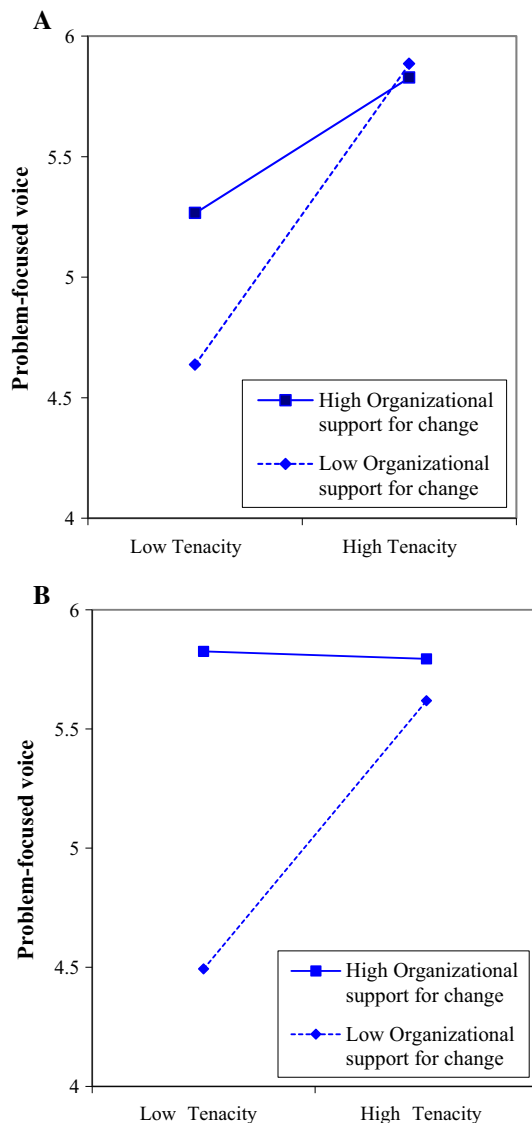
**Fig. 2** Two-way interaction effects. **a** Goal congruence on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice. **b** Trust on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice. **c** Organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice

In addition, this positive effect of tenacity on problem-focused voice is invigorated when employees believe the resulting performance gains will protect them against underperformance due to adverse workplace conditions, as manifested in unfavorable relationships with colleagues or a rigid organizational climate. The invigorating effects of these sources of workplace adversity follow the COR argument that the anticipated value of personal resource



**Fig. 3** Three-way interaction effect. **a** Organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice at high goal congruence. **b** Organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice at low goal congruence

endowments for spurring additional resource or performance gains (through finding solutions to organizational problems) increases in the presence of possible resource drainage by adverse work conditions (Hobfoll and Lilly 1993; Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). When employees believe that their peers do not agree with them about where the organization is heading (low goal congruence), perceive that these peers would try to take advantage of them to achieve personal interests (low trust), or sense that their organization does not grant them much flexibility in terms of how they do their jobs (low organizational support for change), it is more important for them to channel their personal energy into voice activities that expose problem



**Fig. 4** Three-way interaction effect. **a** Organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice at high trust. **b** Organizational support for change on the relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice at low trust

areas in their organization. Similarly, and consistent with AET, the performance gains that tenacious employees hope to achieve with their problem-focused voice behaviors are particularly instrumental when these behaviors can help overcome the negative feelings that employees experience when confronted with poor peer relationships or rigid organizational environments (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996).

Finally, this study reveals that the usefulness of tenacity for increased problem-focused voice is particularly salient when the two sources of workplace adversity (relational and organizational) operate in conjunction (Wright and Hobfoll 2004). When employees cannot rely on supportive

peer relationships, the challenges of a rigid organizational environment seem greater (Cohen and Wills 1985), and tenacious employees become even more eager to leverage their personal energy to pinpoint problem areas, in the hope of continuing to meet their job requirements, *despite* the severe workplace adversity that they encounter. In contrast, when employees can draw from supportive peer relationships, marked by high levels of goal congruence and trust, the need to draw from their tenacity to speak up about problem areas because of rigid organizational decision making gets subdued.

Overall, these results are significant in that they establish a more complete understanding of how voice behaviors focused on problem situations emerge within organizations (Morrison 2011). An important but underexplored facet of voice behaviors refers to attempts to bring problem situations into the open, as opposed to providing suggestions about how the organization can be improved in general (Liang et al. 2012). Such problem-focused voice tends to be more disruptive and encounter more significant resistance, particularly by those who feel threatened directly by that form of voice. Our results add to extant voice literature by specifying the concurrent roles that employees' tenacity levels and distinct sources of work adversity (poor peer relations and a rigid organizational climate) have for stimulating problem-focused voice, as well as revealing the individual and combined influences of these sources of workplace adversity on the anticipated usefulness of allocating sustained personal energy to problem-focused voice.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some shortcomings that suggest research opportunities. First, some caution is needed in terms of causality; the tenacity–problem-focused voice relationship could be susceptible to reverse causality. Employees who pinpoint and speak up about problem areas may feel revitalized by these activities, such that their tenacity levels increase (Parker 1993; Quinn et al. 2012). Although our hypotheses were anchored in well-established theoretical frameworks (COR and AET), additional studies with longitudinal designs could investigate the causal processes that link tenacity with problem-focused voice behaviors more explicitly, as well as the contingency conditions that influence this process. Second, though previous research indicates that the personal characteristic of grit, akin to tenacity, has incremental predictive power over and above that of conscientiousness (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Quinn 2009; Suzuki et al. 2015), additional research could investigate whether our findings hold when controlling for conscientiousness or other relevant personal characteristics, such as employees' self-efficacy (Bandura 1989) or resilience (Luthans et al. 2007).

Third, our choice to focus on voice—instead of alternative behaviors such as exit, loyalty, or neglect—was driven by the recognition that, because of its proactive and constructive nature, this behavior may benefit most from employees' tenacity or sustained allocation of goal-directed energy to work tasks (Si and Li 2012; Rusbult et al. 1988). Still, future research could consider a more comprehensive set of work behaviors and investigate, for example, whether the likelihood of exit is significantly higher among employees who exhibit low tenacity levels. Further research also could complement the quantitative approach we have applied with qualitative approaches that provide more detailed information about the *nature* of the voice activities and thereby explore, for example, how the anticipated impact of solutions to the identified problems differs, depending on whether the problems are situated in core or more supportive activities in the value chain.

Fourth, to expand our theoretical framework in other directions, it might be interesting to investigate whether and how employees' problem-focused voice, as informed by their tenacity levels, influences their ability to meet their job requirements, as well as how the moderators studied herein affect this causal process.

Fifth, with our focus on three contingency factors, we ignore other factors that might invigorate the positive relationship between tenacity and problem-focused voice. Further research could consider the impact of other sources of relational adversity, such as interpersonal conflict (Ilies et al. 2011) or excessive task interdependence (Van der Vegt et al. 2000), as well as workplace adversity due to decision-making styles, such as perceptions of low procedural justice (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008a) or self-serving behaviors (Abbas et al. 2014). To the extent that employees believe organizational decision making is unfair or marked by destructive political games, the anticipated value of allocating their sustained personal energy to activities to diminish the negative influences of such dysfunctional decision making may increase.

### Practical Implications

This study reveals how tenacity stimulates employees' propensity to speak up about organizational problems, as well as why this positive influence is particularly potent in the presence of significant workplace adversity. Problem-focused voice behaviors can be very beneficial for organizations, yet the barriers to employees to engage in such behaviors are munificent, including resistance by organizational members who do not want to be held responsible for problems or the limited time available to engage in energy-consuming voice behaviors that bring organizational failures to the surface. Identifying a critical personal characteristic, such as tenacity, that enhances problem-

focused voice despite these challenges thus has significant practical relevance. Our findings suggest that organizations with an interest in stimulating reports about problem situations in their ranks should attempt to hire employees who are perseverant and maintain a long-term approach toward allocating personal energy to challenging work activities, however risky these activities might be. Furthermore, training tenacious employees to allocate their personal energy to difficult, change-invoking work activities, such as problem-focused voice, should enhance organizations' ability to cope successfully with any resistance to these activities.

Our investigation of the *interplay* between tenacity and workplace adversity for predicting problem-focused voice behavior also has practical relevance. This study reveals some of the circumstances in which tenacity is a more important means through which employees speak about problem areas (Liang et al. 2012). Organizations can benefit most from the voice behaviors of employees who are perseverant and relentless in their work efforts when their past work trajectory has featured poor peer relationships or rigid decision making—features that might not be reversed easily. That is, to the extent that the organization's historical functioning has created significant workplace adversity, marked by poor peer relationships or rigid organizational decision making, targeted initiatives that invest company resources in training efforts geared at leveraging tenacity into problem-focused voice may be particularly useful. In addition to the role of workplace adversity, other useful initiatives may also encourage employees to apply their personal energy to voice behaviors, such as financial reward systems that directly compensate employees for any tangible organizational improvements that emerge from their problem-focused voice efforts, or provisions of intangible rewards that recognize these efforts as exemplary behaviors or role models for other organizational members (Morrison 2011; Ryan and Deci 2000). Ultimately, organizations whose history is marked by adverse social relationships and limited decision-making flexibility can benefit to the extent that they can channel the personal energy reservoirs of their employees into activities targeted at pinpointing and resolving problem situations.

### Conclusion

This study has addressed questions of how and when employees' tenacity is more likely to increase their propensity to speak up about organizational problems. Tenacity fuels problem-focused voice, and this process is more prominent when employees encounter adverse situations in their relationships with peers, characterized by

low levels of goal congruence and trust, and when their organization does not support change. We hope this work functions as a catalyst for further studies of how organizations can leverage the personal resources of their employee bases effectively, especially in the presence of adverse work conditions.

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