

Leadership style may indirectly affect how employees speak up about food safety

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Proper food safety procedures prevent foodborne illnesses and are vital to preventing crises in the food service and hospitality industries. A new study from researchers in the Penn State School of Hospitality

Management found that the leadership style within an organization can influence how employees speak up to correct or prevent food safety issues.

Research led by Heyao "Chandler" Yu, assistant professor and Elizabeth M. King Early Career Professor of Hospitality Management at Penn State, found ethical [leadership](#) has a stronger indirect impact on the prohibitive voice of employees, allowing them to speak up to other workers to prevent—or prohibit—something potentially harmful.

The research team also found that leadership that prioritizes [food safety](#) over productivity has a stronger indirect impact on the promotive voice of employees, meaning the ability for them to suggest—or promote—improvements.

The team recently published its work in the [*International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*](#).

"Food safety is incredibly important in the industry because it can save the lives of human beings," Yu said.

Improperly followed safety procedures, which can include storing food incorrectly or not washing one's hands, could be especially dangerous for people with compromised immune systems, such as children and the elderly, according to Yu.

To explore how leadership styles can impact how employees advocate for food safety, the researchers examined what motivates those who speak up. They found specific motivations can serve as a moderator between [leadership style](#) and how employees use their voice.

"From social desirability, people have two motivations," Yu said.

"Agentic [motivation](#) makes people feel empowered and knowledgeable.

Communal motivation makes people not want to be disliked by others. Leadership can affect an employee's motivation, whether agentic or communal, to use either promotive or prohibitive voice."

The researchers surveyed 239 food handlers and 66 restaurants in Taiwan, and they said the data can be applied broadly to other regions. With assistance from restaurant managers, food handlers who contacted food directly were asked to fill out an on-site survey about food safety.

"At first, we believed both agentic and communal motivations were important for prohibitive voice," Yu said. "Through our research, we discovered it is more important for employees to feel psychologically secure and safe in speaking up about wrongdoings—or communal motivation—than it is for them to feel the motivation to show the power—or agentic motivation."

Unlike promotive voice, which can more easily be recognized and interpreted as positive by supervisors and coworkers, prohibitive voice may not be as easily recognized or interpreted as positive even though it also stems from good intentions, according to Yu.

"For prohibitive voice, managers need to build up an environment where employees can speak up when they see something being done incorrectly," Yu said. "Employees understand where that is coming from, so they won't take it personally. Ethical leadership promotes an environment that says we do things fairly and not to take things personally. This is for a collective benefit, not a personal benefit."

The use of prohibitive voice can be riskier, as employees could take things personally if they were to be reported or stopped from doing something, which could damage relationships, according to Yu.

"Building up a [safe environment](#) for people to fairly criticize each other's

behavior or report issues of wrongdoing is important for food safety prohibitive behavior," Yu said. "If workers or managers can see something happening and point it out, they can prevent foodborne illness or a food safety crisis that could potentially bankrupt their company."

The researchers also found a stronger bond between managers and employees strengthened the influence of both ethical leadership on prohibitive voice and leadership prioritizing food safety on promotive voice.

Yu said these findings show leaders should develop [strong relationships](#) with their employees which can help ensure food safety procedures are followed by using promotive and prohibitive voice.

"Leaders can be great people, but nothing will happen if they never talk to their employees or build up relationships," Yu said. "Leaders need to reinforce food [safety](#), set a strong example and build good relationships with their [employees](#). The goal cannot be achieved if any of these three factors are lacking."

More information: Heyao (Chandler) Yu et al, The Differential Effects of Leader Food Safety Priority and Ethical Leadership on Food Safety Promotive and Prohibitive Voices: A Socially Desirable Responding Theory Perspective, *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/15256480.2023.2276953](https://doi.org/10.1080/15256480.2023.2276953)

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