A Review of Motivating Language Theory's Effects on Trust in Organizations

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Abstract

In their research, Men and colleagues (2022) investigated the influence of Motivating Language Theory (MLT) from supervisors on employee trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. Men and colleagues conducted online surveys across the United States to determine the effectiveness of empathetic, meaning-making, and direction-giving language in building trust within organizations. Results showed that empathetic language had a strong positive relationship with trust (β=.53), and direction-giving language had a weak positive relationship in satisfying employees' need for competence (β=.32). This article is particularly relevant for organizational leaders looking to build trust with employees and those interested in psychology, communication, or business.

Keywords

Motivating Language Theory, employee psychology, trust, supervisory communication

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Men, L. R., Qin, Y. S., & Jin, J. (2022). Fostering employee trust via effective supervisory communication during the COVID-19 pandemic: Through the lens of motivating language theory. *International Journal of Business Communication*, *59*(2), 193–218. **https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884211020491**

In their research, Men, and colleagues (2022) examined how Motivating Language Theory (MLT) influences trust between employees and supervisors within the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Previously, other studies have shown that the use of MTL by supervisors is associated with positive effects like employee satisfaction and organizational citizenship, but Men and colleagues focused specifically on the element of employee trust and its potential correlates (Mayfield et al., 2015; Sharbrough et al., 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant pressure on employee-employer relations. This study illuminates which types of communication organizational leaders can utilize to build trust with employees and why these methods may be effective.

In their study, Men and colleagues conducted online surveys across the U.S. and different organization types to determine how employees were influenced by the elements of MLT. The surveys asked questions about how effective each type of communication in MLT was for building trust for organizational leadership. The three elements of MLT are empathetic, meaning-making, and direction-giving language. As defined by MLT, Empathetic language is showing genuine concern for employees through "expressing appreciation, care, sharing feelings, and validation" (Men et al., 2022). Meaning-Making language aligns employees' values and goals with the company to create a sense of higher purpose. Lastly, direction-giving language involves providing clear instructions and feedback, so employees know what is expected of them. Beyond this, Men and colleagues hypothesized that these tactics would be effective at building trust because they

satisfy the employee needs for competence and relatedness outlined by Self-Determination Theory[7] (SDT).

In their survey, Men and colleagues searched for correlates between MTL and trust, MTL and elements of SDT, and SDT and trust. The strongest significant correlate presented in the study was the positive moderate relationship[8] between the use of empathetic language (β =.53) and trust in an organization and its leaders. The only other result with a relevant correlation strength was the weak positive relationship[9] between direction-giving language and competence need for satisfaction (β =.32). The rest of the results produced were significant and positive but produced negligible correlates.

This study opens the door for new research on building trust in organizations, but also provides insight into how pandemics can affect employee-employer relations in the modern world. One limitation of the study Men and colleagues did not mention was that future research could include surveys of employees and leaders from the same companies; in these cases, discrepancies between what leaders feel they are emphasizing and what employees perceive could indicate how employee disposition and perspective relate to the effectiveness of MLT. Another limitation was that the surveys were only conducted at one point in time, rather than in intervals, which might help indicate how employee trust changes over time in relation to an event like a pandemic or recession. Lastly, future studies might seek to examine these findings within the context of online communication platforms like zoom, or how employee-employer trends like sector-wide layoffs or quiet quitting affect these findings.

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[7] A motivational theory that people seek to satisfy three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
[8] Correlate higher than β =.5 or 50%
[9] Correlate higher than β =.3 or 30%

Overall, Men and colleagues' study of MLT's effects on employee trust during the COVID-19 Pandemic was well executed and is highly relevant to the evolving relations between employees and employers. Their research indicates organizational leaders looking to build trust with employees should focus on using empathetic language, and they can also use direction-giving language to support employees' need for competence. This article is particularly relevant to organizational leaders and those interested in psychology, communication, or business; some relevant topics covered are Motivating Language Theory, employee trust, Self-Determination Theory, organizational leadership, and COVID-19.

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