Learning from Followers: An Examination of Follower Voice Behavior and Its Influence on Leadership Competencies of Ugandan SME Owner-Managers

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Abstract

Ugandan Small business owner-managers lack the desired leadership competencies yet they are a hard nut to crack as far as engaging them in competence development activities is concerned. Based upon Social Constructivism theory, exit-voice and loyalty theory and leader-member exchange theory, this paper explains how leadership competencies of SME owner-mangers can be enhanced with a general assumption that such learning provides support for the growth, development and continuing success of their firms. This paper reports the findings of a cross-sectional survey and a mixed method study involving 340 employees and 54 owner-managers in SMES in Uganda. Using hierarchical regression analysis, the findings suggest that followers through their voice exertion behaviour provides an alternative to convention learning and training by being a rich-informal source of learning for SOMs that meets their learning preferences besides overcoming their excuses for not attending face-to-face training, including time away from operations and poor Return on Investment (ROI). Findings do provide proof of concept that follower voice behaviour is indeed a learning tool for SOMs and advances research on leadership competencies and organizational literature by introducing Follower voice behaviour as a vital source of learning for SME owner-managers.

Keywords: Follower Voice Behavior, Leadership Competencies, LMX, SMEs, SOMS, Uganda

1. Introduction

Although Uganda has been ranked the most entrepreneurial country in the world, it has many Small and Medium sized enterprises (hereinafter SMEs) that do not survive beyond a year (Bruderl et al., 1992; Boden & Nucci, 2000; Walter et al., 2004; Rooks & Sserwanga, 2009). This prompted Rwakakamba (2011) to declare Uganda as a graveyard of SMEs. A growing problem for many SMEs in Uganda is that they are led by owner-managers (hereinafter SOMs) who lack the required leadership competencies to guarantee SME success and sustainability (Rwakakamba 2011, Briggs 2009 & Tushabomwe-Kazooba 2006). In fact SOMs mostly become leaders by virtue of starting their enterprises without formal leadership/managerial training or education. This problem is escalated by the fact that, they have a notoriously negative attitude to formal approaches to learning in preference to incidental and informal learning processes (Massey et al, 2005). Additionally, they are resource constrained and overwhelmed by the day to day demands of keeping the SME running thus limiting the extent to which they can develop their competencies (Leitch 2007).

With SMEs collapsing and practitioners worried about effective learning activities for SOMs, getting employees at all levels to speak up with improvement- oriented information—that is, to exercise voice—is imperative for SOM learning and effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of Follower Voice Behaviour over leadership competencies given that to date, not much of empirical research has identified practical means of developing SOMs leadership competence that considers their preferences and meets their learning needs (Billington, Neeson & Barrett, 2009; Charters et al., 2008; Redmond & Walker, 2008; Webster et al., 2005) and yet, SOMs continue to be reluctant to participate in conventional training and learning programs. Thus, the question remains: how do we develop leadership competencies of such SOMs? Based upon Social Constructivism theory, exit-voice and loyalty theory and leader-member exchange theory, this study sought to integrate current research on voice behaviour and leadership competencies by exploring Follower voice behaviour as a vital learning tool for SME owner-managers with a general assumption that development of leadership competencies provides support for the growth, development and continuing success of their firms. The purpose of this study was to encourage and support learning and development of leadership competencies of less trained and educated, busy and resource poor SME owner-managers. This was achieved by examining the effectiveness of Follower Voice Behaviour as a learning tool for SME owner-managers and concluding that followers voice behaviour is indeed a vital tool for learning for SME owner-managers. The central argument in

this paper is that if you want to know how to improve leadership competencies of SOMs, ask their followers because their input plays an integral role in shaping the leadership competencies of SME owner-managers. Therefore the use of SME followers' constructive ideas, insights, information, opinions or suggestions (voice behaviour) to support and encourage owner-manager learning is a key principle of this study.

In summary, this study provides an alternative to convention learning and training by fronting followers as a rich- informal source of learning for SOMs that meets their learning preferences besides overcoming their excuses for not attending face-to-face training which among others includes time away from business operations and poor Return on Investment (ROI). Findings do provide proof of concept that followers indeed facilitate learning for SOMs, supporting the existing literature regarding follower role is leadership development. Implications for learning in SMEs and leadership theories were explored as well as gathering of evidence about how leadership competencies may be enhanced and influenced by followers. The findings of this study are expected to have implications for practitioners, especially for owner /managers of SMEs, policy makers, government officers who support SME, banks, and educators facilitating owner-manager learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical framework

Social Constructivism theory underpins this study by suggesting that social interaction is necessary for learning (Krause et al., 2003; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). Social Constructivism according to Kim (2001) is premised on three assumptions about reality, knowledge and learning. First, reality is viewed as being constructed through human activity; it cannot be discovered, and it does not exist prior to its social invention. Second, knowing is a human product and Individuals can create meaning through interacting with each other and with their environment. Lastly, learning is viewed as a social process with meaningful learning occurring when individuals engage in social activities. From this perspective, meaningful learning occurs through collaboration and discussion that learners are able to express their understanding, listen to the views of others and explore different ideas. In this article, followers are perceived to be a valuable source of knowledge and Social Constructivism potentially offers a broader understanding and explanation of how follower voice behaviour is an alternative source of knowledge for the development of leadership competencies of owner-managers. For social constructivists, follower's voice behaviour is an important tool because it enables interactivity, discussion, dialogue and debate, which are essential to the social construction of meaning (Chen, n.d).

The research was also informed by Albert Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory where he contends that there are two types of response to unsatisfactory situations. The first is to exit or leave without trying to fix things and the second is "voice," that is, speaking up and trying to improve things (poor leadership competencies in this study). The Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory has been proved in many other respects. For example, voice has been proved to have a direct impact on effective organizational functioning (Morrison& Milliken, 2000; Morrison & Rothman, 2009), improved performance by generating solutions and opportunities to make the workplace run better (Lind &Kulik, 2009; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, &Podsakoff, 2011) and enhances organizational learning and knowledge sharing (Ashford et al., 2009; Brinsfield et al., 2009; Milliken &Lam, 2009). By suggesting that followers can utilize their voices to keep leaders on their toes, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory potentially provides a broader understanding and explanation of how voice exertion behaviour influences leadership competencies. While the Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory provides an in-depth explanation of how followers can utilize voice to remedy or fix things, the context of this explanation may varies from sector to sector and from one country to another. The exit-voice framework is thus not complete with respect to its application to the problems of leadership competencies in Ugandan SMEs.

Another important theory which underpinned the study is the Leader member exchange (LMX) theory because of its conceptualized linkage between leaders and followers. Originally called Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) theory by Dansereau, Graen & Haga in 1975, LMX is the only leadership theory that has focused on the dyadic relationship of leaders and followers' other than leaders behaviors or traits or even situational characteristics. It asserts that leaders do not uniformly interact with followers because of limited time and resources but instead they are closer to some (the in-group) while remaining aloof from others (the out-group) and the high-quality relationships will lead to positive outcomes-specifically leadership competencies in this study. Conversely, those in the out-group are mostly left out from important activities and decisions.

The review of literature shows that the quality of leader-follower relationships affects voice outcome especially when the voice targets are the leaders. Despite the fact that voice behaviour may be promotive/prohibitive, the relationship between the followers and leaders may determine its influence over leadership competencies. Though available literature seems to portray that a low LMX follower might have challenges in voicing

suggestions to leaders, there is no evidence to suggest that the perceived association between high LMX and low voice and vice visa has been empirically tested from a leadership angle. This study was therefore an attempt to prove whether the relational quality between voicers and their targets in the form of LMX does moderate the relationship between follower voice exertion behaviour and leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda.

2.2 Empirical Literature

Informal learning within SMEs has been identified as a more pragmatic means of developing leadership competencies. To some scholars such as Devins, Johnson, Gold and Holden (2005), informal, trusted networks, professional advisors and training providers are a good source of competence learning and development in SMEs. As such, Gold & Thorpe (2008) proposed learning by doing, interacting and talking with others as a solution. Other scholars such as Lewis, Ashby, Coetzer, Harris and Massey (2005) and Devins et al. (2005a) believed networks developed with a group of close others provides an important source of advice and support for SME leaders as this is cheaper (usually free) and considered trustworthy (Gold et al., 2008). Despite this fact, little empirical evidence exists on whether followers within these informal learning environments precisely influence leadership competencies which demands further exploration.

A search for literature on voice behaviour and leadership competencies indicates that the two concepts have been examined separately which has left a void in management and leadership literature with specific regard to SMEs in developing countries where there is mounting concern over SME high mortality rates. More still, the few studies that have combined voice and leader outcomes have focused on other areas such as leader attention and decision-making (Morasso, 2011), leader reaction to voice (Huang, 2015), leader behavior and decision-making (MacMillan et al, 2013) in developed countries thus ignoring leadership competencies and relationships (LMX) aspects most especially in SMEs in emerging economies whose performance and growth are been held-back by poor Leadership Competencies. This shows that the debate on the relationship between voice and leadership outcome is incomplete and still a work in progress. This article is a step contributes to this debate.

However in terms of promotive voice, most scholars agreed that there is a positive relationship between promotive voice and leader outcomes (Burris, 2012; Cheung and Songqi, 2014; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013). Other scholars reported no relationship (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Menon et al., 2006; Ashford et al, 2009), while some reported mixed results (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Seibert et al., 2001). In terms of prohibitive voice, some studies reported a negative relationship between prohibitive voice and recipient outcomes (Belschak and Den Hartog, 2009); Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013; Fast, Burris & Bartel, 2014; Frese & Fay, 2001; Seibert et al., 2001; MacMillan, et al, 2013; Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Klaas et al., 2012) while some few reported a positive relationship (Cheung & Songqi ,2014; Burris, 2012). This means that the debate on the influence of voice on leadership/managerial outcomes of voice is inconclusive and this study furthers the debate besides validating these contradictions within the context of SMEs in Uganda.

In terms of LMX, a good number of studies found out that the relationship quality between subordinates and managers is an essential antecedent of voice (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013). In particular, employees who maintain a positive relationship with the manager are less afraid to express voice, because they feel it is interpersonally safe to express ideas (Ashford et al., 1998; Edmondson, 1999; Detert & Burris, 2007). In contrast, poor relationship quality contributes to lower levels of psychological safety for expressing voice, resulting in a lower likelihood of voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974). Consistent with past research, it's therefore hypothesized that followers with high quality relationships with their leaders are more likely to speak up and influence the competencies of their leaders because their ideas are more likely to be endorsed.

A quasi-experimental field study by MacMillan et al. (2013) which explored the effect of follower voice, leader regulatory focus and leader-member exchange (LMX) on leader attention and decision-making found out that the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower influenced leader interest and decision-making directly and moderates the path between follower voice type and leader decision-making. Prior studies have generally shown a positive relationship between LMX and Prosocial behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995; Zhu, 2012) thus suggesting that the higher the relationship, the more likely that followers are motivated to speak up with the intention of helping the leaders identify the issues. In contrast, employees with low-quality LMX relationships often receive less support and have fewer chances to exchange opinions with their leaders (Graen& Cashman, 1975).

Similarly, Baer (2012) looked at how employees get their ideas implemented in the workplace and concluded that implementation was more likely when there were strong 'buy-in' relationships. Whiting, et al. (2012) further

demonstrated the significant roles of several communication factors such as the characteristics of the message content, voice provider, and voicing context in evaluations of voice behavior and found out that voice-provider trustworthiness and solution-incorporating voice messages were the strongest communication factors that elicit positive reactions. These findings mostly support the argument that follower voice behaviour plays a key role in sharpening leadership competencies of owner-managers and that followers who practice promotive voice behaviour are likely to sharpen leadership competencies of their SME leaders than those who practice prohibitive voice behaviour.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

For purposes of this study, Follower Voice Behaviour is conceptualised as an independent variable and leadership competencies as the dependent variable. Follower voice behaviour refers to expression of leader-targeted constructive ideas, views, opinions/perspectives or suggestions voiced by followers that are heard by the owner-manager and facilitates SME owner-manager competence learning at the work place (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Its measured using prohibitive and promotive voice constructs (Liang et al., 2012). Leadership Competencies as used in this study refer to a complex combination of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes owner-managers need to lead SMEs effectively' (Boyatzis, 1982). This conceptualisation has a very strong backing from several commentators. For example, Shamir (2007) argued that leadership is a follower-driven phenomenon and followers hold information and expertise needed by the leaders and thus called for a greater appreciation of the influence of followers voice behaviour over leader-related outcomes. This is consistent with Howell and Shamir (2005) who argued that Followers/Employees are a main source of feedback in addition to providing validation of the actions of leaders (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Likewise, Axtell et al., (2000) argued that followers are often in an ideal position to help their leaders owing to their knowledge of the work situation, a view supported by Obolensky (2010) who maintained that employees have faster access to information and know what is going on around them, possibly better than their leaders. To Maroosis, (2008), leadership is something which leaders and followers create together and both follow the common purpose and to Kellerman, (2008) and Chaleff, (2003) leaders cannot lead without followers. To Farris and Lim, (1969) and Sims and Manz, (1984) good leaders are the result of good followers and followers influence leaders. Quite recently Lapierre & Carsten, (2014) stated that followers can act as proactive partners in the leadership process and are an essential part of the leadership equation. Other scholars opined that there are immense benefits associated with the diversity of followers input in the workplace such as crisis/mistake prevention (Edmondson, 2003; Schwartz & Wald, 2003), and individual learning and skill accumulation (Nemeth, 1997, Edmondson, 1999, 2003). As a result, follower voice was suggested as an effective avenue to develop leadership competencies of Ugandan SME owner.

Therefore by looking beyond Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, (2003) conception of voice as a means by which employees help their organizations to innovate and succeed by expressing constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas, this study seeks to broaden the common conception of voice as something that can elicit leadership outcomes. This broadened perspective draws from evidence adduced in many studies recognizing the critical role of voice in achieving positive outcomes such as group learning (Edmondson, 1999), enhanced work processes and innovation (Argyris & Schon, 1978), crisis prevention (Schwartz & Wald, 2003), influencing leaders actions (Hirschman, 1970; Folger, 1977) and better leader behavior as well as better decision-making (Morasso, 2011; Liang, Fahr & Fahr 2012).

On the other hand, the conceptualization of leadership competencies as an outcome of Follower Voice exertion behaviour draws from the works of Mwangi et al. (2013), who in their study of leadership competencies linked to successful SMEs in Uganda and Kenya recommended eight (8) essential competencies closely linked to SMEs' success namely; visioning, building commitment, social capital, personal values, anticipation and resilience, resourcefulness, responsiveness, and entrepreneurial orientation.

This study sought to integrate the two concepts of Follower Voice and Leadership Competencies to find answers to problems of poor leadership competence in SMEs. However, it's conceptualised that leader-follower relationships could have an effect on the interface between Follower Voice Behaviour and Leadership Competencies in SMEs. Despite the fact that voice may be promotive and supportive, the relationship between the follower and leader may have the opposite effect on the leader. On the other hand, followers who demonstrate prohibitive voice behaviour could elicit positive response from the leader because of the moderating factor. This study thus conceptualizes the dyadic association between leaders and followers as a moderator given that the relationship between the two variables seems to be indirect. This moderating variable will be characterized by the highness and lowness of the relationship as theorized in the Leader-Member exchange theory.

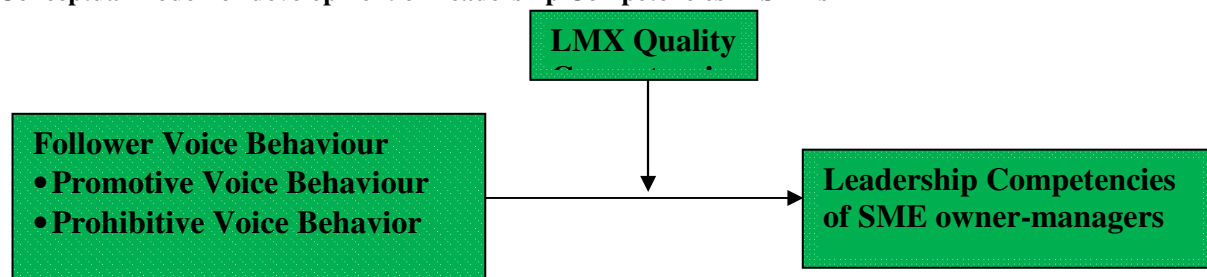**Conceptual model for development of Leadership Competencies in SMEs**

Figure 1: Conceptual Model *(adapted from Liang et.al, 2012 Dansereau et al, 1975 and Mwangi et al 2013)*

Based on the framework, it was be hypothesized that:

H1: Followers practicing Promotive voice behaviour have significant influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H2: Followers practicing Prohibitive voice behaviour have no significant influence over leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H3: LMX Quality moderates the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

H4: LMX Quality moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda.

3. The methodology

3.1 Research Design

This descriptive study employed a cross-sectional survey design and a mixed method methodology to address the research questions. A cross-sectional design was adopted to ensure that only representative sample elements of a cross section of the population were selected. The use of this design also provided the opportunity to obtain detailed information from a number of respondents within the most appropriate and generally acceptable time period coupled with the fact that its results could be generalized to a larger population within defined boundaries (Amin, 2005).

To capture quantitative data, a questionnaire divided into three parts in relation to Follower Voice behaviour, LMX quality and Leadership competencies was designed. The first part was designed to measure the degree to which SME owner-managers practiced promotive and prohibitive follower voice behaviour based on a modified version of Liang et al's (2012) voice scale anchored on a five-point Likert scale . The second part was designed to measure how frequently owner-managers practiced exemplary leadership behaviors as stipulated in the self-version of the Leadership Practices Inventory® anchored on a five-point Likert scale. The third part was designed to measure the quality of leader–member relationships based on the LMX-7 scale developed by Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995) which was also anchored on a five-point Likert scale**.**

3.2 Measurement of Variables

Follower voice behaviour was measured using a validated scale of voice behavior developed by Liang et al. (2012). The instrument includes 10-item scale of voice behavior which was modified to suit the study. Liang et al's (2012) scale consists of two dimensions of voice behavior – promotive (making suggestions) and prohibitive (reporting problems) – using 5 items to measure each dimension. This instrument has been used by a number of studies: (Xie et al, 2015; Jung, 2014; Hassan et al, 2015; Ward, 2013; Shin 2013). Leadership competencies were measured using Kouzes and Posner's (1998a) Leadership Practices Inventory® (Self) which has been used with over 250,000 leaders and more than a million of their constituents. Over 120 scientific studies have so far confirmed the validity and reliability of the LPI and the leadership framework on which it is based. The moderator variable was measured using a validated LMX-7 scale developed by Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Gender, education, and tenure were included as demographic control variables because prior research supposes an association with voice behavior (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

3.3 The study population

For this study, 65 SME owner-managers and 500 of their followers from Mbale ,Tororo and Busia Districts

whose SMEs have been in existence for at least 3 years and that employed at least 10 staff were identified as respondents. Whereas the 500 followers were identified thru random sampling, the 65 owner-managers were identified through the SME networks because of the unavailability in the commercial offices of registers of data about SMEs in of these districts which is not strange given that Rooks & Sserwanga's (2009) had warned that a robust population is difficult to ascertain in studies involving SMEs in Uganda since most of them are not registered. Both owner-managers and their followers were considered as respondents to avoid common method bias because past research indicates that managers and subordinates' perspective of similar measures could significantly differ (Burris et al., 2013; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Both owner-managers and their followers were also sampled because they were considered to be key players and could therefore provide valid and reliable information required for the study.

3.4 Determination of Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

From the target population, a sample size of 54 owner-managers and 392 followers was determined using Roscoe's (1975) and Sekaran's (2003) rule of thumb and Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table respectively. Considering homogeneity in the SME sector and the fact that the problems faced by SMEs are similar across national boundaries (Watkins 1983), besides the dyadic nature of study, this sample size was deemed to be representative and able to give accurate and reliable views concerning follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers. As this was a descriptive study, purposive and simple random sampling strategy were used to respectively identify the 54 owner-managers and 392 followers with due consideration given to the age, experience, gender, and level of education. Most of all, the choice of the sampling technique was guided by the purpose of the study as informed by (Yin, 1997).

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary methods were used to collect data. Primary data was collected using structured self-administered questionnaires and interview guides. The tools selected were not only relevant but also the best for collecting attitudinal and perceptual data from respondents with high literacy ability, and who have nearly full-time exposure to conditions related to the study variables (Peil, 1995). The selection of the tools was guided by the time available the nature of data collected as well as the objectives of the study. Secondary data was collected from journals, textbooks, websites and periodical reports among others.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Before administration of the questionnaires, they were rigorously tested for validity (honesty and genuineness) and reliability (reproducibility and stability) to ensure that each item had a Content Validity Index (CVI) of at least 0.6 and a reliability analysis using Cronbach alpha coefficient of at least 0.7. This was to meet acceptable standards propositioned by Synodinos (2003) who argued that the higher the validity and reliability of an instrument, the more truthful and consistent the data collected by it will be. The results obtained showed that the instrument was internally consistent/reliable because the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.932 which is greater than the recommended 0.70. Despite using validated scales, Validity of the instrument was again established by obtaining expert judgement from two experts in the field and their recommendations were used to make adjustments to some of the research questions. The CVI for the questionnaire was 0.914 against the 0.7 recommended validity measure by Amin (2005), hence the questionnaire was considered valid for data collection. To ensure reliability, the interview guide was piloted on three purposively selected experts and adjustments were made before the real data collection.

3.7 Data Processing and Analysis

For quantitative data, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0 was used to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire because it is user friendly. Descriptive analysis was performed on the variables to determine the measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) and measures of variability, or dispersion (range, variance, and standard deviation). In terms of Inferential statistical analysis, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables. The significance of the coefficient (p) was used to test the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable by comparing it to the critical significance level at 0.05. To test the study hypothesis, linear regression analysis were conducted and the regression coefficient (R) was used to determine the linearity of the relationship between the variables ,the regression coefficient was squared to obtain "R Squared" and the adjusted R Squared was used to determine the percentage of variation explained by the independent variables that affect the dependent variable. The coefficients of the regression (beta, t-value, and significance) were used to test the significance of the contribution of the independent variables on the dependent variable (Sekaran, 2003; Amin, 2005). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also employed to determine the

fitness of the regression model. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the effects of a moderating variable. The qualitative data gathered through interviews was categorized, interpreted and analysed according to the themes and patterns, and then content analysis was used as a data reduction technique. This data was used to triangulate and corroborate findings obtained from quantitative data analysis.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Response Rate

The instruments were administered to 56 owners-managers and 392 followers and a total of 394 responses from owners-managers and followers were received back thus accounting for 88% response rate which according to Punch (2003) is very good (above the 70%) for mail/self-completed questionnaire surveys.

4.2 Reliability Test

This study used Cronbach's alpha value as a tool for internal consistency/reliability analysis. As shown in Table 1 below, the results of the reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.7 limit hence the results are acceptable.

Table 1. Results of the reliability analysis

Variable	Total Constructs	Cronbach's alpha
Voice behaviour	10	0.738
LMX	7	0.766
Leadership Competencies	30	0.925
The Cronbach's Alpha of the study	**47**	**0.932**

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

4.3.1 Background Characteristics of Respondents

The study sample consisted of 340 (100%) owner-managers/leaders and 54 (100%) followers/employees making a total of 394 (owner-managers/leaders and followers/employees). From this sample, most respondents 53% were male while 47% were female. The distribution reveals a fair gender balance and a representative opinions of both gender categories. The analysis also indicates that most respondents were aged between 20 -30 years (52%) followed by those aged between 31 - 40 years (31%) and 41 - 50 years (13%) and lastly those over 51 years (4%). This implies that views about voice behaviour and leadership competencies were sourced from mature and reliable participants who could be having the life experience and maturity to give appropriate responses. The analysis further revealed that most respondents were Secondary/Certificate holders (42%) followed by diploma holders (24%), degree holders (19%), Masters Holders (38%) and PhD holders (2%). Thus the findings could generally be interpreted to mean that the results of the survey predominantly represent opinions of knowledgeable participants whose responses could be relied on.

In terms of work tenure, results shows that 45% of the participants had spent less than 5 years working in their current SMEs compared to 38% who spent more than 5 years and 17% who had spent over 10 years in their current SMEs. This means the overall results represent balanced and reliable opinions about voice behaviour and leadership competencies from relatively experienced respondents.

4.3.2 Voice behaviour, LMX and leadership competencies

The Mean and standard deviations of Voice behaviour, LMX and leadership competencies by respondent category were established as below.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of Voice behaviour, LMX and leadership competencies by category of respondent.

No	Variable	Owner-Managers/Leaders		Followers/Employees		Total	
		Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Promotive Voice	3.31	0.757	3.39	0.794	3.37	0.787
2	Prohibitive Voice	3.17	0.749	3.36	0.780	3.35	0.774
3	LMX	3.56	0.799	3.10	0.609	3.35	0.692
4	Leadership Competencies	3.37	0.731	3.88	0.875	3.83	0.869

Table 2 depicts an agreement among most respondents to the effect that followers practiced leader-targeted promotive voice behaviour to influence leadership competencies of their owner-managers shown by the general mean scores (3.37). The above results also depicted that followers equally practiced prohibitive voice behaviour (mean 3.35) with the mean implying an agreements among most respondents to the effect that followers practiced more promotive voice behaviour than prohibitive voice behaviour because they have the highest average score . In the case of LMX, the findings (mean 3.35)   indicate a stronger higher-quality leader–member exchange (in-groups). In terms of Leadership Competencies, the mean score of 3.83 indicates an agreement among respondents that SME owner-managers practiced exemplary leadership.

4.3.3 Verification of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Followers practicing Promotive voice behaviour have a significantly positive influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda.

Correlation Analysis for promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies

As presented in table 3, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was computed to test the relationship between the variables. To rule out the possibility of multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated and none of the VIFs were greater than 10 as guided by Dielman, (1996) and therefore multi-collinearity was ruled out.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis Result for the hypothesized Variables

Variable	Statistic	Promotive Voice behaviour	Leadership competencies
Owner-Managers			
Promotive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.515*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	54	54
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.515*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	54	54
Followers			
Promotive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.521*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	350	350
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.521*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	340	340
Combined-(Owner-Managers/Followers)			
Promotive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.525*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	394	394
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.525*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	394	394
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level			

The results showed a significant positive correlation between promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies, followers (r= 0.521, p < .05), leaders/owner-managers (r= 0.515, p < .05) combined (r= 0.525, p < .05) which implies that promotive voice behaviour is a very significant factor in the development of leadership competencies and that followers who practice promotive voice behaviour may have significant influence over the leadership competencies of their owner-managers. These findings are supported by Burris, (2012); Cheung

and Songqi, (2014); Liang, Farh, and Farh, (2012); Burris, Detert & Romney, (2013) who asserted that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership behaviours than prohibitive voice.

Having determined the strength, direction and significance of the relationships between promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies, there was need to determine the influence of promotive voice behaviour over leadership competencies. To test the above hypothesis, Regression analysis was conducted and the results of the analysis are shown in table 4 below.

Table 4 Regression analysis result of the influence of Promotive voice behaviour on leadership competencies

Category	Regression co-efficient (B)	t value	p value
Owner-managers	0.544	4.337	0.000
Followers	0.574	11.219	0.000
Combined	0.580	12.229	0.000
1. R^2= 0.266 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.252 ; F= 18.811 ; T =4.337 ; p= 0.000			
2. R^2= 0.271 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.269 ; F= 125.856 ; T =11.219 ; p= 0.000			
3. R^2= 0.276 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.274 ; F= 149.465 ; T =12.229 ; p= 0.000			

From the combined results, Promotive voice behaviour was found to be a significant predictor of leadership competencies of owner-managers (R^2= 0.276, ß=0.515, $p<0.05$). The R^2 value of 0.276 shows that 27.6% of the variation in the leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers is explained/accounted for by variation in promotive voice behaviour and 62.4% of the variation is explained by other factors not in the model or by chance. The results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the model is significant (p value 0.000 < 0.05) and good for prediction. Furthermore, the computed F value of 149.465 is greater than the F-critical 3.87 implying that the model is significant and therefore good for prediction. The regression co-efficient (B) is positive (0.580) and significant (p-value <0.05) statistically suggesting that a one unit increase in Promotive voice can significantly predict a (0.580) increase in leadership competencies. Lastly, the T computed (12.229) is more than the T-critical (1.966) which implies that the predictor variable (Promotive voice behaviour) is significant. This therefore means that the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This therefore implies that promotive voice behaviour is a good predictor and has a positive and significant influence over the leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers.

In addition to the quantitative findings discussed above, the study collected qualitative data interview guide that was administered to the leadership experts. A qualitative analysis was therefore performed to understand the influence of promotive voice behaviour over leadership competencies. The analysis sought to establish from the leadership experts the influence of promotive voice behaviour over leadership competencies. Majority of the respondents pointed out the fact that promotive follower voice behaviour played a significant role in influencing leadership competencies of owner-managers. This is consistent with the findings of Burris, (2012), Cheung & Songqi, (2014), Liang, Farh & Farh, (2012), and Burris, Detert & Romney, (2013) who asserted that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership behaviours than prohibitive voice.

Hypothesis Two: Followers practicing Prohibitive voice behaviour have no significant influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda.

Correlation Analysis for prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies

As presented in table 5, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies.

Table 5. Correlation Analysis result for prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies

Variable	Statistic	Prohibitive Voice behaviour	Leadership competencies
Owner-Managers			
Prohibitive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.310**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.023
	N	54	54
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.310*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.023	
	N	54	54
Followers			
Prohibitive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.506*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	350	350
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.506*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	340	340
Combined-(Owner-Managers/Followers)			
Prohibitive Voice behaviour	Pearson Correlation	1	0.477*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	394	394
Leadership competencies	Pearson Correlation	0.477*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	394	394
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level			

The combined findings revealed a moderately positive correlation between prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies (r=.477, p < .05), an implication that followers who practice prohibitive voice behaviour may moderately influence the leadership competencies of their owner-managers. This contradicts Belschak and Den Hartog, (2009); Burris, Detert, & Romney, (2013); Fast, Burris & Bartel, (2014); Frese & Fay, (2001); Seibert et al., (2001); MacMillan, et al, (2013); Liang, Farh & Farh, (2012); Klaas et al., (2012) who suggested a negative relationship between prohibitive voice and recipient outcomes.

Regression Analysis using Prohibitive voice behaviour to predict leadership competencies

Having determined the strength, direction and significance of the relationships between prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies, there was need to determine the influence of Prohibitive voice behaviour over leadership competencies. To test the above hypothesis, Regression analysis was conducted and the results of the analysis are shown in the table 6 below.

Table 6: Regression analysis result of the influence of Prohibitive voice behaviour on leadership competencies

Category	Regression co-efficient (B)	t value	p value
Owner-managers	0.331	2.351	0.023
Followers	0.567	10.787	0.000
Combined	0.530	10.733	0.000
1. R^2= 0.96 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.79 ; F= 18.811 ; T =2.351; p= 0.023			
2. R^2= 0.256 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.254 ; F= 125.856 ; T =10.787; p= 0.000			
3. R^2= 0.227 ; Adjusted R^2= 0.225 ; F= 149.465 ; T =10.733; p= 0.000			

From the combined test results of the Regression analysis shown above , Prohibitive voice behaviour was found to be a significant predictors of leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda (R^2= 0.227; Adjusted R^2= 0.225, B=0.530, p<0.05) thus accounting for 22.5 percent of the variance in leadership competencies. The result of analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the model is significant (p value 0.000 < 0.05). On the other hand, the regression co-efficient (B) is positive (0.530) and significant (p-value <0.000) statistically suggesting that a one unit increase in prohibitive voice can significantly predict a 0.530 increase in leadership competencies. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the fitted regression equation is significant with F value of 149.465 which greater than the F-critical 3.87 an indication that the model is a good one for prediction and the computed T value of 10.733 is more than the T-critical of 1.966 implying that Promotive voice behaviour is a significant predictor variable. Given that the p-value is less than (0.05), it shows a statistically significant relationship between the variables at (0.95) confidence level. Thus, Prohibitive voice has a significant positive effect over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda but the strength of its relationship with leadership competencies was decreased compared to promotive voice. Statistically, this result sends a signal that compared to promotive voice; prohibitive voice behaviour has lesser influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda. Thus, Hypothesis two was rejected.

Qualitative analysis: Interview results on Prohibitive voice behavior and leadership competencies

Majority of the respondents opined that prohibitive follower voice behaviour was effective in influencing leadership competencies of owner-managers but could be hampered especially in a context in which speaking up may be culturally discouraged (Xu Huang, Van de Vliert, and Van der Vegt, 2005). This contradicts Belschak and Den Hartog, (2009); Burris, Detert, & Romney, (2013); Fast, Burris, and Bartel, (2014); Frese & Fay, (2001); Seibert et al., (2001); MacMillan, et al, (2013); Liang, Farh, and Farh, (2012); Klaas et al., (2012) who suggested a negative relationship between prohibitive voice and recipient outcomes.

Hypothesis Three and Four

H3: High LMX Quality does not moderate the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda.

H4: High LMX Quality positively moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice behaviour and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers in Uganda

Correlation Analysis for LMX Quality and leadership competencies

As presented in table 7, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess whether LMX Quality moderates the relationship between Follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies.

Table 7: Correlation Analysis result for LMX Quality and leadership competencies

Moderator Variable	Dependent Variable	Owner-managers	Followers	Combined
		Correlation co-efficient (r)	Correlation co-efficient (r)	Correlation co-efficient (r)
LMX Quality	Leadership competencies	0.513*	0.542*	0.436*
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level				

From table 7 above, it can be seen that LMX quality was significantly positively correlated with leadership competencies (r=.436, p < .05) which implies that high quality LMX relationships could be associated with significant follower influence over leadership competencies and vice versa. This is consistent with LMX theory

which proposes that the relationship quality between employees and their managers is a key determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013).

Regression Analysis using LMX quality to predict the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies

Having determined the strength, direction and significance of the relationships between LMX quality and leadership competencies, there was need to determine the influence of LMX quality on the relationship between voice behaviour over leadership competencies. To test these hypotheses, a moderated multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the variation in case of the entrance of the moderator variable. The independent variables were mean-centred to avoid multicollinearity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Table 8 presents the regression results.

Table 8. Summary of multiple regression results

Variable	Owner-managers			Followers			Combined		
	Regression co-efficient (β)	t - value	p - value	Regression co-efficient (β)	t - value	p-value	Regression co-efficient (β)	t - value	p - value
Promotive Voice behaviour	0.515	4.337	0.000	0.521	11.219	0.000	0.525	12.226	0.000
Promotive Voice behaviour X LMX	0.171	1.432	0.158	1.36	3.393	0.001	0.180	4.329	0.000
Prohibitive Voice behaviour	0.310	2.351	0.023	0.506	10.787	0.000	0.477	10.733	0.000
Prohibitive Voice behaviour X LMX	0.348	3.055	0.004	0.117	2.850	0.024	0.093	2.364	0.019

In terms of H3, the regression results showed that the interaction between Promotive voice and LMX quality for all respondents was significantly correlated with Leadership competencies (ß=0.180, p<0.05). More so, the interaction changed the R² by 0.029 meaning that a negligible predictive power of 2.9% was added to the model by the addition of LMX quality which is statistically significant (p < .005). From the results, the conclusion is that LMX quality does moderate the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies and therefore H3 was rejected.

In terms of H4, the regression results showed that the interaction between Prohibitive voice and LMX quality was significantly correlated with Leadership competencies (ß=0.093,p<0.05). More so, the interaction changed the R² by 0.009 implying that a predictive power of 0.9% was added to the model by the addition of LMX quality which is statistically significant (p <.005). Statistically, this result sends a signal that LMX quality moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice and leadership competencies and therefore H4 was supported.

Qualitative analysis: Interview results on the moderating role of LMX on the relationship between Prohibitive voice behavior and leadership competencies of SME owner-managers.

The leadership experts who participated in the study generally stated out that relationship quality moderates the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies. They further opined that promotive voice behaviour plays a less effective role in influencing leadership competencies than prohibitive voice behaviour in case of high quality LMX relations and vice versa. This view is consistent with LMX theory which suggests that the relationship quality between employees and their managers is a core determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013).

5. Conclusions

The study established a strong positive relationship between promotive follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies. This implied that expression of promotive voice behaviour by followers had a strong influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in Ugandan SMEs. The positive relationship meant that a directional change in voice behaviour led to a similar directional change in leadership competencies. An in-depth qualitative investigation of the relationship also proved that a positive relationship existed. Overall, the study established that followers/employees in Ugandan SMEs have been practicing promotive voice behaviour and that this partly contributed to development of leadership competencies of their owner-managers. These findings are supported by Burris, (2012); Cheung and Songqi, (2014); Liang, Farh & Farh, (2012); Burris, Detert & Romney, (2013) who asserted that promotive voice has more significant influence on leadership behaviours than prohibitive voice. In broader terms, the findings are consistent with predictions of Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory which suggests that followers who are dissatisfied with leadership competencies will utilise their voice to change things via complaint, grievance or proposal for change (Hirschman, 1970), therefore they will attempt to actively champion important causes from below before decline and failure (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton &Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001).

The second hypothesis was accepted showing that prohibitive follower voice behaviour had influence over leadership competencies of their owner-managers. This because the relationship prohibitive follower voice behaviour and leadership competencies was found to be moderate and positive. The moderate relationship denoted that expression of prohibitive voice behaviour by followers culminated into a moderate influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in Ugandan SMEs. The positive relationship meant that a directional expression of prohibitive voice behaviour by followers led to a similar directional change in leadership competencies. An in-depth investigation of relationship also proved that a positive relationship existed. Thus the study established that prohibitive voice behaviour of followers had influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers in SMEs in Uganda but the influence was lesser compared to promotive follower voice behaviour.

The third hypothesis was rejected because the interaction between Promotive follower voice behaviour and LMX quality was significant. This implied that LMX quality does moderate the relationship between Promotive voice behaviour and leadership competencies. Finally, the fourth hypothesis was accepted because the interaction between Prohibitive follower voice behaviour and LMX quality was significant. In general terms, this implied that LMX quality moderates the relationship between Prohibitive voice and leadership competencies. Over all, the study established that LMX Quality has influence over the leadership competencies of SMEs owner-managers in Uganda. This was because the combined results showed the interaction between follower voice behaviours and leadership competencies was statistically significant thus proving that LMX quality is a moderator variable and thus moderation is supported. This is consistent with LMX theory which proposes that the relationship quality between employees and their managers is an essential determinant of voice outcomes (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2009; Liu, W., Tangirala, S., & Ramanujam, R. (2013).

5.1 Implications

The main theoretical implication of this study in terms of voice behaviour is that followers in the current study expressed upward suggestions or concerns about leadership issues to their leaders which validated exit, voice and loyalty theory. More so, by suggesting that followers influence leadership competencies and are thus a valuable source of knowledge, this study also validates and extends social-constructivism theory. The study also showed that voice can have a positive effect on leadership competencies, depending on one's relationship with the leader. This means relationships positively predicted Leadership competencies when LMX-quality was high and negatively when it was low. A similar relationship was found in the current study as well, with LMX-quality moderating the relationship between voice and leadership competencies. In line with LMX theory, this supports the notion that one should first establish a solid relationship before attempting to provide upward suggestion or criticism. The study has bridged the gap in existing literature on the relationship between voice behaviour and leadership competencies. It also contributes to the Human Resources, Organizational Behavior and leadership literatures by demonstrating that follower play an important role in sharpening leadership competencies of SME owner-managers and that influence is more likely to occur when both parties build high-quality relationships with one another.

From a voice and voicer perspective, another important implication of the study derives from the finding that

promotive voice behaviour has more influence on leadership competencies that prohibitive voice behaviour. This means followers who desire to influence the leadership competencies of their owner-managers should frame their ideas promotively. This also implies that followers need to be careful before expressing prohibitive messages especially in cultures where negative speaking could be discouraged and punished The study also suggested that leaders to an extent dislike prohibitive voice behaviour, this implies that leaders should be aware of their own biases towards followers who practice prohibitive voice behaviour, as they may be deaf to potentially useful input when coming from a disfavoured followers. With employee voice being cited in literature as a key enabler for change, SMEs also need to ensure that their employee's voice is informed.

From a relationship perspective, an important practical implication is that leaders who do not establish good relationships with their followers may not hear diverse and valuable arrays of competence enhancing ideas, insights, and opinions from their followers and they may miss on the opportunity to use this goldmine of ideas to sharpen their competencies. Therefore, leaders should build high-quality relationships with all followers where possible. Otherwise SME performance and growth shall continue to be constrained unless leaders give attention to followers' views and introduce appropriate avenues to capture feedback from them given that their proximity to suppliers, customers and colleagues gives them valuable intelligence. Also, followers should attempt to build high-quality relationships with their leaders if their suggestions or concerns aimed at polishing leadership competencies are to be heard.

For leaders who seek to harness and utilise constructive input from diverse workforce to improve leadership skills and enhance performance , what LMX theory implies is that the types of relationships leaders develop with their subordinates out of daily work interactions matters a lot because the time spent at work is more than time spent outside work. Leaders should never underestimate the power of such workplace relationships given the implications for workplace attitudes and morale and the potential to create an environment characterized by favouritism and unfairness. Therefore, leaders should be aware of how they build these relationships, cultivate workplace relationships consciously, be open to forming good relationships with all staff and prevent these relationships from leading to an unfair work environment.

In the same context but from a job satisfaction perspective, those who choose to express voice (in terms of both suggestions and concerns) could be those who are deeply frustrated and who no longer care about interpersonal harmony and under such circumstances it could be practical to identify the wider reasons behind their frustrations because this may not be sustainable in the long run.

Lastly, in terms of practical use, this study offers less costly and time sensitive solution to leadership learning in SMEs and responds to calls made by, among others, McGuire et al (2008); Walker et al (2007), Hoque & Bacon, (2006); Fuller-Love (2006) who highlighted owner-manager complaints that training programmes were irrelevant to their business or individual needs , never suited their specific needs and considered the modes of delivery to be inconvenient and disruptive to their business operations besides doubting the credibility and expertise of the providers.

5.2 Recommendations

To maximize the uptake of follower ideas, suggestions and feedback by owner-managers, providers must be clear to promote the key benefits of followers as sources of knowledge. It is important that SOMs understand that followers are always available for them to use as much or as little as they wish. It must be clear that it has no fixed time commitment. All of these benefits must be sold to encourage SOMs learning and development.

There is a need to deliberately promote follower voice behaviour as an effective tool in influencing leadership competencies of owner-managers. This can be achieved by encouraging promotive follower voice behaviour given that it's the more effective in influencing leadership competencies than prohibitive voice. More so, followers need to be encouraged to practice promotive voice behaviour .They equally need to be trained on how to frame their messages promotively if at all they are to stand a chance of influencing leadership competencies of their managers.

There is need to encourage prohibitive follower voice behaviour. This can be practically implemented by offering a listening ear to the positives in the prohibitive messages of followers. Followers need to be trained on how to read the wind and understand the most appropriate time to voice prohibitive messages. More so, followers at all levels must be taught how to speak up constructively and productively especially when upward input is offered in an angry and attacking tone.

Business education and training providers need to take note and consider follower or employee voice as a key resource in designing effective training and development programs tailored to sharpen leadership competencies

of owner-managers. Such recognition allows them to redesign their training approaches accordingly. Policy-makers, consultants and other interested parties could derive similar implications from these findings and also design initiatives and tools that integrate voice behaviour and leadership learning in SMEs.

SME owner-managers need to be guided into devising appropriate means of tapping diverse ideas, opinions or suggestions from employees which could be vital source of learning for SME owner-managers. For SOMs to learn from their followers, there is need to create an environment where the same followers feel comfortable speaking up, and such the best ideas can then flow straight up to the leader. Likewise there is need for SME owner-managers to make an audit of their own leadership competencies and if necessary, consider ways to acquire and develop them with knowledge sourced from within their SMEs.

Lastly SME followers should be educated about their important roles as followers and the critical impact they have on their leaders in particular and the performance and growth of their SMEs in general. In line with, Meindl (1995) argument that both leadership and its consequences as largely constructed by followers, followers need to be aware of the important role they play. Gone are the days when followers were viewed as recipients or moderators of the leader's influence, and as avenues to actualize the vision, mission or goals of leaders (Meindl 1995). Followers may need to be coached to guarantee that they present leadership competence enhancing ideas effectively.

5.3 Limitations of the Study and Areas for further research

Much as this study provides some interesting findings and makes an important contribution in leadership and HR literature, there are some limitations worth noting. The study was cross – sectional in nature implying that results obtained may be subjected to the inherent weaknesses of cross – sectional studies. Standard questionnaires were used as instruments to collect data which perhaps limited the ability to collect views about information outside the standardized question. This research used a small sample size centered of owner-managers in SMEs. Future researcher should employ a bigger sample involving other stakeholders like the customers, local authorities among others. Further studies should be carried out in other parts of the country other than those in the current study. The research was also carried out amongst functional SMEs basing on the number of employees and years in operation. Future research should be carried out among collapsed SMEs based on similar variables. Additional research is needed to address group- and organization-level effects of voice and influence from a diverse population.

The highlighted limitations should not take away the fact that the research method that was adopted for this study ensured that quality was not compromised and that very strong and relevant evidence was gathered which satisfied the purpose and objective of the study. This study did not suggest causation, but instead suggested that follower voice behaviour has an influence over leadership competencies of owner-managers but followers who practice promotive voice behaviour were more effective in influencing leadership competencies of owner-managers than those who practiced prohibitive voice behaviour.

In summary, this research provides proof of concept that SOMs can learn from their followers. By suggesting that follower voice behaviour is a viable learning tool for SOMs, followers constructive input thus provides an alternative avenue to learning that meets their learning preferences and addresses their reasons for disliking formal trainings and mitigates many of the reasons often cited for not attending formal training. Promoting this learning tool is important for SOMs, as it is through informal learning that they ensure survival of the business.

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