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# Solidarity in Action at a Time of Crisis: The Role of Employee Voice in Relation to Communication and Horizontal Solidarity Behaviour

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**Solidarity behaviour (SB) among employees is important in building a sense of community in organizations, particularly within a crisis context where adverse working conditions prevail. However, we have limited knowledge concerning how SB develops. Using the lens of social exchange theory, this study examines how top-down communication and employee voice relate to horizontal (employee to employee) SB. We conducted two comprehensive studies during the Greek economic crisis and found that the relationship between top-down employee communication and horizontal SB is mediated by employee voice. The paper extends our existing knowledge in the fields of management and human resource management by advancing our understanding of horizontal SB, highlighting the role of top-down employee communication as an effective human resource practice and delineating the role of employee voice in fostering workplace camaraderie in small and medium-sized enterprises under crisis.**

## Introduction

The concept of solidarity in the literature has traditionally focused on identity politics, industrial relations, class struggle, inequalities and ideological conflicts (O'Toole and Calvard, 2020). Workers' solidarity is often conceptualized as the basis for collective actions within and beyond the organization (Hyman, 2011). This paper departs from the traditional adversarial political and economic understanding of solidarity and instead seeks to understand solidarity behaviours (SBs) exhibited between employees in the workplace with the aim of mutually supporting each other, building

workplace camaraderie and developing a sense of community (Vogl, 2009). Interest in SBs at work has been heightened since the 2007 global financial crisis, given the increased adversity of working conditions (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019) and successive macro-turbulence, including the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020. Such macro-turbulence influences employees' experience with work given the higher job insecurity and stress that prevail, as well as decreased pay, benefits, training and development opportunities (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Prouska and Beauregard, 2019; Cook, MacKenzie and Forde, 2016; Harney, Fu and Freeney, 2018; Maley, 2019), and leads to poorer physical and mental health (Datta *et al.*, 2010; WHO, 2011).

Social support (both work and non-work) can improve employees' psychological well-being (Mayo *et al.*, 2012), therefore enabling employees to cope with the negative impact of such changes (Lawrence and Callan, 2011). For example, empirical evidence shows that high levels of sense of community protect employees against depression and anxiety (Garcia-Reid *et al.*, 2013) as well as increase their motivation, commitment and well-being (Boyd and Nowell, 2020). Yet, social support research is scarce, particularly within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This is a major gap in the literature given that SMEs are extremely vulnerable to external shocks (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018), while at the same time are characterized by informality in the employment relationship and human resource (HR) practices (Psychogios *et al.*, 2016) – which means formal support systems for workers are limited (Della Torre, Gritti and Salimi, 2021; Mallett and Wapshott, 2014). Thus, there is a need for research to focus on whether and how HR practices can support SMEs and their employees in turbulent times (OECD, 2009, 2020).

Solidarity, in general, is 'the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility of a group, which promotes mutual support' (Wilde, 2007, p. 171). According to Laitinen and Pessi (2015, p. 2), solidarity, in its descriptive sense, refers to a 'kind of connection to other people, to other members of a group, large or small', while in its normative sense it requires 'a presumption of reciprocity and perhaps shared group-membership and behaviour according to the norms of a given group'. In the workplace, SB has been conceived as a behaviour exhibited by employees when they 'are prepared to help others in need, resist the temptation to let other members do most of the work, share responsibilities and are prepared to apologize for mistakes' (Sanders *et al.*, 2006, p. 142). SB is premised on two dimensions: vertical solidarity behaviour (VSB) and horizontal solidarity behaviour (HSB). We focus on HSB rather than VSB, because such cooperative behaviour is seen as enabling employees to cope with challenging events (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019).

Given the significance of organizational change within a turbulent global economic context (OECD, 2009, 2020), we seek to understand the extent to which top-down employee communication and employee voice may be important in fostering HSB among employees to cope with

external challenges. The reasoning for focusing on top-down employee communication and employee voice is as follows. Top-down employee communication is regarded as a fundamental HR practice (Den Hartog *et al.*, 2013), and especially important in the context of significant organizational change (Palmer and Dunford, 2008) because it can help shape employee perceptions of the change (Loretto, Platt and Popham, 2010; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2017). Several studies have suggested that open lines of communication between managers and employees can enable employees not only to work effectively in teams and contribute to organizational productivity, but also to help deal with job stressors, to identify more strongly with the organization and to increase job satisfaction (Kumar and Mishra, 2017). In a similar vein, employee voice practices can create opportunities for involvement by facilitating ideas to help organizational efficiency and, in doing so, also lead to a higher sense of organizational commitment (Budd, Gollan and Wilkinson, 2010). Particularly during crisis periods, organizations need a committed workforce and may turn to 'lifeboat democracy' (Cressey, Eldridge and MacInnes, 1985) to deal with the challenges posed by the external environment; employee voice may thus help in this respect (Prouska and Psychogios, 2019). This paper does not adopt the traditional industrial relations perspective of seeing voice as collective bargaining or other institutional mechanisms, as this has limited applicability in relation to SMEs. In contrast, we adopt a more inclusive definition of voice that not only encompasses raising concerns but also sharing ideas with others (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). Voice in SMEs is often constrained as owners/managers wield power over employees' agency in exercising, or withholding, voice (Allen and Tüselmann, 2009; Prouska *et al.*, 2021). Our work is informed by Budd (2014, p. 478), who notes that 'richer understandings have and continue to come from including non-union collective voice as well as various dimensions of individual voice... the frequent approach of starting with Hirschman's (1970) definition of voice is excessively narrow because employee voice is then linked so strongly with complaining rather than broader conceptualisations of input, expression, autonomy and self-determination'.

In particular, we examine top-down employee communication and employee voice in relation to proactive SBs at work among employees

(Maden, 2015), and our focal point is specifically on task and performance communication (Penley and Hawkins, 1985). We build on social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Cross and Dundon, 2019) and argue that, during challenging times, top-down task and performance employee communication relates to HSB, and that this relationship is mediated by employee voice. Mediation mechanisms through which HR practices affect proactive behaviour have attracted less research attention (with the exceptions of Beltrán-Martín *et al.*, 2017; Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; Sonnentag and Spychala, 2012), and we have scant evidence of how this works in a crisis context.

Our work addresses this gap and advances our understanding of top-down employee communication (Den Hartog *et al.*, 2013) shaping employee experience (Loretto, Platt and Popham, 2010; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2017) and supporting employees during times of change (Lawrence and Callan, 2011). It also advances our theoretical understanding of the HSB construct by delineating the role of employee voice in fostering support among co-workers and building workplace camaraderie. The paper sheds new light on ongoing debates on employees' work experience during change (i.e. Lawrence and Callan, 2011; Loretto, Platt and Popham, 2010; Palmer and Dunford, 2008; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2017) and in particular in relation to SMEs in which HR practices are highly informal and oftentimes incidental (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019; Della Torre, Gritti and Salimi, 2021).

## Literature review and hypothesis development

### *Solidarity behaviour*

SB differs from organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), which refers to 'individual behaviour that is discretionary, not explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation' (Organ, 1988, p. 4), in two fundamental ways. First, OCB is rooted within psychology and studies discretionary pro-social behaviours, whereas SB is rooted within sociology and studies behaviours such as 'solidarity' or 'SBs' (Lindenberg, 2006). Second, both concepts are based on the principle of discretionary behaviour but the main motivation behind OCB is to benefit

the organization, while SB within a work context aims at benefitting other members of the organization, with no particular interest as to whether this behaviour may (or may not) consequentially benefit the organization; for example, good OCB is characterized by *altruism* (e.g. helping another person with a relevant task/problem), *conscientiousness* (e.g. carrying out role behaviours well beyond the minimum required levels), *sportsmanship* (e.g. refraining from complaints/grievances) and *courtesy* (e.g. making efforts to prevent a problem) (Organ, 1988), all of which aim to improve organizational functioning. SB, however, follows the norm of taking others into consideration in actions, although the pursuit of short-term pleasure or long-term benefit suggests one would act differently in a given situation (Lindenberg, 2006). SB 'may require a sacrifice, a cost to oneself for the benefit of another individual or the whole group' (Lindenberg, 2006, p. 5) and, therefore, its premise is in relation to the benefit the behaviour brings to an individual or group. The way in which OCB has been defined and analysed has not escaped the attention of critics, who have suggested that the conceptualization of OCB has been built on a managerial orthodoxy whereby workers ('good soldiers') will work tirelessly and obediently to advance organizational goals and objectives (Bies, 1989). The concept of SB deviates from this perspective as an action motivated by solidarity that preconditions feelings of sympathy and belonging together, considers the act as a case of helping in times of distress and regards the distress as a moral problem, an injustice and a source of moral obligation (Wildt, 1999). Herein, the actor feels obligated to help and assumes the possibility of analogous situations in which the recipient acts, has acted or will act in analogous ways towards him/her (Wildt, 1999).

This paper focuses on horizontal SB because such cooperative behaviours between co-workers are seen as enabling employees to cope with challenging periods (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019). HSB is cooperative behaviour characterized by a norm of reciprocity between team members and is defined as 'behaving in the spirit of agreement to other employees even when not convenient and not formally described' (Sanders and van Emmerik, 2004, p. 352). It could be argued that HSB is similar to the concept of OCB directed at individuals (OCBI); however, the premise of OCBI is that behaviours immediately benefit specific individuals

and, indirectly through this means, contribute to the organization (Williams and Anderson, 1991), whereas HSB is purely concerned with behaviours that benefit other team members/co-workers (Koster and Sanders, 2006; Laitinen and Pessi, 2015; Lindenberg, 2006; Sanders *et al.*, 2006) without a focus on how such behaviours may benefit the organization. HSB is the result of mutual interest and support among employees at the same level and is mainly informal and defined through reciprocal relationships. Furthermore, the concept of HSB not only clearly defines who the beneficiary is (employee–employee) (Sanders and Schyns, 2006), but also captures individual employees' personal behaviour towards their co-workers.

#### *HSB through a social exchange perspective*

SET is one of the most influential social science perspectives from which to understand workplace behaviour (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017), bridging the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and social psychology (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Blau (1964) proposed that an exchange relationship emerges between two parties when one party provides a benefit to the other, thereby creating an obligation to respond by providing something beneficial in return. *Reciprocity* is, therefore, one of the key principles of this process (for an overview of other principles, see Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and can be defined through various perspectives, for example as a transactional pattern of interdependent exchanges, as a folk belief or as a moral norm (Gouldner, 1960). Studying reciprocal interdependence is particularly important within the social exchange literature because it emphasizes 'contingent interpersonal transactions whereby an action by one party leads to a response by another' (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p. 876). This reciprocal exchange does not include explicit bargaining (Molm, 2003) and is based more on informality; one party's actions become contingent on the other's behaviour based on rounds of exchange initiatives (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and, in this respect, reduces risk and encourages cooperation and commitment to one another (Molm, Takahashi and Peterson, 2000). This rule of reciprocity means that individuals become involved in an implicit reciprocal exchange (Molm, 2003) and, hence, a good deed may be reciprocated by the beneficiary at a later stage, when an opportunity arises. In tur-

bulent economic contexts, organizations receive significant pressure that results in adverse working conditions for employees (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019); therefore, reciprocal employee support is crucial for employees' well-being (Nyfoudi *et al.*, 2020). A second key principle of this process is *rationality* (Meeker, 1971), namely, using logic to ascertain likely consequences (ends) and how one should achieve those things that are valued (means) (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). This is particularly the case in turbulent environments, where certain employee behaviours and actions might bring about negative consequences (e.g. being labelled a 'troublemaker', poor performance reviews, damaged workplace relationships) or even lead to employer retaliation (e.g. salary withholding/reduction, redundancy, loss of employment) (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018) and, therefore, an individual employee selects a course of action after careful evaluation of the possible consequences.

Solidarity among employees is founded on reciprocity (Koster and Sanders, 2006; Lindenberg, 2006; Wildt, 1999) and SET can explain how this transpires (Sanders and Schyns, 2006). The social interaction between at least two people is fundamental to the development of solidarity (Koster and Sanders, 2006); through this social exchange, employees reciprocate solidarity received from both their co-workers and their supervisors (Sanders *et al.*, 2006). Solidarity can, therefore, be conceptualized as developing within social exchanges in interpersonal relationships, including in the workplace context (MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019). It refers to psychological and social closeness between employees and denotes 'a situation in which the well-being of one person or group is positively related to that of others, indicating mutual interdependence' (De Beer and Koster, 2009, p. 12). Values and norms play an important role in shaping solidarity at work particularly in the context of radical changes in the workplace (Bolton and Laaser, 2020). Employees can form social exchange relationships at work with different parties, such as immediate supervisors, co-workers, employer organization, customers and suppliers (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Under macroeconomic turbulence, however, such exchanges might also be impacted by a conscious choice to select a rational course of action that is based on carefully anticipating the consequences (Meeker, 1971), and this is also likely to affect an employee's decision to engage in SB.

In this paper, we focus on HSB between co-workers (horizontal solidarity; Koster and Sanders, 2006; Sanders and Schyns, 2006; Sanders and van Emmerik, 2004). Research on social exchange relationships between co-workers has explored a number of aspects, including how employees can affect and impact peer behaviour and emotions at work (e.g. Flynn, 2003; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2011). When co-workers are mutually dependent, either formally or informally, they perceive higher solidarity with each other, contrary to those working in firms that do not promote a culture of mutual dependence (Koster *et al.*, 2007). In addition, studies have shown that HSB reduces workplace incivility and deviant behaviour (Itzkovich and Heilbrunn, 2016).

We argue that studying HSB from a social exchange perspective, specifically through the rules of reciprocity and rationality, can enhance our understanding of workplace behaviour among co-workers in times of crisis and better inform organizations in developing cultures and facilitating practices that foster SBs. HSB is even more significant in contexts of crisis, because such contexts create intense pressures on organizations (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019), rendering reciprocal support crucial for employee well-being (Nyfoudi *et al.*, 2020), while rationality guides employee behaviours and actions in order to avoid potential negative consequences (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018).

#### *The relationship between top-down employee communication and HSB*

In this paper, we refer to top-down employee communication as communication strategies and practices designed and implemented by management and directed towards employees with the primary aim of informing organizational members over a range of issues. Top-down employee communication can be verbal (meetings, briefings) or written, and formal or informal (Brewster *et al.*, 2017). We focus specifically on task and performance communication (Penley and Hawkins, 1985); task communication relates to the extent to which supervisors let subordinates know what needs to be done, explain changes in the workplace and explain policy, while performance communication relates to the extent to which supervisors communicate information about the quality of their subordinates' work. We base our decision on

the premise that, amid redundancies and layoffs in a crisis context, employees are more likely to take a rational approach (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and focus on those tasks and activities that are more likely to increase their chances of keeping their job (Nyfoudi *et al.*, 2020), and hence would value task communication. In addition, employees are more likely to want to focus on behaviours directly related to their performance appraisal, not to disadvantage themselves vis-à-vis their colleagues (Nyfoudi *et al.*, 2020), and hence they would also value performance communication.

Effective task and performance communication can help maintain job satisfaction, engagement and commitment (De Ridder, 2004), manage employee well-being (Bordia *et al.*, 2004) and reduce uncertainty (Dundon *et al.*, 2006). It can also positively influence employee perceptions of change, thereby reducing resistance and increasing commitment to change (Maheshwari and Vohra, 2015). Accuracy and clarity of information provided to employees are important, as rumours can quickly spread through the workplace and damage the employer–employee relationship (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991). Communication practices are also antecedents of communication satisfaction, which refers to the degree to which employees perceive satisfaction in information and work relationships amid the overall communication environment (Modaff, DeWine and Butler, 2008). Therefore, employee perceptions of such HR practices matter, not just because they have the potential to bring organizational benefits, but also due to their influence on co-worker assistance (Frenkel, Restubog and Bednall, 2012). Indeed, Frenkel and Sanders (2007) argue that communication is likely to promote greater meaning in work, higher commitment and closer cooperation, not only between management and employees, but also between co-workers.

The early work of Wheelless (1978) indicated that interpersonal solidarity is both the perceived synchronicity and closeness established through communication in a relationship. As communication within a relationship increases or decreases, so will the perceived solidarity (Wheelless, Wheelless and Baus, 1984), as has been established in studies in both friend and family relationships (Patterson, 1995). Workplace relationships are no different (MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019). Organizational culture and leadership styles dictate levels of communication and influence the

levels of solidarity in the workplace (Bourgeois and Friedkin, 2001; Cramm, Strating and Nieboer, 2013). Where leaders/supervisors promote informal/formal communication (MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019; Sanders and Schyns, 2006; Sanders and van Emmerik, 2004), solidarity is stronger. This is particularly important within the SME context, where owners/managers play a pivotal role in shaping top-down communication practices and bottom-up employee voice (Prouska et al., 2021).

Therefore, the disclosure or sharing of accurate information with organizational members is a key element in reinforcing the psychological and social closeness employees feel towards management and towards their co-workers, thereby enabling a social exchange in the employer–employee and employee–employee relationships based on openness (Aryee, Budhwar and Chen, 2002). Failure to accurately communicate information may reduce bottom-up voice (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018), perceived solidarity (Wheless, Wheless and Baus, 1984) and reciprocity (Shaw, Barakzai and Keysar, 2019). During an economic crisis, direct communication (firm to employees) about the state of the business has been found to be an important HRM practice in helping staff better understand how crisis is directly affecting them (Teague and Roche, 2014). Particularly in SMEs, where HR practices are highly informal (Della Torre, Gritti and Salimi, 2021; Mallett and Wapshott, 2014), receiving instrumental information during a turbulent period is perceived as an important resource by SME employees (Nyfoudi et al., 2020). Indeed, the crisis further accentuates the value of top-down employee communication, which not only promotes closer cooperation between colleagues (Frenkel and Sanders, 2007), but also compels them to find ways to mutually support each other. Put simply, when SME employees receive key task and performance information, which could help them keep their job during an economic crisis, they may reciprocate the acquisition of such a valuable resource by in turn helping and supporting each other, leaving ‘nobody alone in crisis’ (Vaiou, 2016, p. 227). Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis in relation to employee communication and HSB:

*H1:* Top-down employee communication is positively related to HSB.

### *The relationship between top-down employee communication and employee voice*

Unlike top-down employee communication, employee voice is essentially bottom-up and concerns the ability of staff to have a say in the activities of their work and the organization (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). Early research in the field of employee communication has presented the benefits of effective communication on employee productivity related to task and performance, particularly when top-down communication invites bottom-up input (Holland, Cooper and Sheehan, 2017). In other words, the extent to which top-down communication can lead to some bottom-up input depends on whether senior management engages in top-down employee communication in a way that enables employees to have a voice and to engage in decision-making. For example, employee performance communication strategies could be the first step on the ‘escalator of participation’ (Wilkinson et al., 2010), with *information* and *communication* leading to some degree of employee participation in decision-making (i.e. task). Therefore, the extent to which voice mechanisms are effective at engaging employees in decision-making is a key factor in building a strong social exchange in the employment relationship (Hom et al., 2009).

In times of crisis, honest and transparent communication regarding tasks and performance can be perceived by employees as a valuable resource (Nyfoudi et al., 2020), a rationally premised notion. Based on SET, employees may reciprocate the acquisition of such resource by offering their voice, sharing their ideas and contributing to decision-making to help the SME survive the crisis. This is in line with extant literature on the role of employee participation in SMEs (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021). Indeed, the purpose, design and implementation of communication strategies can undermine or reinforce the social exchange between employees, their peers and management (Aryee, Budhwar and Chen, 2002), exhibited in employees engaging in voice and a rational evaluation of the possible outcomes. In other words, employee communication practices (task and performance) may relate to the levels of employee voice, particularly as to whether employees believe that these practices make them better informed about organizational matters, as well as more able to share their ideas to contribute to management

decisions (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2010). Hence, we hypothesize:

*H2*: Top-down employee communication is positively related to employee voice.

*The role of employee voice in the relationship between top-down employee communication and HSB*

Employee perceptions of the effectiveness of voice mechanisms can affect outcomes of employee voice such as organizational commitment (Farndale *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, the employer–employee relationship can be further enhanced when employees have the chance to voice their views, perceive that their voice is respectfully treated (Janssen and Gao, 2015) and acted upon (Gao, Janssen and Shi, 2011).

Our first hypothesis suggests that strong top-down communication strategies relate to solidarity among employees. Where senior management engages in top-down employee communication in a way that enables employees to have a voice and engage in decision-making, employees will perceive this as an encouragement to engage in voice behaviour (Frazier and Bowler, 2015). This brings psychological and social closeness between employees (De Beer and Koster, 2009) and helps co-workers to form mutual benefitted relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) based on shared values and norms (Bolton and Laaser, 2020). Similarly, the more open the communication is in the workplace, the more the employees will perceive that their voice matters and the more likely they are to speak up (Botero and Van Dyne, 2009). In addition, the more willing they are to speak up, the more chances to support each other – especially if their voice is socially desirable (Wei, Zhang and Chen, 2015). Therefore, in support of the theories of reciprocity (Molm, 2003) and rationality (Meeker, 1971), higher levels of HSB also develop among co-workers. As such, we argue that the relationship between top-down employee communication and HSB is mediated by employee voice in that the more employee task and performance communication practices take place during times of turbulence and change, the more likely it is for employees to perceive that their views matter, hence it is more likely for them to reciprocate by engaging in voice and expecting positive outcomes (i.e. rationality). For example, during turbulence,

if an employee receives top-down task and performance communication that allows them to sustain their job, the employee may, in turn, reciprocate this action by speaking up and participating in the decision-making to help the business survive. In turn, the more this employee's voice is heard and appreciated in the workplace, the more the employee will feel part of the 'family' (Gilman, Raby and Pyman, 2015) and thus engage in SB. We therefore propose our third hypothesis as follows:

*H3*: Employee voice mediates the positive relationship between top-down employee communication and HSB.

*The context of the Greek crisis*

The severity of the impact of the 2007 global financial crisis varied considerably between economies around the world (Johnstone, Saridakis and Wilkinson, 2019), with some countries experiencing large austerity cuts, while others resisted such measures (Eurofound, 2013). Although research talks about a 'post-crisis' period (Kornelakis, Veliziotis and Voskeritsian, 2017), recovery has not yet been achieved by all affected economies. Institutionally weaker economies have struggled to bounce back to pre-crisis levels, with knock-on effects on working conditions. In Greece, for example, worsening working conditions have become the norm for many workers as the crisis led to regressive institutional employment changes (Psychogios *et al.*, 2020).

Research has studied firms' responses to the crisis through restructuring and downsizing, changing working time arrangements and implementing pay freezes or reducing pay and rewards (e.g. Teague and Roche, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2015). Such strategies have implications for employee motivation, productivity, loyalty and well-being (e.g. Ogbonnaya, Gahan and Eib, 2019). At the national policy level, the ILO (2015) has recorded a general decline in collective bargaining due to the termination of national general agreements, the abolishment of policy support for multi-employer bargaining – particularly in countries hardest hit by the crisis.

Within this general climate of instability, the Greek government, the European Union Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank drew up the 'Greek crisis legislation', which included the three

Memoranda of Understanding and the corresponding primary (four acts: N.3845/2010, N.4046/2012, N.4093/2012 and N.4336/2015) and secondary legislation, implementing them within the Greek legal order on the basis of EU law (Kivotidis, 2018). The signing of these agreements started a process of labour market deregulation (Wood *et al.*, 2015). Key examples include the increase of flexible employment agreements, a rise in enterprise-level agreements and adjustments of terms of employment in individual employment agreements, to the detriment of industry-wide agreements, reduced remuneration and increase of uninsured labour (Eurofound, 2013).

At the organizational level, Greek SMEs were disproportionately hit by the crisis compared to larger enterprises. The crisis increased corporate taxation and restricted access to capital (Psillaki and Eleftheriou, 2015) due to declining turnover and unusual levels of liquid assets (European Central Bank, 2016). This was a particular problem for SMEs who relied on external access to finance for simply maintaining operations, and these liquidity problems had a profound effect on their ability to pay suppliers and employees (Casey and O'Toole, 2014). Liquidity problems intensified in June 2015 with the implementation of capital controls (Samitas and Polyzos, 2016). SMEs were forced to respond by cutting costs and reducing production, leading to employee redundancies and dismissals (OECD, 2009, 2020), job insecurity and job dissatisfaction and work intensification for those remaining (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Prouska and Beauregard, 2019). Due to the crisis, SMEs in Greece continue to face obstacles when looking for financing (European Commission, 2018). So herein we have a good test bed for exploring top-down employee communication, voice and solidarity under conditions of crisis.

## Methods

We tested our hypotheses in one of the most challenging periods for SMEs in Greece. In particular, we conducted our first cross-sectional study in 2015 (when the capital controls had already been introduced) and performed a replication study a year later in 2016. By adopting a two-study approach, we aimed to increase the generalizability of our findings (Köhler and Cortina, 2019). In this respect, and in line with Freese and Peterson's

(2017) recommendations, the second study employed a new sample and a more nuanced research design (i.e. one that allowed us to account for any variance attributable to employees' membership of SMEs).

### *Participants*

In terms of sampling, in line with the SME definition of the European Commission (2012), we focused on employees of firms with less than 250 people, with a turnover of less than €50m for medium-sized firms, of less than €10m for small-sized firms and of less than €2m for micro-firms. We administered the first study to 300 employees working in SMEs across the country. We received back 187 questionnaires, of which 175 were fully completed (58.33% response rate). The participants were 43.4% female, 45.1% were between 26 and 34 years old and 48% held a Bachelor's degree. At the time of the data collection, 30.9% worked in the Retail industry, 9.7% in Manufacturing and 59.4% in Services. A year later (2016), we administered the second study by investigating 740 employees working in 185 SMEs. The targeted participants were different to those of the first study. We received back 361 questionnaires from 86 SMEs. Three of these questionnaires originated from three different organizations and thus were discarded, as per the recommendations of Biemann and Heidemeier (2012) for multilevel analysis, who advised excluding 'those groups in which a single member was observed' (p. 402). Of the remaining questionnaires, 336 were fully completed by employees from 79 SMEs (45.4% response rate). The participants were 45.5% female, 38.1% were between 26 and 34 years old and 38% held a Bachelor's degree; 33.6% worked in the Retail industry, 21.4% in Manufacturing and 44.9% in Services. The average response rate was 4.25 participants and it ranged from two to seven participants per firm.

### *Measures*

All measures are included in Appendix A.

#### *Top-down employee communication*

Top-down employee communication was measured using three items adapted from the task and performance communication scale dimensions by

Penley and Hawkins (1985). We adapted the measure to match better the SME context, shorten the length of the questionnaire and adjust the wording to reflect top-down rather than supervisor's communication, which was the focus of the initial scale. Employees were asked how often they were informed about work-related elements. An example item was 'The priority of the work to be done'. The measure was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Cronbach's alpha for the two studies was 0.77 and 0.76, respectively.

### Employee voice

Employee voice was measured using Botero and Van Dyne's (2009) six-item scale. Example items included: 'I speak up to my supervisor with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures at work' and 'I keep well informed about issues at work where my opinion can be useful'. The measure was rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the studies was 0.89 and 0.87, respectively.

### Horizontal solidarity behaviour

HSB was measured using Sanders and Schyn's (2006) five-item scale, whereby we substituted the word 'supervisor' for 'co-workers'. The items are outcomes of relationships with a strong reciprocal norm (Koster and Sanders, 2006). Participants were asked to indicate how often they support their co-workers using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (every day). An example item was 'I try to equally divide the pleasant and unpleasant tasks between me and my co-workers'. Cronbach's alpha for the two studies was 0.83 and 0.77, respectively.

### Control variables

We have followed recommendations by Bernerth and Aguinis (2016) to only draw our controls from extant literature that has indicated a theoretical connection directly relevant to the variables under examination. We thus controlled for organizational size and participants' age, as both have been identified as determinants of employees' voice behaviour (e.g. Bryson *et al.*, 2007; Tucker *et al.*, 2008).

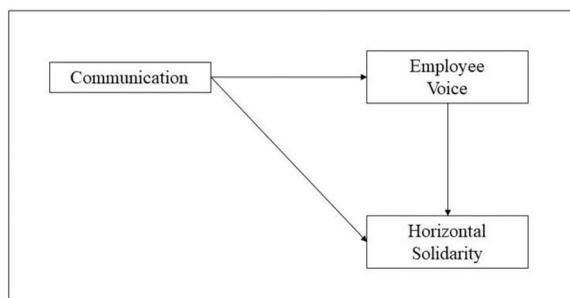


Figure 1. Proposed framework

Note: Communication refers to top-down employee communication.

### Measurement model

We assessed the three-factor structure of the model by conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The results of the CFA revealed a good model fit for both Study 1 ( $\chi^2 [74] = 152.034$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.929, RMSEA = 0.078, SRMR = 0.052, AIC = 6,643.411) and Study 2 ( $\chi^2 [74] = 218.623$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.917, RMSEA = 0.076, SRMR = 0.049, AIC = 13,552.780). We also compared the three-factor model to a two-factor model, where employee communication and voice were merged into one factor, as well as a one-factor model (i.e. Harman's single-factor test), where all three constructs were merged into one factor. As shown in Table 1, in both studies the measurement model had a better fit than the two comparison models.

### Data analysis

In Study 1, we tested the hypothesized model (Figure 1), conducting structural equation modelling (SEM) in the form of path analysis with manifest variables. Path analysis is popular in management and behavioural science (Cole and Preacher, 2014) because it allows the use of SEM with smaller sample sizes (Huang *et al.*, 2015). Cole and Preacher (2014) recommend that this type of analysis necessitates reliable measures, multiple items per measure and relatively simpler models (i.e. without multiple parameters); conditions which are all met for the study. Models with CFI above 0.9 are considered acceptable (Bentler and Bonett, 1980), with RMSEA below 0.06 good (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and with SRMR below 0.08 good (Hu and Bentler, 1999). AIC does not have a cut-off point but is used to compare different models (e.g. in CFA), denoting that the

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis for hypothesized variables

Models	$\chi^2$	$\Delta\chi^2$	d.f.	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	AIC
<i>Study 1</i>							
Three-factor model	152.034	–	74	0.078	0.052	0.929	6,643.411
Two-factor model	214.603***	62.569***	76	0.102	0.066	0.873	6,701.980
One-factor model	358.542***	206.508***	77	0.279	0.151	0.721	6,867.919
<i>Study 2</i>							
Three-factor model	218.623	–	74	0.076	0.049	0.917	13,552.780
Two-factor model	449.851	231.228***	76	0.121	0.090	0.787	13,780.008
One-factor model	733.950	515.327***	77	0.159	0.119	0.625	14,062.108

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Study 1 (N = 175)</i>							
1. Age	0.37	0.48	–				
2. Size	0.21	0.41	0.14	–			
3. Communication	4.21	0.71	0.17*	–0.20*	–		
4. Voice	5.44	0.98	0.16*	–0.13	0.55***	–	
5. Horizontal solidarity	5.22	1.25	–0.06	–0.15	0.23**	37***	–
<i>Study 2</i>							
<i>Individual level (N = 336)</i>							
1. Age	0.49	0.50	–				
2. Communication	4.05	0.78	0.10	–			
3. Voice	5.34	0.99	–0.05	0.29***	–		
4. Horizontal solidarity	5.12	0.95	0.01	0.28***	0.35***	–	
<i>Firm level (N = 79)</i>							
5. Size	0.32	0.50					

Age = control variable for age (0 = participants less than 35 years old; 1 = participants 35 years old or older); size = control variable for size (0 = firms with less than 50 employees; 1 = firms with 50–249 employees); communication = top-down employee communication.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

model with the smallest AIC value fits the data better (Akaike, 1987).

In Study 2, given that participants were nested into organizations, we needed a different type of analysis to account for the non-independence of the data (Preacher, Zyphur and Zhang, 2010, 2011). Indeed, Julian (2001) demonstrated that when the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is higher than 0.05, ignoring the multilevel structure of the data leads to biased results. In our case in Study 2, the ICC for employee communication is 0.16 and the ICC for voice is 0.27. Hence, we adopted multilevel SEM (MSEM) as described by Preacher, Zyphur and Zhang (2010) and in particular, the 1-1-1 model of mediation. This procedure allows the separation of the *within* and *between* parts of the model and thus offers less biased results in comparison with other multilevel

methods (Preacher, Zhang and Zyphur, 2011). In addition, given that the control variable of organizational size was identical among participants from the same organization, we included it in the path model as an organizational rather than an individual-level variable. In both studies, we adopted bootstrapping (10,000 samples) to examine the mediation, which allowed for the computation of confidence intervals.

## Results

### Study 1

*Descriptive statistics.* Table 2 summarizes the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables. In line with our hypotheses, employee communication correlated with

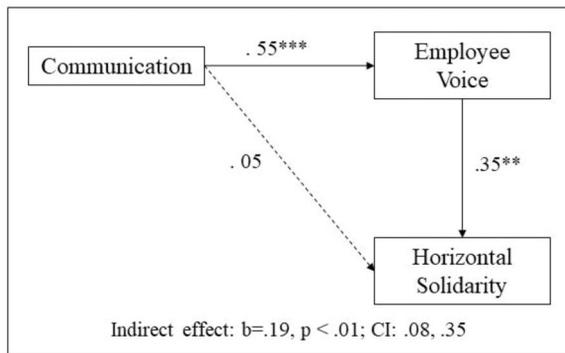


Figure 2. Resultant framework: Study 1

Note: Communication refers to top-down employee communication.

employee voice ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and HSB ( $r = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Path analysis.** The hypothesized model yielded an excellent fit ( $\chi^2 [2] = 1.361$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = 0.000, SRMR = 0.016, AIC = 986.973). The analysis showed that the direct relationship between employee communication and HSB is not significant ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ); hence, H1 was not supported. The analysis further revealed that the relationship between employee communication and voice is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), thus providing support for H2. In addition, the relationship between employee communication and HSB through employee voice was found to be both positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; CI [0.16, 0.55]), thereby supporting H3 (see Figure 2). We also conducted a robustness test that excluded the control variables and found similar results.

### Study 2

**Descriptive statistics.** Table 2 summarizes the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables. Similar to Study 1, communication correlates with both voice ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and HSB ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Path analysis.** The analysis rendered a good fit for the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2 [7] = 13.202$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , CFI = 0.910, RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR = 0.038, AIC = 3,104.327). In terms of within-level estimates, the analysis yielded a significant direct relationship between employee communication and HSB ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), a significant direct relationship between employee communica-

tion and voice ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a significant indirect relationship between employee communication and HSB via voice ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; CI [0.02, 0.20]). With regard to between-level estimates, the analysis demonstrated an insignificant direct relationship between employee communication and HSB ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and an insignificant direct relationship between employee communication and voice ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ). The between-level mediation of voice in the relationship between employee communication and HSB was found insignificant ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; CI [-0.07, 0.31]). The indirect effects are summarized in Table 3. We also ran a robustness test without the control variables and found similar results, with the exception that the between-level direct relationship between employee communication and HSB was found significant ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). All in all, the analysis for Study 2 provided support for all three hypotheses (see Figure 3).

## Discussion and conclusions

### Contribution and implications

The purpose of this paper is to examine how top-down employee communication and employee voice are related to HSB. We studied this within the context of SMEs operating in a wider economic crisis, where working conditions and employee morale have deteriorated (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019). Our two studies demonstrate that in times of crisis, employee (task and performance) communication based on a top-down (manager to employee) dissemination of information is significantly related to HSB. The analysis of the first study found that the direct relationship between employee communication and HSB (H1) was not supported, but revealed that (i) the relationship between top-down employee communication and voice (H2) was significant and positive and (ii) the relationship between top-down employee communication and HSB through employee voice (H3) was also significant and positive. The second study, which controlled for variance attributable to organizational membership, provided support for all three hypotheses.

Our work contributes in two ways. First, we study top-down employee communication as a fundamental HR practice (Den Hartog *et al.*, 2013), shaping employee experience (Loretto, Platt and Popham, 2010; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2017)

Table 3. Indirect effect of top-down employee communication on horizontal solidarity behaviour via employee voice

Path	Indirect effect	Significance	CI
<i>Study 1</i>			
COMM → EV → HSB	0.19	p < 0.01	[0.08, 0.35]
<i>Study 2</i>			
Within:			
COMM → EV → HSB	0.10	p < 0.05	[0.02, 0.20]
Between:			
COMM → EV → HSB	0.12	p > 0.05	[-0.07, 0.31]

Note: CI = confidence interval; COMM = top-down employee communication; EV = employee voice; HSB = horizontal solidarity behaviour.

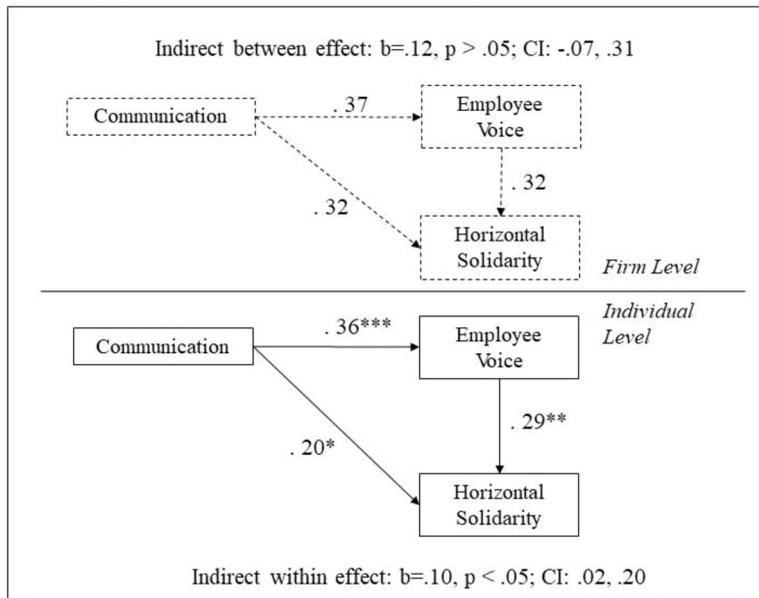


Figure 3. Resultant framework: Study 2 Note: Communication refers to top-down employee communication.

and supporting employees during times of change (Lawrence and Callan, 2011). While top-down employee communication is often treated as simply the lowest step on the escalator of participation (Marchington *et al.*, 1992) on the grounds that it is very much a one-way process and does not allow much employee participation, in contrast we demonstrate that during periods of intense macro-turbulence, top-down employee communication is an instrumental HR practice that may lead not only to employee voice but also to solidarity.

Second, we extend the theoretical understanding of the HSB construct (i.e. Koster and Sanders, 2006; MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019; Sanders and Schyns, 2006; Sanders and van Emmerik, 2004) and in particular, examine how HSB can occur through the implementation of HR

practices. To the best of our knowledge, this is a novel perspective. HR practices have the potential to develop solidarity in the workplace through social exchanges in interpersonal relationships (MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019), and the potential to instil the values and norms needed for shaping solidarity – particularly in contexts of radical change (Bolton and Laaser, 2020). Studying HSB brings the employee experience of a wider crisis to the forefront (Ogbonnaya, Gahan and Eib, 2019) and helps us understand the benefits of social support during periods of intense turbulence and change. The foundations upon which the HSB concept is built enable such an employee-centric focus.

Our findings suggest that HSB occurs as a process of social exchange (Koster and Sanders, 2006; Lindenberg, 2006; Wildt, 1999). During a

crisis, employees in SMEs feel uncertain and, in this context, are looking for ways to 'survive the turbulence' (Nyfoudi *et al.*, 2020). A strategy to achieve this is through exhibiting HSB towards their co-workers to find ways of mutual support (reciprocity). Previous research has indicated that SMEs are characterized by existing close working relationships (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021; Tsai, Sengupta and Edwards, 2007), so one might expect an element of SB to be already present in such enterprises. However, literature specific to SMEs operating under economic crisis has demonstrated that tension builds up in work relationships due to the increased uncertainty and fear of layoffs (Arghyrou and Tsoukalas, 2010), with bullying behaviours observed between employer and employee, manager and employee and among employees (Galanaki and Papalexandris, 2013). In such contexts, voice may seem risky, or futile (Prouska and Psychogios, 2018). Our findings, however, demonstrate that, during crisis, HR practices could help ease these tensions. Specifically, we found that top-down employee communication is reciprocated by employee voice, leading to positive, rational outcomes which subsequently lead to building co-worker camaraderie. This is a particularly important finding within the SME context, which is characterized by informal HR practices (Della Torre, Gritti and Salimi, 2021; Mallett and Wapshott, 2014). In SMEs, the owner/manager plays a pivotal role in the governance structure in managing top-down employee communication and shaping employees' agency in exercising or withholding voice (Prouska *et al.*, 2021). Voice is contingent on organizational signals and management messaging. Gilman, Raby and Pyman (2015) reported that where owners/managers engage employees in open/informal dialogue and are transparent with decision-making processes, employees perceive this to create a 'family feel' in the organization, characterized by collaborative relationships with owners/managers and with other workers, and by high levels of trust between all parties. This can explain our findings; where SME owners/managers engage in top-down employee communication (task and performance) during a crisis period, employees perceive this to foster a collaborative and supportive climate in the organization. They reciprocate by not only extending support to the organization by engaging in voice, but also to their co-workers by engaging in HSB. This support mobilization can be conceptu-

alized as a coping strategy (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) to deal with the stress and uncertainties arising in the workplace during a crisis (Lawrence and Callan, 2011). Employees engage in positive interpersonal transactions with their co-workers for emotional (e.g. the provision of affect by showing concern or listening), informational (e.g. the provision of information, advice), instrumental (e.g. the provision of active help with regard to labour, time) and appraisal (e.g. the provision of information relevant to self-evaluation) support (House, 1981). Due to this support mobilization, and as our research has demonstrated, they help their co-workers to finish tasks, are willing to help their co-workers when things unexpectedly go wrong, they apologize to their co-workers when they have made a mistake, they try to divide tasks equally between themselves and their co-workers and they live up to agreements with their co-workers.

In terms of practical implications, our work encourages SME owners/managers and HR departments to pay particular attention to top-down employee communications, especially during macro-turbulence. Having a clear plan of how to communicate task and performance information to employees will contribute towards an improved employee experience. This has significant implications for employee well-being, as well as for organizational performance. Organizations are constantly looking for ways to cope and survive in such turbulent conditions, and our research uncovers ways in which SMEs can support employees and help them persevere in the midst of a crisis. Solidarity among employees is important in building a sense of community in organizations for supporting employees' psychological well-being (Mayo *et al.*, 2012), particularly where adverse working conditions prevail within a crisis context. This is in accordance with studies suggesting that a sense of community increases solidarity, which in turn is used as an effective buffer in stressful and demanding work situations (Asensio-Martinez *et al.*, 2019; Talò, Mannarini and Rochira, 2014) such as in a crisis context (Psychogios *et al.*, 2019).

## Limitations and future research

The cross-sectional aspect of the data collected for both studies means that we cannot make any dynamic causal inferences. Nevertheless, we strongly support the view that exploration of new

theories related to understudied issues, like HSB, can be done through cross-sectional studies ‘especially when a strong theory-driven model is tested through SEM’ (Boxall, Guthrie and Paauwe, 2016, p. 109). The study of HSB in crisis contexts can benefit from longitudinal studies in the future. Another limitation relates to the single crisis context and the specific country culture (Greece) that the two studies focused on. Further, it is important to acknowledge that the number of individuals employed in SMEs in Greece was 1,815,465 in 2015 and 1,867,240 in 2016, when Studies 1 and 2 were conducted, respectively (European Commission, 2015, 2016). Based on these figures, the initial target of 300 (Study 1) and 740 (Study 2) participants was not representative of the total population of employees; however, the response rates achieved, 58.33% (Study 1) and 45.4% (Study 2), offer adequate confidence over the generalizability of the findings to the larger population (Rogelberg and Stanton, 2007). Indeed, these figures are within the norm for response rates outside the United States, as indicated by Baruch (1999). Moreover, we conducted two separate studies, 1 year apart from each other, using different participants as well as analyses and achieved similar findings, which further increases the generalizability of the hypothesized model (Köhler and Cortina, 2019).

It is also important to note that our model is employee-centric and thus necessitates the collection of data from SME employees. Doing so, we heed calls for more research focused on SME employees, an area that is under-researched (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021). However, to avoid common method bias, we took specific remedial actions (Podsakoff, MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012), including highlighting the volunteering and confidential character of the study, introducing other measures in between the scales measuring the variables under investigation in the questionnaire, and using different anchor labels. Furthermore, we tested for common method variance, employing Harman’s single-factor technique and found that when all the items load to a single factor, this factor explains less than 50% of the variance in both studies (37.50% in Study 1 and 41.26% in Study 2), thus indicating that it is less likely for common method variance to be present.

Future research can bring to the forefront how employees operate during periods of crisis and change and the way in which co-worker behaviours, such as HSB, can enable a more positive

experience. This type of research can offer a fresh perspective from OCB studies, which have been more concerned with workplace behaviours promoting organizational functioning. Comparative studies can explore whether voice has a similar role in the relationship between employee communication and HSB during crisis periods across different cultures. Moreover, given that previous studies on employee communication have adopted mediation designs not accounting for group/organizational membership (e.g. MacDonald, Kelly and Christen, 2019), we believe that more multilevel studies are needed to examine the contribution of employee communication to important work outcomes. Our study foreshadows issues emerging from the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on working conditions. Studies specific to measuring working conditions in the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods could shed additional light on issues of employee solidarity and employee voice. In line with this, a fruitful research avenue that entails pre- and post-crisis data collection is the examination of different antecedents of solidarity. For example, it is possible that different types of crises, or their repercussions for SMEs (e.g. redundancies), result in keeping in employment only those who show solidarity or alternatively, employees may exhibit solidarity as a gesture of appreciation for having kept their job during macro-turbulence. Finally, future studies may examine whether, within a wider crisis context, top-down employee communication in SMEs triggers different reactions to employees of differing occupations in terms of voice and solidarity.

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## Appendix 1: Measures

*Top-down employee communication* items – based on task and performance dimensions of communication scale by Penley and Hawkins (1985).

How often have you been informed about:

- (a) What is to be done in your job (your job duties)
- (b) Your manager or supervisor's expectations about your job performance
- (c) The priority of the work to be done

(1= Not at all, 5 =Very much)

*Employee voice* items – developed by Botero & Van Dyne (2009).

Reflecting on the last five\* years, how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- (a) I develop and make recommendations to my supervisor concerning issues that affect my work
- (b) I speak up and encourage others in my work unit to get involved in issues that affect our work
- (c) I communicate my opinions about work issues to others in my work unit, even if their opinions are different and they disagree with me
- (d) I keep well informed about issues at work where my opinion can be useful
- (e) I get involved in issues that affect the quality of life in my work unit
- (f) I speak up to my supervisor with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures at work

(1= Strongly Disagree 7 = Strongly Agree)

*Horizontal solidarity* items – adapted from Sanders and Schyn (2006).

Reflecting on the last five\* years, how often have you been supporting your co-workers?

- (a) I help my co-workers to finish tasks
- (b) I am willing to help my co-workers when things unexpectedly go wrong that nobody is responsible for
- (c) I apologise to my co-workers when I have made a mistake
- (d) I try to equally divide the pleasant and unpleasant tasks between me and my co-workers
- (e) I live up to agreements with my co-workers

(1 = Never, 7 = Every day)

\*since the beginning of the national economic crisis