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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Employee voice in times of crisis: A conceptual framework exploring the role of Human Resource practices and Human Resource system strength

Margarita Nyfoudi[1] | Bora Kwon[2] | Adrian Wilkinson[3,4]

[1]Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

[2]Jack Welch College of Business & Technology, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut, USA

[3]Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Nathan, Australia

[4]Sheffield University Management School, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence
Margarita Nyfoudi, University House, Birmingham Business School, Edgbaston, B15 2TT, Birmingham, UK.
Email: m.nyfoudi@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite extensive developments in the field of Human Resource Management, we still have limited and fragmented knowledge of how the external and internal environment of an organization influences direct employee voice. In this conceptual paper, we draw on signaling theory and theorize on whether and, if so, how direct employee voice and organizational voice climate are shaped at times of macro and organizational turbulence. Specifically, we introduce the concepts of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related Human Resource (HR) practices and propose that they send different signals to employees, influencing their voice perceptions in distinctive ways. We also theorize that employees interpret these signals vis-à-vis the experienced meso- and macroturbulence, a process that affects HR system strength and the subsequent formulation of voice perceptions and voice climate emergence. With this work, we contribute to the voice and strategic HR literature by offering an integrated and multilayered understanding of how top-down processes at turbulent times such as crisis-related HR practices can influence bottom-up emergent phenomena.

KEYWORDS
conceptual paper, crisis, employee voice, HR practices, HR system strength

1 | INTRODUCTION

An increase of highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) external contingencies (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters) has rendered organizations in need of effective crisis management practices (Biron et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2022). Indeed, macro-crises may aggravate organizational volatility exhibited in the corrosion of organizational structures (e.g., the collapse of communications), deterioration of employees' working conditions (e.g., work intensification), and the endangerment of organizational legitimacy (King, 2002). Direct employee voice has been acknowledged as an important alleviation mechanism during turbulent times (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012; Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023), potentially benefiting the whole organization (Farh et al., 2020). Providing constructive ideas or raising concerns and grievances regarding employee-related or organizational problems may help employees, as well as organizations, weather crises (Wee & Fehr, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, our understanding of how direct employee voice and climate are shaped in times of extreme macro- and organizational instability is lacking. Specifically, we need to know more about whether and, if so, how macro factors, such as national and international economic or social conditions, influence direct voice within organizations (Marchington, 2015; Morrison, 2023). Furthermore,

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despite past literature acknowledging that direct voice is often facilitated by various Human Resource (HR) practices (Conway et al., 2016; Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Marchington, 2008), we know little about the signals different HR practices convey regarding speaking up. This is problematic especially during crises because HR may send confusing messages or signals that are the opposite of what is intended and even detrimental to the employees and the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). For example, organizations addressing an increasing employee mental health crisis (Patel, 2023) may opt for the delivery of additional well-being initiatives which seem to have little positive impact on employees' well-being (Fleming, 2024) leaving employees confused in relation to their employer's duty of care toward them. In addition, although a handful of extant studies have focused on the micro-processes (i.e., "individuals' affect, behavior, choices, and cognition", Cowen et al., 2022: 1) through which HR practices promote direct employee voice (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Hu & Jiang, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019), we still have little knowledge of how such practices influence voice climate. Shedding light on the emergence of voice climate is important because it has been acknowledged as a key contextual coping mechanism for employees working in highly complex and volatile environments (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016).

Drawing on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), we thus aim to develop an integrated conceptual framework to examine direct employee voice and climate during macro- and organizational volatility. The main tenet of our work is that at any given moment, the HR department on behalf of the employer assumes the role of "signaler" in relation to the current state of working conditions. Accordingly, employees make inferences about the climate within the organization and whether it is conducive to speaking up based on the implemented HR practices, that is, the signals the HR/employer is transmitting. We focus on individual perceptions of formal and informal direct employee voice because this type of voice relates to important coping behaviors during turbulent times, such as solidarity toward other employees (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023), and due to often being the only type of voice accessible to employees, for example, in nonunionized organizations (Goldberg et al., 2011) or institutional contexts characterized by weak employment support (Kougiannou, 2023). In doing so, we align our work with Budd (2014: 478) who highlights the value of exploring individual direct voice and calls for more pluralistic understandings that, in contrast to Hirschman's (1970) main focus on complaining, allow for "broader conceptualizations of input, expression, autonomy and self-determination."

The contribution of our paper is threefold. First, we offer novel insight in terms of the examination of direct employee voice under macro- and mesoturbulence. In this respect, we move beyond previous work that situated the investigation of employee voice within a crisis (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023; Rho et al., 2022). Our theoretical framework takes into consideration not only the external environment but also the extent to which such a crisis influences an organization. By conceptualizing direct voice as part of an overall ecosystem that encompasses macro and meso influences, we bring to the forefront the importance of context which is often neglected in micro theory (Barry & Wilkinson, 2022; Cowen et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). Second, in contrast to extant work that has focused on individual employee perceptions of the HR system strength (Bednall et al., 2022), we turn the spotlight on HR system strength as an organizational-level construct. In doing so, we shift the attention back to Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) original conceptualization and open a new line of inquiry by theorizing how HR system strength influences voice perceptions and voice climate emergence. In doing so, our theorization reveals that HR system strength does matter in employee signaling, especially in times of extreme volatility and uncertainty. Third, our study introduces a new classification of HR practices, that is, crisis-related HR practices, acknowledging that even organizations employing high-commitment or high-performance work practices (Pfeffer, 1996) need to consider and respond to external contingencies. Whereas previous literature has focused on the positive outcomes of HR (Jiang et al., 2012), we provide a more nuanced approach whereby HR practices may have not only positive but also negative individual and organizational consequences.

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of direct voice perceptions, HR practices, and HR system strength as the theoretical building blocks of our conceptual framework. Second, we juxtapose these concepts against the backdrop of macro and organizational turbulence and develop our propositions. Third, we present and elaborate on our model in an integrated way and finally, conclude by discussing how the model informs theory, practice, and future research.

2 | THEORETICAL BUILDING BLOCKS

2.1 | Individual, direct voice perceptions

Employee voice is defined as the "opportunity for employees to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owner" (Wilkinson et al., 2014: 5). Speaking up does not only entail offering suggestions or ideas but also can include concern about and dissatisfaction with processes or issues that are problematic for employees and/or the organization (ibid.). Employee voice has been extensively examined either as a perception (Farndale et al., 2011; Kwon & Farndale, 2020), behavior (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001), or process (Dundon et al., 2023). Extant studies demonstrate that perceived employee voice relates to organizational decision-making, employee engagement, employee–line manager relationships, trust in senior management, and organizational commitment (Farndale et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013; Weiss & Zacher, 2022). Similarly, employee voice behavior has been linked to employees' creativity, innovative behavior, and other-rated in-role performance (Chen et al., 2020; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Employee voice as a process has been linked among others to perceptions of fair treatment (Millward et al., 2000), teamwork and partnership (Dundon et al., 2004), and political participation in civic society (Budd et al., 2018).

In this paper, we are interested in individual perceptions of both formal and informal direct employee voices and how they are shaped

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TABLE 1 Examples of different forms of direct employee voice.

Degree of formality	Initiated/ facilitated by	Examples
Formal direct employee voice	Employer	Suggestion schemes
		Employee surveys
		Formal meetings between management and employees
	Employee	Problem-solving teams
		Open-door dispute resolution
		Email peers/superiors
Informal direct employee voice	Employer	Manager-initiated informal discussions
	Employee	Incidentally expressing concern, dissatisfaction, or ideas to managers, peers, and/or other staff members

by the HR process. We focus on perceptions rather than on behavior or process because the latter two necessitate "a latent voice opportunity," that is, an occasion upon which the employee may choose to speak up (Morrison, 2014: 179). In other words, at any given moment employees have a subjective understanding of whether the environment is conducive to speaking up (in relation to raising ideas and/or concerns), but the opportunity to do so may not have yet arisen. Formal direct employee voice could take the form of employer-sponsored voice practices, including suggestion schemes, discussion forums, and meetings between employees and management (Knoll & Redman, 2016). They could also take the form of employee-driven practices, such as formally emailing peers or supervisors to raise an idea or concern. Similarly, informal direct employee voice could be facilitated by management, through an open culture whereby the manager chats with an employee in the corridor and the employee finds the opportunity to speak up about a particular situation (Huang et al., 2023). Informal direct employee voice could also be employee-led, such as when an employee raises an idea or concern with a colleague or superior incidentally. Table 1 enlists examples of different types of direct employee voice. Although the occasion may not always lead to employees exhibiting direct voice behavior, understanding whether they perceive that they can do so when the opportunity arises is a central tenet in our conceptual framework and forms the basis of organizational voice climate. The following sections elaborate on HR practices and HR system strength, which are also key building blocks of our framework.

2.2 | Human Resource practices as antecedents of employee voice

Previous work highlighted the complexity entwined in encouraging employee voice in the workplace since voice behavior has inherent characteristics that employees can deem risky and ineffective (Sherf et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Indeed, employees decide whether and how much they speak up through a decision calculus process based on two key considerations: (1) whether engaging in voice may have negative consequences regarding job security, advancement, and work relationships, and (2) whether speaking out may be effective in bringing about the desired result (Morrison, 2014). Therefore, studies investigating antecedents of direct employee voice have examined ways in which speaking up could be a safe and impactful behavior in organizations (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Morrison, 2011, 2014). However, the majority of these studies focus primarily on micro-antecedents; thus, omitting potentially significant factors, including organizational mechanisms and practices, that may play an important role in the development of direct voice perceptions.

Indeed, HR practices as well as their implementation and realization may considerably impact direct voice perception and behavior (Marchington, 2008). The existing small body of work that has examined how HR practices (e.g., high-performance work systems) influence direct employee voice has tended to focus on micro-processes (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Hu & Jiang, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019) rather than the role of organizational-level processes, such as task-based participation, upward problem-solving, and fair-treatment complaints (Marchington, 2008). Furthermore, only a few studies investigated how specific HR practices relate to employee perceptions of direct voice under macro-level conditions, such as national and global crises, (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023; Rho et al., 2022) so we have little understanding of whether and if so, how macro-level factors may shape the impact of HR practices on direct voice perceptions and voice climate.

Drawing on the contention between Kant's (2019) perspective of duty, Bentham's (1996) utilitarian theory, and Williamson's opportunism (1975), our paper makes an original contribution by categorizing HR practices in relation to the organizational crisis response. In particular, we distinguish between solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices. First, Kant's (2019) argues that unless an action is universally good, it cannot be morally good. In this regard, crisis-related HR practices would need to be solidary aiming at preventing or minimizing workplace adversity for all employees. Thus, although the choice to downsize and make several employees redundant would be against Kantian ethics, adopting practices such as job rotations and reskilling to weather a crisis would demonstrate care for all employees and hence, would reside more in line with Kantian ethics. Lincoln Electric is an example of a company that has employed solidary crisis-related HR practices. Despite the various crises faced including the 2008 global financial crisis and COVID-19, Lincoln Electric follows a strict "no lay-off" practice opting for more solidary measures, such as up to 25% reduction in working hours, voluntary unpaid leave, and intra-company transfers (Dickler, 2008; Hummel, 2023). Second, according to utilitarianism, an action is considered morally good when it maximizes pleasure or happiness for the largest number of people (Budd & Scoville, 2005). Following this line of reasoning, the choice of an organization to proceed with downsizing and redundancies to weather a crisis can be morally legitimate as not only does the

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organization survive but also many of the employees keep their jobs. In other words, utilitarian crisis-related HR practices aim to prevent or minimize adversity for the largest number of people but not for all. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AEG after implementing a 20% reduction in salaries across the whole organization and having had no income for 3.5 months, proceeded to dismiss 15% of its workforce (Brown, 2020; Strauss, 2020). Finally, Williamson's (1975, 1981) theory of opportunism argues that organizational agents may engage in actions that promote their own self-interests over and above bounded rationality through deception and guile. This is the case, especially, when uncertainty is heightened and knowledge is limited (Conner & Prahalad, 1996). Thus, during crises and VUCA circumstances, employers may proceed with implementing crisis-related redundancies, downsizing, and reskilling, although such practices may not be proportionate to the organizational exposure to the crisis. Put differently, employers may implement crisis-related HR practices under the guise of surviving a crisis while promoting self-interests (opportunism). A case in point is the Workplace Relations Commission in Ireland finding unfair the dismissal of the former general manager of Ardbrook that ostensibly took place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but was ruled to be a decision unrelated to the crisis (McCarthaigh, 2022).

A key distinguishing feature of crisis-related HR practices against other configurations, such as high-performance and high-commitment HR practices (Pfeffer, 1996), is that the implementation of the former has been initiated ostensibly on account of an internal or external crisis. Crisis-related HR practices can refer to new HR initiatives implemented due to external and internal turbulence (e.g., reskilling, restructuring, and downsizing) or existing practices that have been reconfigured for the said crisis (e.g., communications and job rotations). Table 2 enlists different types of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices. A nuanced examination of these practices renders their categorization fluid necessitating not only the consideration of the HR strategy of the organization but also how employees perceive it vis-à-vis the experienced turbulence. Specifically, during crises organizations may employ seemingly similar practices but treat employees differently (Cameron, 1994; Cascio, 1993, 2002). For example, Johnstone (2023) demonstrated that the practice of restructuring could align with different HR recessionary strategies, leading to employees losing their jobs on voluntary or involuntary basis and temporarily or permanently. According to our theorization of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related responses (Bentham, 1996; Kant, 2019; Williamson, 1975), if an organization faces a severe crisis that places in jeopardy its future operations and thus, the job security of the entire workforce, employees may perceive temporary redundancies as more solidary than permanent job losses. On the other hand, if an organization is unaffected by external turbulence but uses it as an excuse to implement redundancies, employees are more likely to perceive it as an opportunistic crisis-related HR practice. For example, many organizations offered voluntary furloughs to their employees due to the low demand for specific products and services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lennane, 2020). Yet, it has become apparent that several organizations chose temporary layoffs ostensibly because of the pandemic, even when such a practice was not necessary (Macnab, 2021). Thus, while some furlough schemes may have indicated a solidary approach, which was also evident in the swift return of the furloughed employees to work, unnecessary temporary layoffs appeared opportunistic leading to a delayed return of the laid-off employees to work (Bennedsen et al., 2023).

TABLE 2 Examples of crisis-related Human Resources practices.

Type of practice	Examples
Solidary[a]	Reskilling
	Job Rotations
	Secondments
	Redeployment
	Communications[b]
Utilitarian[a]	Downsizing
	Restructuring
	Redundancies
	Salary freezing
	Wage cuts
	Reduced hours
	Communications[b]
Opportunistic	Any of the above

[a] The categorization is indicative and may depend on the severity of the faced crisis. For example, severe turbulence endangering employees' job security may render many utilitarian practices, such as salary freezing, wage cuts, and reduced hours, as more solidary if adopted in lieu of more austere measures, including redundancies.

[b] Top-down communication during times of turbulence is perceived as a positive and welcoming initiative by employees (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023). However, the quality of communication may also influence its categorization. For instance, an organization sending mixed communication messages may make employees distrust the practice rendering it opportunistic.

2.3 | HR system strength

Bowen and Ostroff (2004: 208) introduced the construct of HR system strength to describe the extent to which the HR system is effective "in conveying the types of information needed to create" shared perceptions of HR practices among employees. Put differently, HR system strength denotes employees' invariability of understanding the messages sent by HR. The construct is based on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Mischel, 1973), according to which the distinctiveness and consistency of, as well as consensus about a situation influence the strength of that situation. Correspondingly, distinctive and consistent HR messages that cultivate consensus among employees reinforce the strength of the HR system within an organization and lead to the emergence of a strong climate in relation to what HR practices convey (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Ostroff and Bowen (2016) explicate that when HR practices are distinctive and consistent, they become more salient among employees, and thus allow employees to develop a collective

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understanding of what these practices signal. Hence, a strong HR system indicates that the implemented HR practices send clear messages leading to employees collectively understanding the intentions of the employer.

HR system strength is created through the signaling of HR practices regardless of the contents of these practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). This means that HR system strength is a value-free concept that solely demonstrates the extent of a strong or weak situation, not denoting whether it brings positive or negative outcomes. Put simply, employees' interpretation of an HR practice as positive or negative is ineffectual in relation to the strength of the HR system. What matters is whether the implementation of HR practices sends distinctive and consistent signals that allow employees to reach a consensus about them. Hence, a strong HR system denotes HR practices that send clear homogeneous messages, which allow most employees to interpret the employer's intentions similarly and thus, generate uniform expectations and behaviors. In contrast, weak HR systems deliver ambiguous messages to employees, thus creating a weak situation where the employer's intention is not uniformly encoded, therefore generating heterogeneous employee expectations and behaviors.

Previous work on HR system strength has focused mainly on positive outcomes. Extant literature highlights that employee perceptions of HR system strength are significantly related to a plethora of individual work-related outcomes, including performance, learning, work engagement, and positive psychological contract (Bednall et al., 2014; Den Hartog et al., 2013; Guest et al., 2021). More recently, Song et al. (2023) examined employees and organizations under the COVID-19 macro-crisis and found that HR system strength is related to employees' work engagement. Yet, studies examining how HR strength contributes to the emergence of higher-level outcomes are rare (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016), despite the initial premise of the theory that the strength of the HR system leads to emergent and collective effects (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The few studies that have taken place report that HR strength is positively related to organizational performance, quality of business units, strength of goal climate, and employee attributions of service quality and exploitation (Aksoy & Bayazit, 2014; Katou et al., 2021; Meier-Barthold et al., 2023). In this paper, we are interested in exploring the emergence of organizational voice climate, that is, shared employee perceptions about the extent to which the environment within the organization encourages direct employee voice (Frazier & Bowler, 2015). We do so by drawing on signaling theory to explicate how, in times of turbulence, HR system strength as an organizational-level construct contributes to the development of direct employee voice perceptions and thereupon, to the emergence of organizational voice climate.

3 | PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT

3.1 | Crisis-related HR practices

According to signaling theory, information asymmetry is what makes individuals look for signals (indications) in their environment (Connelly et al., 2011). Signalers are "insiders," who possess information about individuals and the organization that is not readily available outside their cluster (Connelly et al., 2011: 44). These signals are important as the party holding little to no information could use them to interpret the intentions of the party holding much of the information (Elitzur & Gavious, 2003). Hence, receivers try to interpret the signals the signaler is sending to draw conclusions. In the workplace, HR practices are a key signal for employees to interpret the intentions of the organization as well as to make inferences about which employee behaviors the organization values and rewards (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In times of crisis, these signals are even more pronounced. Indeed, in line with signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), employees as signal receivers (Guest et al., 2021) may focus on the HR practices of their organization to gain valuable insights amid uncertainty and resource scarcity. The range of HR practices an organization chooses to adopt and deploy signals to the employees the intentions and strategies of the organization.

Specifically, during turbulence, organizations often deploy new or reconfigure existing HR practices to respond to the crisis. Indeed, extant research demonstrates that during crises, organizations implement HR practices that may treat employees as long-term assets or as medium- to short-term costs (Cameron, 1994; Cascio, 1993, 2002; Johnstone, 2023). We distinguish crisis-related HR practices into solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic to highlight the signals the organization is sending to its employees during turbulence. Solidary crisis-related HR practices, including reskilling, job rotations, and secondments, are highly valued because they signal to the employees that the organization cares for them (Collings et al., 2021; Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023). Put differently, solidary crisis-related HR practices signal a Kantian stance concerning the employer's duty of care toward employees. On the other hand, utilitarian crisis-related HR practices, such as downsizing and redundancies, accentuate work adversity (Psychogios et al., 2019); thus, signaling to the employees that the organization is less interested in fulfilling its duty of care for all employees. In other words, utilitarian crisis-related HR practices signal a more practical stance in line with Bentham's fundamental axiom, whereby the employers are striving for the highest good for the highest number of people (Bentham, 1988). Furthermore, opportunistic crisis-related HR practices signal a more exploitative employer stance, whereby the goals of some stakeholders are prioritized against mutual advantage and medium- to long-term benefits.

In relation to voice and in line with signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), employees focus on interpreting the signals the organization is emitting through the implemented HR practices. Interpreting organizational signals is important because direct voice challenges the status quo (Liang et al., 2012), and hence, speaking up may be risky or ineffective in a particular organizational setting. Put differently, employee perceptions of the intentions of management influence their view on which types of voice might be welcome in that environment (Ashford et al., 2009). In times of crisis, as job insecurity increases (Psychogios et al., 2019), employees are less likely to engage with initiatives that are risky or ineffective (Nyfoudi et al., 2022).

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Thus, in an effort to reduce uncertainty (Song et al., 2023), employees pay more attention to the implementation of crisis-related HR practices, and depending on their interpretation, they may develop positive or negative perceptions about direct voice. Specifically, crisis-related HR practices that employees perceive as solidary may signal a work environment, in which employees feel safe to express themselves. Indeed, the implementation of solidary HR practices may signal to employees a Kantian type of environment, where the organization leaves "nobody alone in the crisis" (Vaiou, 2016: 227). In contrast, crisis-related HR practices that employees perceive as utilitarian may signal a more adverse work environment, which employees have to endure "for the greatest good." In such a utilitarian type of environment, unless speaking up brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people, raising an idea or a grievance may appear futile, unimpactful, and to a certain extent may even put the individual under the spotlight for their lack of "utility." Respectively, opportunistic crisis-related HR practices may signal an environment where employees are less safeguarded by contractual arrangements and more open to "manipulation or exploitation" (Maitland et al., 1985: 60). Within such an unsupportive environment, speaking up in times of turbulence may expose employees to iniquitous tactics and thus, lead to negative perceptions about direct voice.

Based on the above, we propose:

Proposition 1. *Solidary crisis-related HR practices positively influence direct voice perceptions.*

Proposition 2. *Utilitarian crisis-related HR practices negatively influence direct voice perceptions.*

Proposition 3. *Opportunistic crisis-related HR practices negatively influence direct voice perceptions.*

3.2 | The role of context

Signaling theory (Lampel & Shamsie, 2000; Ramaswami et al., 2010) highlights the importance of the strength of the signal in relation to its interpretation by the receivers. The stronger the signal strength is within a setting, the more unambiguous and accurate the interpretation of the signal will be. Key elements that influence the strength of the signal are clarity, observability, frequency, and consistency (Connelly et al., 2011); all of which are congruent with the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus characteristics of the HR system strength theory (Bendall et al., 2022). Indeed, as discussed earlier, distinctive, and consistent HR messages cultivate consensus among employees and increase the strength of the HR system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In contrast, unclear, and inconsistent HR messages decrease the strength of the HR system (ibid.).

First, to be distinctive, the HR system needs to stand out, which means organizational members clearly acknowledging and understanding the HR practices and how they influence their work experience (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). During turbulence, employees are likely to pay more attention to the implemented HR practices to decipher the intentions of management and adjust their behavior. Indeed, the stronger the crisis, the more likely employees are to be influenced by HR practices, while the less disruptive the crisis the more likely employees are to continue their work routine and "rely less on HR practices for guidance" (Song et al., 2023: 217). This is due to organizations choosing to react differently to crises (Prouska, Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2023) and thus, the more disruptive a crisis is the less defined the course of action an organization may take. Hence, during turbulence, crisis-related HR practices become more distinctive for employees, who are looking for organizational signals to decrypt whether their employer will opt for solidarity fulfilling their duty of care for all employees or resolve to utilitarianism and even opportunism introducing cost-reduction strategies that may accentuate work adversity.

Second, to be consistent, HR practices need to be aligned and administered systematically over time, people, and context (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In this way, employees can make stronger inferences in terms of what the organization values and how much it cares for employees' work experience. Indeed, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) emphasized that consistency is key to clear employee signaling. Yet, during turbulence, organizations may select a potpourri of crisis-related HR practices (Teague & Roche, 2014), which may not only emit signals of solidarity and a safe space, but also send messages of a stifled, adverse, and even rogue environment, which hinders employee expression. In other words, organizations may employ a mixture of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices thus emitting contradictory signals about organizational intentions and leading to a weak HR system strength. On the other hand, when an organization focuses primarily on deploying a single type of crisis-related HR practices, the HR signals complement each other and are more consistent and thus stronger, contributing in turn to a stronger HR system strength. For example, if an organization aims to adopt a Kantian perspective in relation to employees' work experience, it is important that it focuses on deploying solidary crisis-related HR practices, such as reskilling and job rotations. The more such an organization employs utilitarian or opportunistic crisis-related HR practices the less consistent the signals it sends to the employees and the weaker the messaging is in relation to employees' work experience; thus, leading to weak HR system strength.

Based on the above, we propose:

Proposition 4. *The implementation of crisis-related HR practices is more distinctive under macro- and meso-turbulence and thus contributes to a stronger HR system.*

Proposition 5. *Consistency among crisis-related HR practices increases HR system strength. The more an organization employs a mixture of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices, the weaker the strength of the HR system is.*

Although many studies on HR system strength elaborate on the internal context of the organization (Guest et al., 2021; Meier-

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Barthold et al., 2023), higher-order contexts relating to the external environment within which the organization operates are less frequently examined (Farndale & Sanders, 2017; Kwon & Farndale, 2020). In terms of VUCA circumstances, exigencies exist that may influence ubiquitously the organizations within a country (e.g., terrorist attacks, economic recessions), a region of countries (e.g., wars, natural disasters), or globally (e.g., pandemics, climate emergency). Nevertheless, often not all organizations are influenced to the same degree (Nyfoudi et al., 2022). Macroturbulence can be mediated by a myriad of institutional factors. Organizational action may be embedded in regional or country-specific institutional variations and thus, national institutions, cultures, politics, and demographics may partially account for employer responses, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic (Dobbins et al., 2023). Hence, for example, more liberal market economies, such as the United States, may be less likely to buffer an external crisis than coordinated market economies with stronger institutional bases, such as Germany. Furthermore, depending on the type of crisis, specific sectors may be more exposed and vulnerable. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality industry was more heavily hit than the pharmaceutical industry. Put simply, macroturbulence may not always lead to organizational turbulence.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argue that poor consistency of HR practices leads to idiosyncratic employee experiences and therefore, low consensus among employees on HR practices. Furthermore, signaling theory posits that the fit between the receiver's already existing information and the sender's signal influences the effectiveness of the signal (Connelly et al., 2011). If the signals sent are not consistent with the information the receiver holds, the strength of the signals deteriorates. Hence, the fit between the external and internal environment and the corresponding way HR practices are implemented play a significant role in fostering consensus among employees. Specifically, when the implemented crisis-related HR practices are in misalignment with what the employees already know about the extent to which the organization is affected by the external crisis, employees are less likely to form a consensus regarding these HR practices, and thus the strength of the HR system decreases. In contrast, when the HR practices align with the information the employees already hold, the HR system is strengthened.

The fit between the external and internal environment and the way HR practices are implemented becomes particularly important during turbulent times when employees' attention to organizational signals is accentuated. Any dissonance between the adopted HR practices and the extent to which the organization is affected by the external turbulence may result in signal deterioration and thus, employees are less likely to reach a consensus about the purpose of these HR practices. For instance, an organization choosing to opportunistically implement crisis-related HR practices without being affected by an external crisis deviates from both a Kantian and utilitarian perspective. In such a case, the organization is neither treating employees as long- nor medium-term assets (cf. Cascio, 1993, 2002), but rather deploys HR practices haphazardly or exploitatively, thus resulting in signal cacophony that confuses employees, who cannot see how the implemented crisis-related HR practices fit the employees' existing information. As a result, employees cannot reach a consensus about these practices leading to a weak HR system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). On the other hand, a good fit between the adopted HR practices and the exposure of the organization to external turbulence will heighten HR system strength. For example, an organization proceeding to the implementation of crisis-related HR practices having been impacted heavily by external turbulence emits signals that are in line with the information employees already hold, helping them to reach a strong consensus about these HR practices and thus, leading to a stronger HR system. All in all, we argue that context matters in the way in which employees interpret crisis-related HR practices as organizational signals and the way they reach a consensus about them. If the signals fit with the degree of turbulence to which the organization is exposed, consensus among employees is high and the strength of the HR system increases.

Hence, we propose:

> **Proposition 6.** *Employees' consensus derived from the fit between macroturbulence and organizational turbulence about the implemented crisis-related HR practices increases HR system strength. The better the fit, the stronger the HR system is.*

3.3 | Perceived HR system strength and employee voice perceptions

In line with signaling theory, we have argued that during turbulence employees are more attuned to the signals received through the implementation of crisis-related HR practices in relation to whether speaking up is safe and impactful. In other words, employees' direct voice perceptions are influenced by the implemented crisis-related HR practices. Indeed, the more HR practices are deployed, the more signals the employees receive that shape their perceptions and behavior (Guest et al., 2021). Yet, signaling theory highlights that it is not only the quantity but also the quality of the signals that matter (Connelly et al., 2011). Concerning HR practices, the quality of the signals is manifested in HR system strength (Guest et al., 2021). Hence, crisis-related HR practices implemented through a strong HR system, send clear organizational signals about managerial intentions, and thus influence employees' perceptions of whether direct voice is welcomed. Although not all employees may need to engage with direct voice behavior, through a strong HR system, they can develop an understanding of whether speaking up is an impactful and safe behavior to perform. On the contrary, a weak HR system sends ambiguous signals to the employees about organizational intentions. Thus, employees develop idiosyncratic perceptions of whether the organization is a place where individual expression is encouraged or suppressed.

A strong HR system entails the implementation of HR practices that are distinctive, consistent, and about which employees develop a consensus (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Hence, crisis-related HR

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initiatives need to meet all three conditions to achieve strong employee signaling in relation to employee voice. For example, an organization choosing to implement solidary crisis-related HR practices during severe macroturbulence may send distinctive signals of a Kantian intention to care for all employees. Yet, unless these solidary crisis-related HR practices are implemented consistently throughout the workforce, the sporadic implementation of such initiatives may prove futile in signaling to employees about direct voice. Similarly, unless these practices are in line with the information employees already possess in terms of the exposure of the organization to macroturbulence, the implementation of solidary crisis-related HR practices may weaken the HR system, and thus, direct voice perceptions.

Based on the above, we propose:

> **Proposition 7.** *Crisis-related HR practices influence direct voice perceptions through HR system strength.*

3.4 | The effect of indirect voice mechanisms

Adopting an integrative perspective, we need to acknowledge unique meso-level organizational characteristics, such as the existence of indirect voice mechanisms, including trade unions and nonunion employee representation (NER), that also send signals and may influence the way employee perceptions of direct voice are shaped. Specifically, trade unions have been considered an important vehicle to increase workplace equality and fairness due to their independence from management (Bryson & Green, 2015; Dundon et al., 2004; Kaufman, 2015). Kaufman (2014, 2015) has argued that both employers and employees can benefit from union voice as employees could exercise more influence and power through their representatives, while employers could also enjoy a productive advantage by working collaboratively together. Studies show that unionized employees enjoyed better terms and conditions, fairer treatment, job security, decision-making power (Bryson & Green, 2015), and higher health and safety enforcement (Shojourner & Yang, 2022). Also, employees in unionized organizations report higher job satisfaction (Pohler & Luchak, 2014), better well-being (Blanchflower et al., 2022), and improved performance (Newman et al., 2019). Moreover, Bryson et al. (2013) found that employees in unionized organizations experienced less job anxiety and more job satisfaction when new organizational changes were implemented in comparison to employees in nonunionized organizations.

NER, such as work councils, may also be an alternative route for employer–employee communication and consultation (Butler, 2009; Donaghey et al., 2012). Focusing on collaboration and employer–employee relations not mediated by external bodies, NER is often seen as more about shared agendas (Gollan et al., 2015). Although employee influence through this vehicle may be more limited than that through trade unions, research shows that employees perceive that NER can be an effective channel for communicating their concerns and ideas (Donaghey et al., 2022; McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018). However, both forms of representative voice have shown a sharp decline in the private sector (Bryson et al., 2019), and necessary conditions (including social support, bargaining power, and a cooperative employer) need to exist for indirect voice mechanisms to effectively work in favor of employees (Bryson et al., 2013).

Crisis-oriented HR practices in organizations with a trade union or NER presence are more likely to follow specific local, sectoral, or national labor agreements. For example, managerial decisions to reorganize work can be constrained by union-negotiated rules (Bryson & Green, 2015). Hence, since employers in unionized organizations need union support to implement crisis-related HR practices, they may be less likely to introduce opportunistic crisis-related HR practices. In other words, any large changes related to employment conditions (including redundancies and wage cuts) are likely to be the subject of discussion and negotiation through the existing indirect voice channels either through collective bargaining or joint consultation. In this regard, Rho et al. (2022) found that during turbulence, employees' confidence in organized labor is positively related to direct and indirect voice. Thus, the existence of indirect voice mechanisms in an organization can signal to the employees that voice matters, a message that may not be available nor accessible to those in organizations without representative voice mechanisms. Put differently, employees in organizations with indirect voice mechanisms may have a more positive baseline in terms of the signals the implementation of crisis-related HR practices sends. Hence, the relationship between solidary crisis-related HR practices and direct employee voice perceptions is more likely to be stronger in organizations with indirect voice mechanisms. Respectively, the relationship between utilitarian as well as opportunistic crisis-related HR practices and direct employee voice perceptions is more likely to be weaker in organizations with indirect voice mechanisms.

Thus, we propose that:

> **Proposition 8.** *The existence of indirect voice mechanisms moderates the relationship between crisis-related HR practices and employee voice perceptions in such a way that the relationship between solidary (utilitarian) (opportunistic) crisis-related HR practices and employee voice perceptions is stronger (weaker) in organizations with indirect voice mechanisms.*

3.5 | A bottom-up perspective of organizational voice climate

Climate is defined as "collective beliefs or perceptions about the practices, behaviors, and activities that are rewarded and supported in a given work environment" (Morrison et al., 2011: 184). Climate is distinctive from individual perceptions and attitudes since it represents the extent to which the members of a particular referent, such as a team, department, or organization, share common perceptions (Schulte et al., 2006). Morrison et al. (2011: 184) conceptualized group voice climate as a "shared belief about whether speaking up is safe

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versus dangerous and whether group members are able to voice effectively." Put differently, employees' direct voice perceptions influence how voice climate is formed. Any strong organizational signals employees receive through a strong HR system not only influence direct employee voice perceptions but also lead to a common understanding of whether speaking up is safe and effective to do so. The stronger the HR system, the more similar the direct voice perceptions, and thus, the more likely for organizational voice climate to emerge.

During turbulence, the implementation of crisis-related HR practices is particularly important for employees to interpret whether their voice is safe and effective. When solidary crisis-related HR practices are implemented with distinctiveness, consistency, and in a way that employees reach consensus, employees are more likely to develop positive voice perceptions. They are more likely to believe their suggestions, opinions, complaints, and grievances are welcomed and will be acted upon. Hence, solidary crisis-related HR practices implemented through a strong HR system may reach more employees and contribute to the development of a shared positive understanding concerning direct voice, and thus, a positive voice climate. On the other hand, utilitarian and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices implemented through a strong HR system may negatively influence direct voice perceptions leading most employees to believe that engaging in direct voice activities is unimpactful, risky, and may jeopardize their job security. At times of crisis, especially when there is both internal and external turbulence, employees are less willing to engage in risky or inconsequential activities (Nyfoudi et al., 2022). Thus, a negative voice climate may emerge.

Based on the above, we propose:

> **Proposition 9.** *Direct voice perceptions developed through a strong HR system are shared by most employees and thus contribute to the emergence of a voice climate.*

4 | DISCUSSION

Organizations are increasingly called to manage and respond to ubiquitous VUCA external contingencies, which have become the "new normal" due to accelerated globalization, escalation of natural disasters, and unexpected human-related events (Biron et al., 2021). Direct employee voice can be a critical tool to identify potential solutions and help employees and organizations in dealing with a crisis (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012; Prouska, Nyfoudi et al., 2023). Yet, employees are often hesitant to speak up due to the risk involved with raising one's voice not only in terms of job security but also in relation to exerting effort in unimpactful activities during a period of increased uncertainty (Nyfoudi et al., 2022; Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). Therefore, determining whether it is safe and worthwhile to engage in voice activity is critical for employees experiencing turbulence. We place significant emphasis on direct voice perceptions, as they can often provide more concrete information about organizational members than voice behavior. Specifically, not all employees face a situation about which they need to speak up (and hence, exhibit voice behavior), but all employees may calculate the effectiveness and safety of doing so.

Against this backdrop, we draw on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) to theorize the way in which direct employee voice and organizational voice climate are shaped at times of macro and organizational turbulence. A main tenet of our framework is that employees interpret the implemented crisis-related HR practices as organizational signals that help them discern the intentions of the organization and infer whether direct voice is safe and impactful. Indeed, research shows that employees use HR practices as organizational signals that influence their perceptions (Guest et al., 2021). Moreover, extant work highlights the importance of the HR system strength: the stronger the HR system, the more similar employee perceptions will be and thus, the more likely for a climate to emerge (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Hence, we argue that the quality of implementation of crisis-related HR practices depicted in their distinctiveness, consistency, and employees' consensus about them matters in bringing about a strong HR system that influences employee voice perceptions and thereupon, voice climate.

Furthermore, we draw from the ethics literature and in particular, Kant (2019), Bentham (1996), and Williamson (1975) to categorize organizational responses into solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices respectively and propose that the type of practice is instrumental in employees' signal interpretation, voice perceptions, and climate emergence. Specifically, as depicted in Table 3, our framework suggests four different implementation pathways. First, we propose that the implementation, during turbulence, of solidary crisis-related HR practices may signal to employees a supportive environment that encourages them to speak up. Indeed, Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al. (2023) demonstrated that under macroturbulence, employees reciprocate top-down communication by voicing their ideas and concerns. Put differently, in times when an organization is influenced by a crisis and chooses to adopt a Kantian perspective and

TABLE 3 Organizational voice climate emergence.

Crisis-related HR practices	Fit between the external and internal environment[a]	Employee voice perceptions	Organizational voice climate
Solidary	Good	Positive	Positive
	Poor	Idiosyncratic	No emergence
Utilitarian	Good	Negative	Negative
	Poor	Idiosyncratic	No emergence
Opportunistic	-	-	-
	Poor[b]	Negative	Negative
Mix	Poor	Idiosyncratic	No emergence

[a] External environment refers to the intensity of macroturbulence. Internal environment refers to the nexus between the degree of organizational turbulence and the type of crisis-related HR practices implemented.
[b]Opportunistic crisis-related HR practices are, by definition, implemented in misalignment with the exposure of the organization to macroturbulence.

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implement solidary crisis-related HR practices, employees may perceive that the organization fulfills its duty of care for all employees and thus, that it is safe and even encouraged to mirror the caring conduct of their employer by raising their voice in the workplace. In turn, in line with Ostroff and Bowen (2016), such shared perceptions may lead to the emergence of a positive organizational voice climate. Second, we propose that the implementation of utilitarian crisis-related HR practices may signal that the organization prioritizes the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The interpretation of Bentham's (1988) fundamental axiom can be elastic and differ for different stakeholders. For example, the greatest number of people during times of crisis may often include senior managers and customers but less so employees (Manning, 2020). Thus, utilitarian crisis-related HR practices, albeit may lead to a strong HR system, may raise shared concerns over the extent to which the organization cares for all its employees. In such cases, employees deprived of employer's care may be less inclined to speak up during turbulence perceiving such behavior as futile (Tauntun, 2023), while the rest of the employees may be afraid to speak up in fear of negative consequences (Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). Hence, employee voice perceptions may be negatively influenced leading to a negative organizational voice climate. Third, we suggest that the deployment of opportunistic crisis-related practices may signal a highly volatile organizational environment, in which employees may be less inclined to speak up either to raise an idea or a complaint. Indeed, Williamson (1975) highlighted that unless opportunism was present, cooperation among different parties with conflicting or divergent interests would be the norm. Put differently, opportunistic crisis-related practices send signals of unreliability, which obstruct employees' calculus-based decision-making in terms of whether direct voice is safe and impactful, resulting in overall negative voice perceptions and thus, the emergence of a negative voice climate. Finally, our theorization suggests that if the organization adopts a blend of solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices, it sends inconsistent signals to employees. Thus, employees may be less likely to reach a consensus about the purpose of these practices, which may weaken HR system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) and ultimately, impede the emergence of voice climate.

We also highlight how different contextual factors further complicate employees' interpretation of the signals sent by crisis-related HR practices. According to our framework, the fit between the external and internal environment plays a significant role in the way employees interpret the signals the HR practices send. For example, if the internal turbulence is less severe or perhaps the crisis has little negative repercussions for the organization, any implemented crisis-related HR practices may send mixed signals to the employees as their purpose is less distinctive and aligned with the information the employees hold. The lack of distinctiveness and consistency of HR practices as well as little employee consensus on the purpose of these HR practices may lead to a weaker HR system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) and thus, the formation of idiosyncratic understandings about direct employee voice that hinders the emergence of voice climate. Hence, since the exposure to crisis of different organizations may vary (Nyfoudi et al., 2022), organizations need to opt for those crisis-related HR practices that fit their exposure. All in all, a good fit between the external turbulence, the internal environment, and the implemented crisis-related HR practices sends strong signals leading to a strong HR system and thereupon, shared voice perceptions and the emergence of an organizational voice climate. A poor fit between the external crisis, the internal environment, and the implemented crisis-related HR practices distorts HR signals resulting in idiosyncratic voice perceptions and hindering the emergence of a voice climate.

Another critical contextual factor is the presence of indirect voice mechanisms. Formal bargaining and joint consultations enable employees to fear less prospective organizational changes (Bryson et al., 2013). Furthermore, employees are aware that work reorganization is influenced by union-negotiated rules (Bryson & Green, 2015). In other words, although the relationship between organizational and employee representatives may fluctuate from positive to neutral and from contentious to hostile, the existence of indirect voice mechanisms signals to the employees that they have a say about organizational practices and change. In our framework, we highlight that indirect voice mechanisms influence the relationship between crisis-related HR practices and direct voice perceptions, as employees in the presence of indirect voice mechanisms develop a more positive baseline in terms of speaking up than employees working in organizations without indirect voice mechanisms. Figure 1 depicts our complete conceptual framework.

4.1 | Theoretical contribution

Our work introduces a novel perspective to the study of employee voice by exploring potential interactions among the macro (external crisis), meso (organizational crisis), and micro-environment (individual perceptions). While some studies have explored the contextual influence on employee voice perceptions and climate (Kwon et al., 2016; Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Marchington, 2015) and investigated the role of specific contextual situations, such as crises, on direct voice (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023; Wee & Fehr, 2021), we suggest plausible linkages among situational contexts at different levels. We propose that a good fit among macro- and meso-environment and crisis-related HR practices could contribute to formulating a strong HR system that more coherently delivers managerial intentions to employees, thus influencing the formation of shared voice perceptions and the emergence of voice climate. By articulating a potential three-level interaction, we open a broader discussion of the significance of context for the development of employee voice perceptions and climate, which has been largely overlooked in micro theory (Huang et al., 2023).

Further, we emphasize the role of a strong HR system as a critical tool to deliver managerial intentions to employees. In line with recent developments (Meier-Barthold et al., 2023), we argue that HR practices are signals containing managerial intentions, which effectively reach employees when the quality of those HR practices is ensured and shared through a distinctive and consistent implementation

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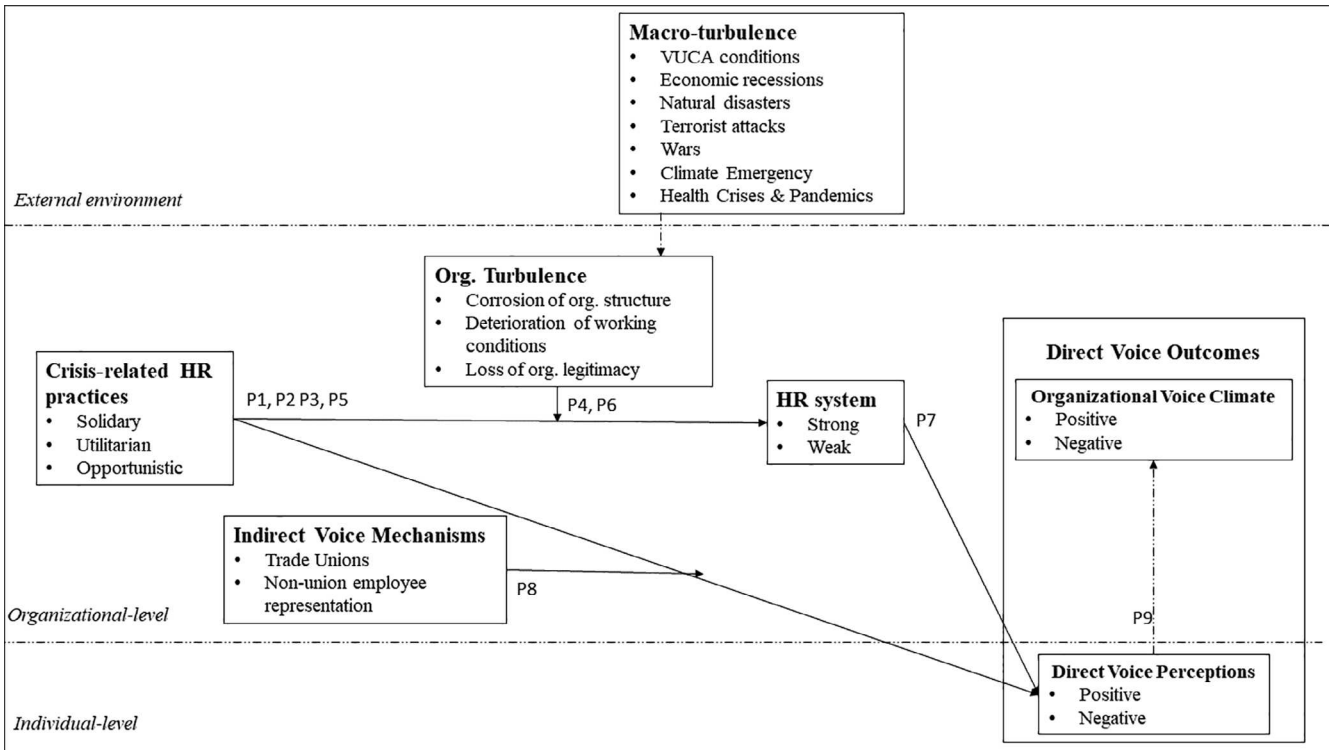

FIGURE 1 The process of how crisis-related Human Resources practices influence employee voice perceptions and the emergence of voice climate.

process that promotes consensus. This argument is congruent with most studies that consider a strong HR system as a mediator between HR practices and employee outcomes using signaling theory (Bednall et al., 2022). However, our suggested framework deviates from those studies that postulated HR strength as an individual-level construct pertaining to employee perceptions. Instead, we followed Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) original conceptualization of HR strength as an organizational-level construct. Ostroff and Bowen (2016) reemphasized that signals sent by HR practices can be interpreted idiosyncratically unless the implementation process mechanism ensures and creates a strong HR system. Therefore, they argued, "HR system strength is a high-level construct that is a contextual property and enables HRM to send unambiguous messages about the broader culture, climate, priorities, and values" (p. 197). Following this, we suggest a high-level HR system strength plays a pivotal role in the entire framework linking crisis-related HR practices, direct voice perceptions, and voice climate since we conceptualize voice climate as a bottom-up emergent phenomenon. We argue that if crisis-related HR practices are not systematically implemented and fail to send consistent messages to employees, they can be interpreted idiosyncratically. Thus, employees might develop different voice perceptions, and a voice climate cannot emerge. With our work, we emphasize the original role of HR system strength as an organizational tool that may close perceptual gaps across employees (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) and if used effectively may encourage different organizational actors to speak up and assist the organization weather a crisis.

Also, drawing from the works of Kant (2019), Bentham (1996), and Williamson (1975), we introduce a new classification of HR practices—solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic crisis-related HR practices. In addition, we propose that these three different types of HR practices can derive two opposite employee outcomes—positive voice perceptions and negative voice perceptions through HR system strength. This proposition is partly in line with other researchers' arguments about the positive effect of HR practices on employee voice perception and behaviors (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2016; Marchington, 2008; Morrison, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). However, we open a new line of inquiry by explicating how HR practices influence employee voice perceptions acknowledging that they may also negatively affect employee voice perception. By doing so, we depart from the academic focus in the HRM literature on the role of HR practices and systems as a positive contributor to organizational-level effectiveness (Huselid, 1995; Jiang et al., 2012; Subramony, 2009) and bring to the forefront a more nuanced view, whereby HR practices could not only be positively but also negatively related to individual and organizational outcomes.

4.2 | Practical implications

Our work also has significant practical implications. Direct employee voice is a critical resource that may help organizations sustain a crisis (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023). Our framework highlights the importance of organizations implementing crisis-related HR practices distinctively and consistently to enable the effective signaling of employees about direct voice. Distinctiveness of crisis-related HR practices can be promoted by securing top management support and

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applying the practices to all or most of the employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Consistency can be facilitated through alignment of espoused and experienced organizational values (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Moreover, our framework underlines the importance of congruence between the external and internal environment and the implemented crisis-related HR practices. According to our framework, a good fit strengthens the HR system, which in turn helps reduce ambiguity for employees in times of intense change (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In other words, congruence between the organizational exposure to turbulence and the implemented crisis-related HR practices is instrumental in employees' calculus-based decision-making that shapes direct voice. Hence, organizations need to avoid the haphazard or opportunistic implementation of crisis-related HR practices that may represent an external trend rather than internal fit. For example, amid a frenzy of layoffs and redundancies by technology firms, Apple (one of the largest companies in the world by market capitalization) has resisted firing its employees and instead has embraced measures that are more aligned to its exposure to macroenvironmental changes (Kelly, 2023).

4.3 | Future research directions

In our conceptual framework, we focus on crisis contexts and examine how the organizational reaction to turbulence plays a significant role in shaping direct employee voice perceptions and voice climate through crisis-related HR practices and their signals. Our framework is applicable to unionized and nonunionized organizations with a dedicated or sophisticated "HR function." Below we offer suggestions of how our work could inform future research to further advance our understanding of the way in which crises influence direct employee voice perceptions and climate.

4.3.1 | Organizational size and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

The size of the organization is an institutional factor that may also influence how employee voice unfolds during crises. A handful of studies have already explored employee voice during turbulence in SMEs (Prouska, Nyfoudi, et al., 2023; Prouska & Psychogios, 2018) but less attention has been paid to the role of the HR system. Indeed, in SMEs, HR practices are less formally implemented (Psychogios et al., 2019). Yet, Harney and Alkhalaf (2021) highlighted that employee perceptions of the HR system matter in SMEs and more research needs to be directed to this overlooked area. We agree with this perspective and emphasize that SMEs are highly vulnerable to external turbulence (Nyfoudi et al., 2022). Thus, it would be desirable if future work not only explores the role of organizational size but also how our conceptual model unfolds for SMEs under crisis with less sophisticated or nonexistent HR functions.

4.3.2 | National culture and other macro-institutional factors

Although our conceptual framework can be applied to different contexts and countries, we expect that the strength of the proposed relationships varies depending on the national culture and in addition, other macro-institutional factors, including the level of social policy, industrial relations settings, and unemployment rates. For example, concerning national culture, we already know that it influences organizational norms in relation to voice safety and effectiveness (Kwon & Farndale, 2020; McKearney et al., 2023). Future studies may build on our model to compare how differences between organizations operating under diverging macro-institutional factors are exhibited in employees' interpretation of the HR signals and their subsequent influence on direct employee voice perceptions and climate.

4.3.3 | Types of crises

By focusing on the extent to which an organization is affected by turbulence, our framework focuses on the attested organizational effects of a macro-crisis. However, it is possible that employees react differently to varying types of crises (Psychogios et al., 2020) and thus, may interpret the organizational signals in varied ways. For example, mandatory teleworking imposed due to a pandemic may trigger different responses to voluntary teleworking during a financial crisis (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, 2022). Future research may consider the nuances of different types of crises and explore how they may influence employees' interpretation of organizational signals.

4.3.4 | Academic perspectives and frames of reference

Our conceptual framework is based on pluralism (Fox, 1966) and the premise that stakeholders within an organization may have "some interests in common but with others in conflict" (p.375). Hence, in our framework, we draw from the perspective that employees, the HR, and the management of the organization have a common interest in their employer weathering the crisis. The underlying reasons and how to achieve sustainability of operations are likely to differ and the diverse stakeholders will most likely enter a period of negotiations and possible conflict, as extant work demonstrates (Lingo & Elmes, 2019). Nevertheless, as Boxall (2021: 838) highlights "to want to help the parties to achieve closer alignment is not the same as assuming that only the employer's interests are valid." Put simply, mutuality of interest in one area (in our case, weathering a crisis) does not imply harmonious relationships between the different stakeholders nor a de facto acceptance of an absolute authority, as is the case with unitarism.

In our work, we aimed to avoid the acknowledged pitfall of a siloed examination of employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2020), and thus, although we adopted a pluralistic perspective, we acknowledged

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literature from different disciplines that are pertinent to our topic. This cross-fertilization has allowed us to develop a broader, cross-disciplinary framework that advances the debate on employee voice during turbulence more holistically. Nevertheless, we recognize that such cross-fertilization is still situated within our adopted academic perspective and frame of reference. Thus, examining the way in which internal and external turbulence influences how employees' direct voice and climate are shaped through HR signaling from alternative disciplinary perspectives has also its merits. In this respect, future work may focus on examining direct voice during turbulence adopting an Industrial Relations, or Organizational Behavior perspective. Similarly, our topic could be explored through different frames of reference, that is, unitarism, radicalism, and egoism (Budd & Bhave, 2019; Fox, 1966), that include a more or a less contested understanding of voice.

4.3.5 | Signaler

Our paper draws from signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and elaborates on the type of signals (i.e., solidary, utilitarian, and opportunistic HR practices) as well as signal strength (i.e., strong or weak HR system strength) to explicate how employee perceptions of direct voice and resultantly voice climate may be shaped during turbulence. Nevertheless, signalers represent a key element of the signaling environment. Hence, future research may choose to examine whether different types of signalers influence the signaling process differently. For example, signaling from line managers implementing HR practices may be stronger for employees than signaling from the HR department because of the proximity and salience of line managers in employees' experience of work (Nyfoudi, et al., 2023).

5 | CONCLUSION

Drawing on signaling theory, we develop a conceptual framework that takes into consideration both institutional and HRM influences and examines organizational voice climate as a bottom-up and emergent construct. In so doing, we introduce and define crisis-related HR practices and argue that their strength and solidary, utilitarian, or opportunistic orientation matter in them inducing individual employee voice perceptions and subsequently the development of organizational voice climate.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

The authors wish to declare that an early version of the manuscript was presented at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Margarita Nyfoudi https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8850-2045

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Margarita Nyfoudi is Associate Professor of HRM and Organizational Behavior at the University of Birmingham (UK). Margarita's research interests include employee voice, communication, and workplace learning especially in times of crises and turbulence. She has published in academic journals such as the *British Journal of Management*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, and *Human Resource Management Review*. She is a Senior Associate Editor of the *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK), and a Chartered Member of the CIPD.

Bora Kwon, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Management at the Jack Welch College of Business and Technology at Sacred Heart University (USA). She previously held the position of postdoctoral scholar at the Center for International Human Resource Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Bora's research interests include international human resource management (HRM), HRM and organizational culture/climates, perceptions of HRM practices, global talent management, diversity and inclusion, remote work, and employee voice. Dr. Kwon has published across a range of HRM and organizational behavior journals.

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Adrian Wilkinson is Professor of Employment Relations and Human Resource Management at Griffith University and Visiting Professor at Sheffield University. Prior to his current appointment, Adrian worked at Loughborough University where he was Professor of Human Resource Management. Adrian has published widely in the HRM field, especially in the area of employee voice.

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