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Prevention-Focused Giving Wears off Over Time: An Investigation of the Relationship Between Regulatory Focus and Prosocial Behavior

Lindsey Li
University of Pennsylvania

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Keywords
prevention focus, promotion focus, helping behavior, voice, job tenure

Disciplines
Organizational Behavior and Theory

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PREVENTION-FOCUSED GIVING WEARS OFF OVER TIME: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REGULATORY FOCUS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

By

Lindsey Li

An Undergraduate Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

WHARTON RESEARCH SCHOLARS

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Doctoral Student Advisor:

Nicholas Lobuglio

THE WHARTON SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

MAY 2019
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Motives of Giving Behavior: Prosocial vs. Impression Management

Prosocial and impression management are the two largely discussed motivations for giving behavior that arise in the current research literature. Prosocial motivation is understood as the desire to protect and promote the wellbeing of others. This motivation “operates at three hierarchical levels of generality: global, contextual, and situational” (Grant & Berg, 2011). The **global** level focuses on an employee’s relatively stable dispositional orientation toward goals and actions across time and situations, while the **contextual** level focuses on an employee’s motivation toward a specific domain or class of behavior and is moderately variable across time and situations. These distinctions are important because at the global and contextual levels, conflicts between self-interest and prosocial motivations tend to disappear. Accordingly, this suggests that this paper should be focused on the **situational** level, where there are circumstances in which prosocial and self-interested motivations guide employees toward conflicting courses of action. For example, a teacher’s passion for educating students would be an example of a contextual prosocial motivation, whereas the teacher’s desire to help her classroom of 25 kindergartners learn to read today would be an example of a situational prosocial motivation (Grant & Berg, 2011).

Conversely, individuals may also be guided by impression management motives, in which their behavior is a conscious attempt to influence the image others have of them (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). Researchers have found that there are five main ways in which employees in an organizational setting embody impression management motives: “(1) *ingratiation*, where individuals seek to be viewed as likeable; (2) *exemplification*, in which people seek to be viewed as dedicated; (3) *intimidation*, where individuals seek to appear
dangerous or threatening, (4) self-promotion, in which individuals hope to be seen as competent; and (5) supplication, where people seek to be viewed as needy or in need of assistance” (Bolino, 1999). Accordingly, not all forms of helping / citizenship behavior align with the goals of individuals pursuant of impression management. In fact, “strong impression management motives may encourage employees with prosocial motives to avoid expressing their feelings of concern and empathy in risky forms of citizenship, such as voicing problems in ways that threaten supervisors or challenge the status quo” (Grant & Mayer, 2009). Thus, impression management motives tend to guide individuals toward giving behavior only when the act appears beneficial both for themselves and for their organization.

**Regulatory Focus Theory**

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) suggests that people are guided by two distinct, self-regulatory systems which are differentiated by the needs they serve, the standards they lead one to pursue, and the outcomes that are salient to the person. The first system is prevention focused — security needs predominate, people aspire to standards representing their “ought” selves, and the emphasis is on the avoidance of negative outcomes. The second system is promotion focused — growth and development needs predominate, people strive for standards representing their “ideal” selves (e.g., hopes, wishes, and aspirations), and the emphasis is on the attainment of positive outcomes (Dewett & Denisi, 2007).

Previous research has found that individuals with a promotion focus mindset performed better on subsequent tasks after working on a difficult assignment or having just experienced failure (Crowe & Higgins, 1997); promotion cues also tended to elicit a riskier response bias and greater creativity relative to prevention cues (Friedman & Forster, 2001). However, there appear only to be a few publications discussing the relationship between regulatory focus theory and
giving behavior. Meyer, Becker, and Vandenberghhe (2004) used regulatory focus theory as one peg of a larger model, with self-regulation “positioned as an antecedent to goal choice, goal mechanisms, and ultimately, discretionary behavior” (Dewett & Denisi, 2007). Next, Dewett and Denisi (2007) provide a theoretical linking of regulatory focus theory and organizational citizenship behaviors, asserting that “a citizenship [behavior] can be viewed as something which leads to the attainment of positive outcomes or something which aids in avoiding negative outcomes,” depending on how the behavior is typically approached by the manager. The researchers go on to ask whether impression management motives are done to “remain safe, become congruent with one’s ought self, and to avoid negative outcomes,” suggesting a prevention focus, or rather, to “achieve aspirations, work towards one’s ideal self, and to attain positive outcomes,” suggesting a promotion focus. Dewett and Dinisi (2007) note that these claims need to be validated empirically, in either laboratory or field settings.

**Social Undermining**

To better understand the specific losses individuals with a prevention focused mindset attempt to avoid, it is important to take a deeper look into social undermining and reputational gossip in the workplace. First, the research suggests three defining features of rumors — they are “a collective phenomenon and a rumor’s existence is contingent on its circulation,” they “inform, explain, predict, and thus provide useful information,” and lastly, they “comprise unverified information” which distinguishes rumors from news (Bordia et al., 2004). Moreover, individuals have higher intention to transmit a harmful rumor when organizations break job-related promises. In other words, individuals who believed that negative treatment should be “reciprocated in kind” also “reacted with stronger revenge motivation” in response to the wrongdoer. It should be noted that believability of the rumor had no effect.
Additionally, individuals who dispel rumors in the workplace are also more likely to engage in Machiavellian behaviors, such as social undermining and zero-sum competition. The research shows that Machiavellians “create a toxic and dysfunctional work environment where they prevail to the detriment of their peers” (Castille et al., 2017). Thus, workplace culture surrounding the rewarding of certain behaviors is suggested to play a large role in determining whether employees choose to engage in giving behavior.
RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

Research Question

How does a prevention focus or promotion focus orientation toward goal achievement affect giving behavior as job tenure increases?

Hypotheses

Employees high in promotion focus or high in prevention focus should be more motivated to perform giving behaviors than employees who are not high in either. When striving toward the goal of being viewed as a good employee, promotion focused individuals will energetically seek out opportunities to engage in giving behaviors. Conversely, when attempting to achieve this same goal, prevention focused employees will engage in giving behaviors because they wish to avoid being viewed negatively by their coworkers and / or supervisors. However, as employees become more comfortable in their organizations over time, prevention focused employees may feel less required to engage in giving behaviors (i.e., the fear of appearing like a bad employee to coworkers / supervisors wears off over time). Therefore, organizational tenure should moderate the relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior.

The hypotheses stated formally are as follows: (1) Prevention focus is positively associated with giving behavior, (2) Promotion focus is positively associated with giving behavior, (3) Job tenure moderates the relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior, such that as tenure increases, the positive relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior is reduced, and (4) Job tenure does not moderate the relationship between promotion focus and giving behavior.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedures

Survey data was collected via a cross-sectional field study at a customer service call center based in Mexico. Both calls and survey responses \((N = 208)\) were conducted in English. 67% of the participants were women \((N = 140)\) and 33% of the participants were men \((N = 68)\). Because the survey software was inaccessible from employees’ individual work terminals, they were invited to take the survey in a conference room during a 15-minute interval of the work day. Clear instructions were communicated regarding the voluntary nature of the survey as well as the confidentiality of the responses.

Measures

*Regulatory Focus.* The Lockwood et al. (2002) scale was adapted to measure both promotion focus and prevention focus. The scale consists of two subscales designed to measure promotion and prevention goals (Lockwood et al., 2002). The endpoints are labeled 1 (*not at all like me*) and 7 (*very much like me*). For this study, eight items were adapted that were judged to be the most applicable to the workplace context. The questions measuring promotion focus were, “I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations,” “I typically focus on the success I hope to achieve in the future,” “Overall, I am more oriented toward achieving success than preventing failure,” and “My major goal at work right now is to achieve my career ambitions” \((\alpha = .78)\). The questions measuring prevention focus were, “I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations,” “I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my goals,” “I often imagine myself experiencing bad things that I fear might happen to me,” and “My goal at work right now is to avoid becoming a failure” \((\alpha = .83)\). All scales used in this study can be found in the Appendix.
**Prosocial Motivation.** Because extensive research demonstrates that prosocial motivation leads to giving behavior, the measure was included as a control in this study. Three items from Grant (2008) were used to measure prosocial motivation, including “I care about benefitting others through my work,” and “I want to help others through my work” (α = .85).

**Job tenure.** Employees were asked to list the amount of time they had been with the company, in months. The average job tenure among participants was 14.9 months, with a standard deviation of 21.2 months.

**Voice.** The Detert & Burris (2007) scale was used to measure voice. The scale has endpoints labeled 1 (*almost never*) and 7 (*very often*). The questions on the survey asked employees how often they engage in the following behaviors: give suggestions to their boss about how to make the workplace better, speak up with ideas for changing how things are done, communicate their opinions about work issues even if other people disagree with them, make an active effort to speak up with ideas, and encourage coworkers to get involved in issues that affect their work group (α = .91).

**Helping Behavior.** Four items adapted from Podsakoff et al. (1993) were used to measure helping behavior. The scale has endpoints labeled 1 (*almost never*) and 7 (*very often*). The questions on the survey asked employees how often they engage in the following behaviors: try to help others who have been out, orient new people even when not required, help others with their problems, and lend a helping hand when possible (α = .81).
ANALYSIS OF DATA

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliability estimates for all variables.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that prevention focus is positively associated with giving behavior. Hypothesis 2 predicted that promotion focus is positively associated with giving behavior. Hypothesis 3 predicted that job tenure moderates the relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior, such that as tenure increases, the positive relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior is reduced. Hypothesis 4 predicted that job tenure does not moderate the relationship between promotion focus and giving behavior.

The hypotheses were tested using hierarchical ordinary least squares regression (OLS), following procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991; see also Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The prevention focus, promotion focus, and tenure variables were mean-centered. Then, prevention focus and job tenure were multiplied to create an interaction term. Promotion focus and job tenure were also multiplied to create a second interaction term. In the first regression, prosocial motivation was entered in the first step, promotion focus and tenure in step two, and the promotion focus and tenure interaction term in the third step. Another regression was run to test prevention focus; prosocial motivation was entered in the first step, prevention focus and tenure in step two, and the prevention focus and tenure interaction term in the third step.

The analyses, shown in Table 2 and Table 3, indicate that, in support of Hypothesis 2, promotion focus is positively associated with giving behavior, operationalized through both voice ($b = .33, s.e. = .10, B = .23, t = 3.38, p < .01$) and helping behavior ($b = .28, s.e. = .07, B = .27, t = 3.84, p < .01$). Moreover, the analyses in Table 2 and Table 3 indicate that, in support of
Hypothesis 4, job tenure does not moderate the relationship between promotion focus and giving behavior. There was no significant association found between the promotion focus and tenure interaction term and voice ($b = .00$, $s.e. = .01$, $B = .07$, $t = .94$, $p > .05$), nor between the interaction term and helping behavior ($b = -.00$, $s.e. = .00$, $B = -.02$, $t = -.26$, $p > .05$).

The analyses, shown in Table 4 and Table 5, did not support Hypothesis 1. There was no significant association found between prevention focus and giving behavior, operationalized through voice ($b = .04$, $s.e. = .06$, $B = .04$, $t = .62$, $p > .05$) and helping behavior ($b = -.01$, $s.e. = .05$, $B = -.01$, $t = -.20$, $p > .05$).

Lastly, Table 4 and Table 5 indicate conflicting evidence for Hypothesis 3. While a significant negative association was found between the prevention focus and tenure interaction term and voice ($b = -.01$, $s.e. = .00$, $B = -.17$, $t = -2.41$, $p < .05$) in support of Hypothesis 3, no significant association was found between the interaction term and helping behavior ($b = -.00$, $s.e. = .00$, $B = -.07$, $t = -.96$, $p > .05$). Possible explanations for this observed phenomenon will be further elaborated upon in the Discussion section below. To facilitate the interpretation of the interaction, the simple slopes were plotted for prevention focus and tenure at one standard deviation above and below the means (see Figure 1). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the slopes suggest that as job tenure increases, prevention focus is associated with relatively less voice behavior.
DISCUSSION

This study provides an initial test for the hypotheses outlined above regarding the relationship between regulatory focus and giving behavior over time. As shown in the Analysis of Data section above, Hypotheses 2 and 4 are supported by the data. Promotion focus is positively associated with giving behavior, operationalized through helping behavior and voice. Moreover, this giving behavior is unassociated with job tenure (i.e., the interaction term between promotion focus and tenure shows no significant association with voice or helping behavior). Hypothesis 1 was found not to be supported by the data – prevention focus was not significantly associated with either helping behavior or voice.

The data remains conflicted on whether the relationship between prevention focus and giving behavior is moderated by job tenure (Hypothesis 3). While a significant negative association was found between the prevention focus and tenure interaction term and voice, no association was found between the interaction term and helping behavior. This may be due to the fact that employees in a call center lack opportunities to directly affect the work of coworkers (helping behavior) during their daily job responsibilities, and are more often presented with opportunities to direct suggestions for workplace improvement to managers (voice). However, it should be noted the prevention focus and tenure interaction term is the only variable that leads to a significant negative association with voice in the analyses above – both models in Table 2 and Table 4 indicate that tenure is a strong predictor of voice. Moreover, no significant association exists between prevention focus individually and voice. Thus, a reversal of these patterns was only observed with the interaction term between prevention focus and job tenure.

As the popularity of cross-functional teams in companies continues to rise, this paper holds practical implications for managers interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the
underlying drivers of employees’ decisions to engage in giving behaviors, particularly in areas outside of their specific job expertise. With the knowledge that prevention focus employees may engage in less voice as their job tenure increases, managers still maintain significant influence over how they choose to recognize and reward desired behavior (e.g., speaking up to improve the workplace) – and may make the consequences of not doing so more salient. Thus, empirically linking regulatory focus theory and engagement in giving behavior provides managers a more nuanced look into most effectively motivating their employees.

Further research could be conducted in companies with employees reporting longer job tenure (the average tenure at the company in which the study was conducted is 14.9 months). This may help create more disparity in the data, particularly as it relates to individuals who have spent a large majority of their careers at the same company, and shed more light on the conflicting evidence for Hypothesis 3.
CONCLUSION

This research offers an empirical link between giving behavior, operationalized through helping behavior and voice, and regulatory focus theory. It was found that promotion focus was positively associated with both helping behavior and voice, and was not moderated by job tenure over time. Additionally, prevention focus did not lead to more helping behavior or voice in this particular study, and conflicting evidence arose regarding whether job tenure moderated this relationship. While a significantly negative association was found between the prevention focus and job tenure interaction term and voice, no association was found between the interaction term and helping behavior. Further research could be conducted operationalizing giving behavior in other ways. Lastly, a deeper examination of companies with employees reporting longer job tenure may create more clear distinctions in the data.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Cronbach’s Alpha Reliabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prosocial Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Promotion Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Prevention Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tenure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Helping Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Voice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *N = 208. Internal consistencies are provided in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01.
**TABLE 2**

Results of Regression Analyses for Promotion Focus Predicting Voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>45.59**</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>47.39**</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>47.19**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Motivation</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>3.99**</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<td>.29</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>3.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion Focus</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>3.55**</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>3.38**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>2.80**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.94**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion Focus x Tenure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| R²                         | .072   | .149     | .153     |          |        |          |          |          |
| F(df)                      | 15.8 (1, 206) | 11.9 (3, 204) | 9.2 (4, 203) |          |        |          |          |
| R² change                  | .078   | .004     |          |          |        |          |          |          |

*Notes:*

*a*Values shown in bold reflect hypothesized results

*p < .05; **p < .01*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>( R )</td>
<td>( t )</td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>77.19**</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosocial Motivation</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.96</td>
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<td>.06</td>
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<td>Promotion Focus</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>3.85**</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>2.09</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion Focus x Tenure</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( R^2 \)          | .004  |     | .084  |     | .084  |     |
F(df)                  | 0.9 (1, 206) |     | 6.2 (3, 204) |     | 4.7 (4, 203) |     |
R\(^2\) change         | .080  |     | .000  |     |

Notes:

*Values shown in bold reflect hypothesized results

\( *p < .05; \quad \text{**}p < .01\)
### TABLE 4

Results of Regression Analyses for Prevention Focus Predicting Voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
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<tr>
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<td>s.e.</td>
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</tr>
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<td>45.59**</td>
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<td>.10</td>
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<td>4.43</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>46.27**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosocial Motivation</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>3.99**</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>4.08**</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.41*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prevention Focus x Tenure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- .01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- \( R^2 \)          | .072   |          | .098     |          | .123   |          |
- \( F(df) \)         | 15.9 (1, 206) |          | 7.4 (3, 204) |          | 7.2 (4, 203) |          |
- \( R^2 \) change    |        | .027     |          |          | .025   |          |

**Notes:**

*Values shown in bold reflect hypothesized results

*p < .05; **p < .01
TABLE 5

Results of Regression Analyses for Prevention Focus Predicting Helping Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
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<th>Step 3</th>
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<td>s.e.</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>77.19**</td>
<td></td>
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Notes:
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$
FIGURE 1

Job Tenure Moderates the Relationship between Prevention Focus and Voice
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Regulatory Focus (Lockwood et al., 2002)

On a 1 to 7 scale, please choose how much each of these statements is like or not like you. [1=not at all like me, 7=very much like me]

1. I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations.
2. I typically focus on the success I hope to achieve in the future.
3. Overall, I am more oriented toward achieving success than preventing failure.
4. My major goal at work right now is to achieve my career ambitions.
5. I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations.
6. I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my goals.
7. I often imagine myself experiencing bad things that I fear might happen to me.
8. My major goal at work right now is to avoid becoming a failure.

Motivation (Grant, 2008)

Why are you motivated to do this job? Please rate your agreement or disagreement with each statement. [1=disagree strongly, 7=agree strongly]

1. Because I care about benefiting others through my work
2. Because I want to help others through my work.
3. Because I want to have a positive impact on others.

Voice (Detert & Burris, 2007)

In general at work, how often do you…[1=almost never, 7=very often]

1. Give suggestions to your boss about how to make this place better?
2. Speak up with ideas for changing how things are done?
3. Communicate your opinions about work even if other people disagree with you?

4. Make an active effort to speak up with ideas?

5. Encourage coworkers to get involved in issues that affect your work group?

Helping Behavior (Podsakoff et. al, 1993)

In general at work, how often do you…[1=almost never, 7=very often]

1. Try to help others who have been out

2. Orient new people even when not required

3. Help others with their problems

4. Lend a helping hand when possible