

Constructive challenge: employee voice, helpfulness and task performance on organizational rewards

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of three classes of employee behavior (voice, helpfulness and task performance) on supervisory reward recommendations. In a laboratory setting, n=216 research participants engaged in a managerial simulation where they worked on an inbasket task that was created to simulate the types of decisions that managers are faced with on a daily basis. While performing this task, participants were interrupted with videotaped behavioral episodes of simulated subordinates engaging in high or low levels of voice, helping and task performance. After completion of the simulation, participants made recommendations regarding the extent to which a particular subordinate was worthy of a variety of rewards including an increase in salary, a promotion and readiness for valuable training opportunities. Results revealed that task performance, helping and voice each contributed independently to these rater reward recommendations. This finding supports the growing body of literature on the importance of employee voice on rater assessments of employee contribution to the organization.

Keywords: contextual performance, organizational citizenship behavior, voice, extra-role behavior, reward recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Employee behavior at work is often evaluated and rewarded in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most widespread form of this evaluation is through a formal performance appraisal conducted by their supervisor. A favorable rating on such an instrument can have a positive effect on one's career, as these evaluations are often tied to more distal rewards for employees because of their widespread use in determining allocation of pay raises and their use by managers in determining promotion decisions. As the name implies, the results of a formal performance appraisal are thought to be a fair representation of an employee's actual contribution or worth to the organization. Sometimes; however, these formal appraisals are used instead as a tool with which managers may reward or punish their subordinates (Longnecker, Sims & Gioia, 1987). The implication of Longnecker et al.'s (1987) survey research is that managers understand the link between their performance appraisal ratings and the rewards their subordinates might receive and are sometimes inclined to express their desires to reward or punish their employees through the manipulation of these performance ratings. This study seeks to test the effects of three types of employee behavior-- task performance, helping and employee voice on managerial reward recommendations. While an increasing amount of evidence supports the importance of task performance and helpfulness on measures of employee contribution to the organization (i.e., job performance), far less is known about the contribution of employee voice. Thus, this study was conducted in an effort to build upon the growing body of literature on employee voice as an important dimension of employee contribution to the organization as well as examine its effect on a direct measure of supervisory reward recommendations.

Task Performance and Helpfulness

There is a rich theoretical and empirical literature that supports the contribution of both task performance and helping to organizational effectiveness. Borman and Motowidlo (1993), in their broader discussion on distinguishing between task and contextual performance, argue that task performance and helping each contribute positively to the organization; however, the mechanism through which each contributes to effective organizational functioning is different. Task performance contributes to organizational effectiveness through its direct impact on the technical core of the organization. Task performance includes a myriad of behaviors including those that represent specific steps in facilitating the transformation of organizational inputs to outputs (i.e., a bank teller cashes a check for a depositor), actual distribution of the product and all of the underlying planning, supervising and other activities that "service and maintain" the technical core (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Helping behavior, on the other hand, does not contribute to the technical core directly. Instead, pervasive helping behaviors at work are thought to contribute to effective organizational functioning more indirectly, mainly through fostering a more positive working environment (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). In essence, according to this perspective, helpfulness at work should make the technical core of the organization function more smoothly.

Helping behavior is perhaps the one common component of all of the efforts to examine the effects of nontask behavior on overall performance ratings (Whiting, Podsakoff & Pierce, 2008). As Whiting and colleagues point out, in addition to being featured prominently in the contextual performance dimension, it is also a core construct in the Organizational Citizenship

Behavior (OCB) literature. Here, it shows up in dimensions of altruism (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983) and altruism, courtesy, cheerleading and peacemaking (Organ, 1988). Helping is also heavily emphasized in the behavioral domain of interpersonal facilitation (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996; Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999). While helpfulness has been described using a variety of terminologies in the past, a substantial amount of empirical evidence supports the argument that employee helpfulness contributes substantially to overall job performance ratings. For example, MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Fetter (1991) examined the effects of task performance and OCB in samples of salespeople and insurance agents. In each instance, their results showed that OCBs contributed as much to overall performance ratings as did task performance. A third study (MacKenzie, Podsakoff & Fetter, 1993) examining petrochemical salespeople revealed that OCBs contributed even more than did task performance in explaining variability in supervisors' assessments of job performance. Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994) found similar results in their study of Air Force mechanics. They found that contextual performance and task performance contributed roughly equally to supervisor ratings of employee job performance. The results of these studies and others (cf. Werner, 1994; Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996; Borman, White & Dorsey, 1995; Allen & Rush, 1998) have led most researchers to conclude that raters take into account employee helpfulness in making assessments of employee job performance.

While much evidence has accumulated on the impact of helpfulness on overall assessments of employee job performance, comparatively less is known about the impact of these behaviors on managers' inclinations to recommend their employees for valued rewards. An early study conducted by Park and Sims (1989) showed that employees who engaged in various altruistic acts (i.e., volunteering to serve on a United Way committee) were more likely to be recommended for compensation increases and for promotion by raters. In addition, the impact of helping on rater reward recommendations has been examined by Kiker and his colleagues in a series of managerial simulations (Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999; Johnson, Erez, Kiker & Motowidlo, 2002). Kiker and Motowidlo (1999) conducted a managerial simulation in which raters evaluated a simulated subordinate after watching videotaped depictions in which the subordinate's task performance and helpfulness were manipulated. They found that both task performance and helpfulness each had a main effect on rater reward recommendations. They also found a significant interaction effect, suggesting that helpfulness pays off more for those who are high in task performance and that task performance pays off more for people who are also helpful. Similarly, Johnson, et al. (2002) also uses a managerial simulation where helpfulness was manipulated and found that in each of the two studies they report, helpfulness had a significant main effect on rater reward recommendations.

Voice

The definition of employee voice used in the literature has not been consistent. In reviewing the literature, Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington and Ackers (2004) note this inconsistency and argue that researchers have used "voice" to describe employee behaviors ranging from using grievance procedures, engaging in collective bargaining, to partnering with management. The definition used in this paper is the one proposed by LePine and Van Dyne (2001), who define employee voice as "constructive change-oriented communication intended to improve the situation" (p. 326). More specifically, voice represents a form of "promotive behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than

merely criticize” the status quo (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998, p. 109). In this way, voice is similar to helpfulness in that neither contributes to the technical core directly. Instead, each contributes to the environment in which the technical core must function. Helpful behaviors emphasize cooperation and conforming to the status quo. They serve to facilitate harmony and positive working relationships. In contrast, voice behavior is a constructive force for changing the status quo. This may lead to upsetting the interpersonal relationships that exist inside an organization, but they ultimately help to clarify employee role structures in a dynamic environment, increase employee comfort and confidence, and reduce employee disagreement over the diffusion of tasks and responsibilities within the organization (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001).

Whiting, et al. (2008) offer three possible reasons why those who engage in the constructive challenge that voice represents might be viewed positively by their supervisor. First, organizations frequently find themselves facing dynamic competitive environments where change is increasingly necessary for survival. Employees who actively engage in constructive attempts for change should facilitate this. Second, they suggest that “employees who speak up” and make “valuable suggestions” help the manager perform his or her job more effectively. Finally, voice behavior is likely viewed by managers as being illustrative of an employee’s commitment to the organization, which is in decline overall, but is related to job performance (Whiting, et al., 2008). While little empirical evidence exists on voice, the evidence that is available is generally supportive of its positive impact. For instance, in a field study of 597 employees, Van Dyne and LePine (1998) collected ratings of employee task performance, helping and voice and correlated them with supervisor assessments of overall job performance. They found that each class of behavior contributed to these overall performance judgments. Similarly, Whiting, et al. (2008) conducted a lab study using written descriptions of employee behaviors manipulating high and low levels of task performance, helping and employee voice. They found that voice contributed to overall assessments of job performance above and beyond that of task performance and helping. Taken together, both conceptual and empirical support exists that employee voice is distinct from both task performance and helping and that these behaviors are likely to be rewarded by their supervisors.

Current Study

In light of the growing body of evidence supporting the positive effect of helping and voice on raters’ assessments of overall job performance, this study seeks to build upon prior research in several ways. First, the vast majority of research in this area relies on supervisor ratings of employee task performance, helpfulness, voice and overall performance. If the same supervisor makes ratings on task performance, helpfulness and voice and then also makes the assessment of overall performance, it is very possible that a type of halo effect might artificially inflate the observed correlations among the variables. Even in designs that use separate supervisors to make ratings of the independent and dependent variables, as in the study done by Van Dyne and LePine (1998), it is still possible that supervisors making ratings of a given performance dimension (i.e., task performance) will use elements of other dimensions (i.e., helping and voice) in making those ratings. This study was designed to eliminate this halo effect as a possible explanation for the observed results because directly manipulated levels of performance were used, rather than ratings of performance, in testing the hypotheses under investigation. Second, there is a clear reliance in past research on exploring the effects of helpfulness and voice on managerial assessments of employee job performance. Exclusive

reliance on measures of overall performance might not directly capture the effects of these behaviors on managers' decisions to recommend their subordinates for various rewards. This study seeks to capture the observation made by Longnecker et al. (1987) regarding using performance appraisals as accurate measures of employee value to the organization versus using them instead as a mechanism with which to reward and punish employees. Accordingly, the dependent variable measure in this study directly measures reward recommendations such as pay increases, promotions and recommendations to participate in "fast track" training opportunities to better capture this distinction. Third, while the study conducted by Kiker & Motowidlo (1999) addresses the problem of artifactually high intercorrelations between performance dimensions through directly manipulating levels of task performance and helping as well as adopting a focus on rewards, they do not manipulate and test the contribution of employee voice on these decisions. Finally, while Whiting, et al. (2008) directly manipulate and test the combined effects of task performance, helping and voice, they also focus exclusively on measures of overall job performance, not rewards. In addition, they manipulated these variables using written descriptions of employee behavior presented to participants with no irrelevant information that might make the rating environment more closely simulate the type of environment in which real managers make real decisions. In the study presented here, videotaped depictions of employee behavior were used and participants were encouraged to focus on a cognitively engaging, yet irrelevant, inbasket task. It was thought that this more closely mimics a real world decision-making environment whereby managers' observations of employee behavior represent only a small proportion of their duties.

Overall, this study tests the effects of task performance, helping and voice on supervisory reward recommendations in a cognitively engaging, ambiguous rating environment that more closely resembles real-world decision making. Based on the accumulated evidence for the dimensionality of job performance, as well as the body of empirical evidence discussed above, it is expected that task performance, helping and voice will each have a main effect on rater reward recommendations. More formally, the hypotheses under investigation in this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Manipulated task performance will have a main effect on rater reward recommendations.

Hypothesis 2: Manipulated helpfulness will have a main effect on rater reward recommendations.

Hypothesis 3: Manipulated voice will have a main effect on rater reward recommendations.

METHOD

The sample consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in upper division management courses in a small regional university in the southeast. These students were offered extra credit points to participate in the study which, they were told, was being conducted to examine how managers go about making day-to-day decisions. The average age of student participants was approximately 25 and the sample was 52% female. Lab sessions were conducted over several weeks and each session lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. After being told of the purpose of the study, participants were introduced to their inbasket assignment (see Mero & Motowidlo, 1995; Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999). They were told that the inbasket assignment was the primary task on which they should focus. In performing their inbasket duties, students were asked to adopt the role of Leslie Wilder, who was in charge of a sizable governmental contracting office.

As Leslie Wilder, they were provided with multiple tasks to complete. These tasks included such things as dealing with angry customers, responding to various employee needs and requests, filling out expense reports, reviewing company policies and procedures, etc. The total materials consisted of far more than students could complete in the time allowed and they were told that they should go through it as they would if they were Leslie Wilder. The ambiguity of the task, as well as the prioritizing required to work through the inbasket, were designed to closely approximate a typical manager's duties in a realistic situation (Mero & Motowidlo, 1995).

While working on the inbasket materials, students were occasionally interrupted by videotaped behavioral episodes of Leslie Wilder's simulated subordinates. They were told that these interruptions may or may not be useful to them in performing their inbasket duties. Thus, participants were primarily asked to focus on the inbasket materials, which were not relevant to the study's research questions, while simultaneously being told that the videotaped depictions of subordinate behavior (relevant information) constituted an "interruption" from their primary task. The videotaped behavioral information focused on a single employee, Bill Jensen, who was the MIS director in the contracting office. Other simulated employees were also shown; however, they were used only to add realism to the scenes and to help create the work context in which Bill Jensen was to perform.

Prior to conducting this experiment, a pair of pilot tests was conducted to ensure that each scene a) measured only its intended performance dimension (task performance, helping or voice) and b) represented its intended level of effectiveness (high or low). First, each scene was tested to ensure that the level of effectiveness of each scene was accurately portrayed. All scenes were designed such that effective performance episodes would result in scores of 6-7 on a 7-point rating scale while ineffective performance episodes would yield scores of 1-2 on the same scale. A total of 28 participants were recruited and they were asked to watch a subset of videotapes and make ratings on the degree of effectiveness depicted in each scene. The results of this test revealed average ratings of each scene consistent with what was expected; each effective scene was scored much more highly than its corresponding ineffective scene. Specifically, the mean ratings for the effective scenes were 5.94 (SD=1.03) for task performance, 5.5 (SD=1.05) for helping and 5.14 (SD=1.35) for voice, while the mean ratings for the ineffective scenes were 2.2 (SD=.86) for task performance, 1.64 (SD=1.05) for helping and 2.37 (SD=.90) for voice. To examine whether the scenes used in this study captured only the intended performance dimension, 10 MBA students were trained on the definitions of task performance, helping and voice. They were asked to watch the videotaped vignettes and in response to each scene classify the behavior shown as being a clear depiction of either a) task performance, b) helping, c) voice or d) other. They were instructed to categorize a scene as "other" if they believed, for example, that the scene might contain elements of multiple dimensions (i.e., the scene reflected both voice and task performance) or if the scene was not illustrative of task performance, voice or helping. Results showed that raters correctly classified task performance 98% of the time and both helping and voice were each classified correctly 88% of the time. Overall, the results of these pilot tests confirmed that the videotaped scenes used in this study both depicted clearly what each was intended to measure (task performance, helping or voice) and accurately portrayed the level of effectiveness desired (high or low).

Experimental Conditions

A total of eight experimental conditions were created for this study. These conditions were formed by crossing two levels of voice (high and low) with two levels of helping (high and low) by two levels of task performance (high and low). Each participant was assigned to only one experimental condition. Rater reward recommendations represented the dependent variable. Each condition contained a total of six videotaped depictions of employee behavior. In the effective task performance condition, Bill Jensen was shown engaging in effective task performance (i.e., installing a new computer component) in two scenes while in the ineffective condition Bill Jensen was shown handling the same situations ineffectively (i.e., failing to install the computer component correctly). The helpful condition consisted of Bill Jensen being helpful in two scenes while in the unhelpfulness condition Bill Jensen was being unhelpful in the same situations. For example, in one scene Bill Jensen is confronted with a coworker who has a personal problem. In the effective condition, Bill is depicted as volunteering to help while in the ineffective condition Bill does not help and admonishes the coworker for bringing his personal problems to work. Finally, the effective voice condition showed Bill Jensen engaging in constructive challenge in two scenes and in the ineffective voice condition Bill Jensen was depicted as handling the same situations ineffectively. For example, in one scene designed to depict effective voice, Bill challenges the company's long-standing policy of restricting their pool of suppliers to only U.S. owned firms. In the ineffective scene, Bill notes the policy, states that he has some thoughts on it, but has decided to "keep his mouth closed" because he didn't want to "rock the boat." At the conclusion of the experimental simulation, participants were then asked to rate Bill Jensen on task performance, helping and voice (as a manipulation check) as well as make reward recommendations about him.

Measures

Reward recommendations were measured on a 7-point anchored scale ranging from 1 (totally unsuitable) to 7 (extremely suitable). The scale consisted of nine items and was adopted from Kiker and Motowidlo (1999). Three of the nine items were designed to tap into recommendations for compensation increases, three others tapped into assessing suitability for promotion, while the final three asked participants about the subordinate's readiness to participate in a fast-track development program. Its internal consistency reliability estimate was .97. The measure of perceived helpfulness (included as a manipulation check) was adopted from Van Scotter and Motowidlo (1996). This was also a 7-point anchored scale ranging from 1 (extremely ineffective) to 7 (extremely effective) where participants were asked to rate Bill Jensen on various helpful behaviors. These included such activities as helping others without being asked, the degree to which he treats others fairly and the extent to which he says things to make others feel good about themselves. Its internal consistency reliability estimate was .94. Finally, the task performance measure (included as a manipulation check) used in Kiker and Motowidlo (1999) was employed in this study. It asks subjects to rate Bill Jensen's effectiveness from 1 to 7 (extremely ineffective to extremely effective) in performing such activities as routine maintenance work, training others in the use of new technology and operating equipment. Its internal consistency estimate was .95. Finally, the voice measure was adopted from the definition offered by Van Dyne and LePine (1998). A 7-point scale was used which again ranged from 1 (extremely ineffective) to 7 (extremely effective) to assess Bill Jensen's effectiveness in performing such activities as making innovative suggestions for change,

expressing constructive challenge intended to improve the organization, and recommending modifications to standard procedures. Its internal consistency reliability was .96.

RESULTS

First, the effectiveness with which the experimental conditions created successfully varied the levels of task performance, helping and voice as intended was examined. To accomplish this, a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, once with ratings of task performance as the dependent variable, once with helping as the dependent variable and another with ratings of voice as the dependent variable. Results of this manipulation check showed that the videotaped depictions of task performance had a strong effect on ratings of task performance, $F(1, 208) = 483.3, p < .05, E^2 = .70$. Similarly, the videotaped depictions of helpfulness had a strong effect on ratings of helpfulness, $F(1, 208) = 81.42, p < .05, E^2 = .28$. Finally, the videotaped depictions of voice had a strong effect on ratings of voice, $F(1, 208) = 39.9, p < .05, E^2 = .16$. Manipulated task performance ($N^2 = .06$) and manipulated helpfulness ($N^2 = .05$) also had a significant effect on ratings of voice behavior; however, the magnitude of these effects are much smaller than those of the voice manipulation. This finding suggests that raters take into account some sense of overall contribution when making ratings about dimensions of employee performance. As expected, for each manipulation check, the pattern of means showed that ratings increased with increases in manipulated task performance, helpfulness and voice. Taken together, these findings provide evidence that the videotaped behavioral manipulations used in this study successfully varied the conditions in the way that was intended.

Effects on Reward Recommendations

To test the hypotheses regarding the effect of task performance, helping and voice on reward recommendations, a 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVA that crossed 2 levels of task performance, 2 levels of helping and 2 levels of voice was conducted. The dependent variable was the overall reward recommendations score. Results showed a significant main effect of manipulated task performance, $F(1, 208) = 132.35, p < .05, N^2 = .39$ and a significant main effect for manipulated helpfulness $F(1, 208) = 6.41, p < .05, N^2 = .03$ on reward recommendations. The effect of manipulated voice was also significant, $F = 12.80, p < .05, N^2 = .06$. These results provide support for hypotheses 1-3. The pattern of means, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix), further demonstrate that task performance, helping and voice each have a main effect on rater reward recommendations. The results did not show a two-way or three-way interaction effect. This finding is inconsistent with those reported by Kiker & Motowidlo (1999) as well as Whiting, et al. (2008), who both showed that nontask performance behaviors significantly interacted with task performance in determining reward recommendations and overall performance assessments, respectively.

DISCUSSION

The results reported here provide evidence of a positive impact of voice on supervisory reward recommendations. It seems that voice contributes to these reward decisions over and above the significant contributions of both task performance and helpfulness and that more rewards are allocated to those who demonstrate effectiveness in all three dimensions. Thus, all

three classes of behavior are valued and contribute independently reward recommendation decisions. Also, unlike the results from Kiker and Motowidlo (1999) and Whiting, et al. (2008), in this study, no interaction effect was found. This suggests that an individual's discrete task performance, helping, and voice behaviors contribute independently to his or her contribution to the organization. This finding is also consistent with the conceptualization of job performance offered by Motowidlo and his colleagues, who argue that the contribution value of any particular behavioral, such as task performance, should not have any bearing on the contribution value of other behaviors (i.e., helping) performed by the same individual (Motowidlo, Borman & Schmit, 1997). The results reported here are true to this conceptualization of job performance, though they diverge from those of recent research (Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999; Whiting, et al., 2008).

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the finding that voice, along with helping and task performance, contributes independently to supervisory reward recommendations. In fact, the magnitude of the effect of voice in this study is greater than that of helpfulness. This finding highlights the potential importance of employee voice as an important component of job performance. Given the dynamic nature of the environment that today's organizations face and the fact that employee voice might help the manager do a better job, perhaps the usefulness of change-oriented behavior by employees is readily apparent (Whiting, et.al, 2008). However, given the paucity of empirical research on the topic relative to that of helpfulness, the results reported here suggest that more attention should be given to understanding the predictors and effects of employee voice in today's organizations. Research on employee voice is gaining momentum and these results suggest that continued inquiry into this overlooked class of employee behavior will yield fruitful results. The research reported here extends previous research which has already demonstrated the unique effects of task performance, helping and voice on contributions of employee worth to organizations as measured by overall assessments of employee job performance (Whiting, et al., 2008) in two primary ways. First, the contribution of these behaviors on managers' decisions regarding allocation of valuable rewards was directly measured as opposed to relying on an indirect indicator like a measure of overall employee job performance. Second, due to the extreme steps undertaken to make the rating environment as realistic as possible, perhaps the generalizability of the results is enhanced. Ilgen and Favero (1985) suggested that laboratory studies could be significantly enhanced by creating conditions that more closely approximate the conditions under which real managers make real decisions. To accomplish this, they suggest that researchers present raters with both relevant information related to the research questions as well as irrelevant information, as this is the type of environment that is consistent with actual workplace decision-making. In addition, they suggest that researchers should seek out more ways to enhance the realism of the actual employee behaviors under investigation. Rather than relying exclusively on the use of "paper people," or written descriptions of employee behavior, they suggest providing participants more opportunities to actually observe behavior. In the absence of this, they suggest the use of videotaped depictions of employee behavior.

The experimental design used in this study is consistent with these recommendations in that videotaped depictions of employee behavior were used rather than written descriptions of employee behavior. Further, participants in this study were told to focus primarily on the inbasket materials (irrelevant information) while considering the videotaped vignettes (relevant information) as mere "interruptions" that they also might consider. The inbasket materials themselves provided participants with plenty of rich, cognitively involving materials which kept their attention. In fact, compared to the inbasket materials, the videotaped depictions of

subordinate behavior accounted for only a small percentage of the participants' attention. It is possible that past research, which provided only relevant information in the form of written behavioral descriptions, focused participant attention on these materials more so than might be the case under more realistic conditions. The study reported here was designed to more closely mimic the conditions under which managers actually make decisions. Interestingly, the results reported in this study, while compelling, are smaller in magnitude than other studies that test similar constructs under less realistic conditions (cf. Werner, 1994; Whiting, et al., 2008).

This study also contributes to the literature in several ways, starting with moving away from using supervisors' ratings of task performance, helping, and voice and instead manipulating these constructs directly. This avoids the possibility of any halo effects resulting in artifactually high interrelationships among the dimensions. Second, while previous research has relied almost exclusively on using supervisors' assessments of employee job performance, the dependent variable in this study was instead managers' inclinations to recommend their subordinate for valued rewards. Third, this study adds to the growing literature on the importance of employee voice as an important component of an employee's contribution to an organization. The results reported here show that voice behavior explains variability in managerial reward recommendations over and above that explained by the more traditional predictors of task performance and helping.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Reward Decision Means

Condition	Task	Manipulation		Reward Score	
		Helping	Voice	M	SD
1	High	High	High	40.55	8.60
2	High	High	Low	35.46	10.72
3	High	Low	High	36.48	10.61
4	High	Low	Low	31.35	13.75
5	Low	High	High	24.33	10.35
6	Low	High	Low	18.60	6.16
7	Low	Low	High	20.48	10.62
8	Low	Low	Low	16.58	7.08

