

Employee voice: an important dynamic in changing times

By **Sofya Isaakyan**

In these times of crisis, effective leadership has become especially critical and central to ensuring organisational strength. Now, more than ever, organisational leaders need to take concrete actions as they focus on three main areas.

First, they need to manage themselves. They need to accept that they cannot control everything, that they might not have all the information available, and that some answers might come slowly. Being resilient is key – the best managers in times of crisis can handle stress and are able to adapt quickly to changing situations. They constantly need to assess the situation, act, pause, and then re-assess the result of their actions on the situation to identify what has gone well and what needs to be changed.

Second, they need to manage external stakeholders such as suppliers, banks, other clients, and so on. They need to reach out proactively, sharing their ideas and concerns and hearing the other side. This is an opportunity to both help and ask for help, addressing challenges through a collaborative approach.

Finally, and probably most importantly, they need to manage their internal stakeholders: employees. They need to communicate to their employees what they know and what they don't know. But two-way communication is equally critical. They must provide employees with opportunities to openly express their ideas, suggestions, and concerns. This article focuses on this often-neglected phenomenon of how employee voice behaviour can help managers succeed.

Most organisations should encourage employees to engage in "voice" – speaking up with constructive ideas, suggestions, or concerns with intent to bring positive changes. This is beneficial to organisations – it helps identify emerging issues and problems, it improves decision-making processes, and it fosters innovation. However, the COVID-19 virus has sent organisations spinning – forcing them to make hard decisions quickly in a complex atmosphere of ambiguity. Now, more than ever, employees are in danger of losing their "voice".

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When managers don't listen

The expression of work ideas can spur useful discussions, action planning, and problem solving. To work, however, these ideas must be heard, addressed, and implemented. But in many organi-

sations, managers often react negatively to their employees' input, ignoring the ideas they hear and carrying on with "business as usual". They might reject ideas not for their inherent value but because of feeling threatened. Employees who challenge the status quo can be interpreted as voicing personal criticism. As a result, managers might perceive this voice as a challenge to their authority, credibility, and competence.

This happens every day across countless organisations. And it is unfortunate, because it leads to situations in which great ideas are buried, and in which employees who do not feel heard become demotivated and unwilling to speak up in the future.

Employees can choose to voice their ideas publicly, during a larger meeting with others present. Indeed, most organisational literature emphasises

the importance of discussing ideas in groups of people with different perspectives. This allows employees to challenge each other, come up with a variety of suggestions and develop the best possible solutions. Employees can

also choose to voice their ideas privately, talking to their manager one-on-one. However, this eliminates the advantage of collective thinking, and can be fundamentally inefficient. Clearly, it is important that employees speak up in public. But the question is: how do managers react to this type of voice?

Until recently, researchers have looked at the public versus private voice dynamic from two different perspectives: accountability and image management. The accountability perspective suggests that managers are more likely to feel a sense of accountability when employees speak up in public, endorsing and acting on an idea because others

have heard it too. The image management perspective, on the other hand, suggests that managers are more likely to feel that their competence is being questioned when employees speak up in public. As a result, they can react defensively and shut down the public voice. A series of studies we are currently conducting provides support for the image management perspective, and suggests that managers are indeed less likely to endorse public voice due to enhanced image concerns in public settings.

Relationship quality

The idea of employee voice doesn't occur in a vacuum. The relationship be-

tween employees and their managers can have a major influence on how managers react to voice. If the employee and the manager have a "distant" relationship, the manager will usually be less likely to endorse an idea, especially if it is expressed in public. If the manager has a close, trusting relationship with the employee, they will give them the benefit of the doubt and see public voice from them as a benevolent attempt to bring positive changes. As a result, they will be more likely to endorse it.

But here's the rub: employees who are more distant are more likely to have non-overlapping and unique perspectives vis-à-vis managers, but will also have fewer opportunities for private interactions with them. If managers are averse to public channels – often the only channel available for these relationally distant employees – they will miss out on important divergent opinions. Although this allows them to save face, these managers ultimately bring about dysfunctional organisational behaviour.

Voice and silence

When talking about voice, we should also address the phenomenon of silence. Until recently, organisational scholars have treated voice and silence as opposites: low voice must equal high silence, and vice versa. In fact, our latest research project¹ shows that this is not true. The extent to which people speak up is independent from the extent to which people intentionally withhold ideas. In other words, an employee might frequently speak up with some ideas (high voice), while also withholding a lot of other ideas (high silence). At ▶



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the other end of the scale, an employee might speak up infrequently (low voice) and at the same time not withhold any input (low silence), but only because they simply agree with the status quo.

Importantly, we found that two different mechanisms motivate voice and silence. The extent to which employees voice their ideas or concerns is primarily motivated by their level of perceived impact (ie, a sense that their voice can bring positive changes). At the same time, the extent to which employees withhold their ideas or concerns is pri-

course, the organisation doesn't need to implement every idea. But employees must feel that their ideas will be taken seriously. To further instil a sense of impact, managers can highlight past employee ideas that have been addressed and implemented.

Managers should also actively increase a sense of psychological safety to reduce silence. This means creating an atmosphere in which nobody shouts down another employee or laughs at their ideas. Informal meetings work best here, where employees feel comfortable

Finally, employees should be aware that, when they do not share a close, trusting relationship with their manager, they might be more successful in gaining managerial endorsement by expressing their opinions or concerns in private rather than in public settings.

Leadership development

Speaking up can also have add-on organisational benefits down the line in terms of employee leadership development. Most organisations usually put employees through formal leadership development programmes. However, leadership development can also occur during on-the-job experiences. Building on the idea that acting like a leader can make you feel more like a leader, we have found that the more employees speak up, the more they view themselves as effective leaders. And given that individuals with higher levels of leader identity are more likely to actively seek out opportunities to lead and advance their leadership skills, voice behaviour turns out to be a great trigger for leadership development. ■

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¹Sherf, E. N., Parke, M. R., & Isaakyan S. (In press). *Distinguishing voice and silence at work: Unique relationships with perceived impact, psychological safety, and burnout. Academy of Management Journal. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2018.1428*

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marily motivated by their perceived level of psychological safety (ie, a sense that their voice won't lead to personal harm or negative repercussions). This means that organisations need to develop two systems: one that focuses on increasing voice and another that focuses on decreasing silence.

Beyond an open-door policy

To encourage voice, organisations should move beyond an “open-door” policy to an approach in which they actively increase employees' sense of perceived impact. Managers should solicit employee input, and show them that they will act on this input if possible. Of

sharing their input and people are not afraid to make mistakes.

Organisations should also communicate the benefits of public voice to managers and explain to them that it is often productive for people to challenge each other publicly. This might encourage managers to endorse public voice without being overly concerned about how this might impact their image. Managers also need to be aware that their reactions to voice can be coloured by the quality of their relationships with employees and that they might miss out on important divergent perspectives by neglecting public voice from those outside their circle of confidants.

