When Employees Speak Up, Companies Win

Why and how you should encourage employees to speak out about issues beyond their own jobs.

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Business headlines suggest that employees are speaking up more than ever. Activist employees are calling out their companies over where and with whom they do business, burned-out employees are asking for more and more unique work-life accommodations, and concerned employees are raising questions about hiring practices and promotion decisions in light of institutional biases. Often, these instances of speaking up — called *employee voice behaviors* — result in an embarrassingly public airing of organizational issues.

Yet our research reveals that the headlines are not an accurate reflection of the current state of employee voice. We asked 6,000 employees of a Microsoft business unit to tell us how often they spoke up to their managers. In addition, we asked how many of 15 topics they spoke up about, such as their immediate job assignments, the culture of their teams, how employees are treated across the organization, the

strategy of the company, and the work-life balance alternatives available to them. We found that relatively few employees consistently share their thoughts and opinions about a multitude of work issues with their managers: Just 13.6% of the surveyed employees said that they speak up on more than 10 of the topics. Slightly more are silent: In fact, 17.5% said they do not speak up at all. The largest group of employees — 47.1% — said they speak up on five or fewer topics, typically on issues related to their jobs.

If we assume that these findings reflect similar tendencies in other organizations, leaders should be concerned, because employee voice is not a voice of complaint or protest per se. It encompasses the willingness of employees to speak up about opportunities for improvement. These efforts are not a prescribed part of employees' jobs; they are a voluntary communication of constructive ideas to leaders that enable learning and effective change in work groups of all sizes, from teams to entire organizations. Yet these efforts to tell the truth can involve confronting leaders, who can feel challenged or even threatened, especially when the proposed changes involve things that leaders have helped create or for which they are responsible. [1]

More and more, companies are seeking to expand efforts to listen to their employees by inviting them to share their opinions and ideas in areas that are outside of their day-to-day tasks. For instance, in 2014, in the aftermath of a recall of 6 million vehicles for an ignition flaw linked to at least 13 deaths, General Motors launched its Speak Up for

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Safety program, which asked employees across the company to speak up about anything that might impact customer safety. The growing use of innovation platforms and ecosystems is another example. In addition, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen companies frequently survey employees on topics such as physical and mental health and their working conditions.

The effectiveness of all these efforts depends on employees' willingness to use their voices. In this study, we sought to examine the benefits of a more expansive employee voice, the factors that determine voice behaviors, and the ways in which companies can encourage those behaviors.

The Benefits of Speaking Up More

Prior research into employee voice about job-related issues shows that it produces a variety of benefits for employees and organizations, including greater engagement, better customer service, reduced turnover, and greater operational efficiencies. [2] The current study revealed that speaking up about a multitude of topics is associated with positive employee behaviors.

Most intriguingly, we found a correlation between willingness to speak up about a variety of topics and level of employee engagement. We found that employees who spoke up about all 15 topics were 92% more likely to want to stay with the company (even if offered a comparable position elsewhere) versus 60% for those who didn't speak up at all and 68% for those who spoke up on one to five topics. Furthermore, 95% of those who spoke up about all topics said they would recommend their company as a great place to work, compared with 82% among those who didn't speak up at all and 86% among those who spoke up on one to five topics. Lastly, 95% of those who spoke up about all topics expressed excitement to come to work to do their jobs, compared with 61% among those who did not speak up at all and 75% among those who spoke up on one to five topics.

Factors That Encourage More Expansive Voice Behaviors

Personality is, of course, an important determinant of voice behaviors — some people are just less inhibited than others. [3] But work-related factors also play a significant role in who speaks up and how often. When we compared the employees who took the survey, we found four main factors that distinguished those who spoke up from those who were less likely to do so:

Managerial status and level within the organization. As people assume more responsibilities and decision-making authority, they are exposed to a wider variety of issues. They also are likely to feel more secure about raising issues outside of their jobs. So it wasn't a surprise to find that workers were less likely to speak up about multiple issues than managers. For example, 49% of managers spoke up about six or more topics, whereas only 35% of workers were vocal about as many distinct topics.

With more and more people coming into the workplace as contingent or part-time workers, their concerns regarding issues such as the challenges of working remotely, ambiguous career trajectories, and understanding the strategic direction of organizations are increasingly important. And, of course, hearing the opinions and ideas of employees at the lower levels of the organization is a critical factor in a wide variety of managerial decisions, whether customer strategy or HR policies. This is important in the latter case especially, to avoid the irony of making investments in things like work-life balance that don't reflect the needs and desires of the people they are intended to benefit.

Managerial behaviors. We know that front-line managers are a critical linchpin in employee voice. Reporting to a manager who is receptive to employee ideas and willing to act on them assures employees that expressing their perspectives can indeed make a difference in their work environments and motivates them to speak up. [4]

The data from the engagement survey shows that this effect may be magnified for employee voice across a variety of

topics. Ninety-six percent of employees who speak up about all of the topic areas covered in the survey said they have managers who act based on their suggestions. Among employees who speak up about one to five topics, 83% said they have action-oriented managers, and among employees who do not speak up at all, 77% said they have managers who are action-oriented. In short, cultivating an environment where employees speak about things that, on the surface, have little to do with their work responsibilities — and taking action on those issues — is associated with employees being more engaged with their work.

Team climate. Working in teams that value diverse perspectives and make their members feel safe to express their viewpoints also encourages employees to speak up. [5] We found that this effect has a marked impact on the willingness of the surveyed employees to speak up about a greater variety of topics.

Ninety-six percent of the employees who speak up on all the survey topics said they work in teams that value diverse perspectives, compared with 85% of those who speak up on one to five topics and 76% of those who don't speak up at all. Moreover, 92% of the employees who speak up on all issues said they work in a team that allows them to try new things on the job, compared with 70% of employees who speak up on one to five topics and 68% of employees who don't speak up on any topic. Lastly, 96% of employees who speak up on all topics said it is safe for them to speak up in their teams, compared with 84% among those who speak up on one to five topics and 73% who don't speak up at all.

Degree of connectedness. Feeling connected with others in the organization, even those outside one's own team, provides the social support necessary to speak up and challenge the status quo. [6] Conversely, one clear reason why employees limit their voices is because they feel isolated and thus are unsure about how widespread an issue actually is.

To test this effect on expanded employee voice, we assessed how well the surveyed employees were connected to the rest of the organization by measuring the volume of their emails and the range of the recipients of their messages. We found that the more well connected an employee is to the rest of the organization, the more likely that person is to speak up

across all topics. Employees who speak up about all topics sent 23% more emails within their teams and 50% more emails outside their teams per week than those who speak up about one to five topics.

How to Promote More Expansive Employee Voice Behaviors

The findings in our study suggest four ways in which companies can encourage more expansive voice behaviors, even among the most introverted employees.

First, leaders should be cognizant that the employees least likely to speak up are those with the least power. Aligning systems to purposefully hear from these employees is paramount to learning about the issues facing the largest population of most organizations.

A regional grocery chain did this by creating and actively promoting a dedicated email address that employees in the stores could use to communicate to the entire executive team at once. In another example, the president of a local bank instituted a monthly lunch with no more than a dozen employees, but with a playful catch: If each employee brought an idea, the president would pay for their lunch; if not, the employees had to pay for their own lunches.

Second, because managerial behaviors are essential enablers of speaking up, companies should train managers to be open to the ideas of the employees on their teams and take prompt action based on their suggestions. Microsoft added a specific training module on this subject in its required learning path for managers. One of the practices it teaches is holding check-ins at the start of meetings, during which employees are encouraged to share how they are feeling at that moment — whether it's something positive or something they are concerned about.

Third, share the results of your company's efforts to listen to employees companywide to help spread desirable peer behaviors and establish speaking up as a cultural trait. Microsoft's annual engagement survey, which enjoys response rates above 85%, provides an important

opportunity for managers and their teams to both share and support employee voice. Another tech company trains its managers to interpret the results of employee surveys and the comments they elicit, and to hold meetings with employees to review those results. This sets the stage for collective involvement in voicing suggestions to improve the issues identified in the survey.

Finally, companies know that complex organizational problems are best solved by cross-functional teams, but they don't always recognize that such groups also enhance employee connection and increase the propensity of employees to express their opinions. Accordingly, they should consider launching initiatives and programs with broader, less specific goals aimed at helping employees develop personal networks and collecting a wide range of ideas. Prudential did this 20 years ago when it engaged 55,000 employees in 12 cities in a series of large- and small-scale meetings designed to share ideas, transform the business, and institutionalize problem resolution. [7]

Recently, some companies, including Google and Coinbase, have attempted to discourage employees from speaking up at work about political issues and other topics that are considered outside the scope of their jobs. Our research highlights the need for organizations to rethink that stance, because we've seen the result when they don't: activism, discontent, and attrition. Encouraging employees to observe and speak up about areas of improvement across a variety of domains and ensuring that leaders listen and take action on this diversity of experience can help organizations thrive.

About The Authors

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