



Let Your Employees Speak...So They Stay

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Do employees have a voice in your organization? Dave Stevens and Barry Pokroy address the concept of employee voice and maintain that fostering open and honest communications with your people will create trust and a sense of belonging in the workplace.

"Leaders who don't listen will eventually be surrounded by people who have nothing to say." – Andy Stanley.

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Most of us are familiar with the story of the Titanic—a cautionary tale of miscommunication which led to the largest loss of life aboard a non-wartime vessel in modern times. Ignored iceberg warnings, messages from fellow ships left unsent to the bridge, and a pair of missing binoculars were only some of the events in a series of miscommunications that contributed to the tragedy. Undeniably, this lack of communication was a core theme of the tragic story. In this instance, had certain people spoken up at key times or, if others had listened, the outcome may have been very different.

When [coaching](#) multiple layers within the same organization, we often hear the same story from different perspectives: "My employees don't give me the right information" or "My manager doesn't listen." Obviously, these complaints point to a common theme—a breakdown in communication.



In the workplace, this miscommunication has consequences, since employees who feel unheard tend to vote with their feet, while those who remain have little incentive to help improve the organization or their own job satisfaction. Of the former—it's clear that, during the pandemic, employee turnover and movement have both escalated. Dubbed the 'Great Resignation' or even 'the mass exodus', the rise in attrition rates in many sectors has brought a [scarcity of talent](#); giving employees leverage to be more vocal on many workplace issues.

While these concerns appear to reflect two sides of the same coin, organizations—including people managers, human resource teams, executives and especially founders, partners, and owners—are ultimately the ones responsible for creating a culture that encourages employees to step forward and be heard without fear of reprisal.

What is employee voice and why is it so important?

Employee voice, in its simplest terms, is how an employee—at any level of an organization—can speak up, be *heard*, and influence positive change in their workplace. This applies to feedback, opinions, ideas, and even dissension around themes such as work environment, culture, career planning, learning and development, flexible work, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I).

Too often, organizational leaders are unaware of the ways that they could improve the employee experience—including their ability to speak up, be heard, and influence—which has real consequences, as employee voice is a main contributor to productivity, innovation, and workplace engagement.

An environment where an employee's voice is valued and actively encouraged ultimately makes for a healthy, successful, and a well-connected workforce. The researched and well-documented benefits include both subjective rewards: job satisfaction, engagement, cohesiveness, loyalty, trust, and commitment on the part of employees. There are also measurable improvements for the organization as well—higher productivity, a richer culture, employee retention, innovation, and sharing of important information.

How can organizations foster employee voice?

First, organizations must make it clear—both explicitly and implicitly—that they value input and feedback. This means giving employees time when they come with a request. It means *listening* first and then asking intentional questions to better understand an employee's point of view *before* responding. It means asking them to contribute potential solutions to the problem brought forward and engaging them in the process of organizational change—no matter how small the change may seem.

It also means working to protect your employees if negative emotions are sparked in you by their comments. When you appreciate and respect your employees—placing the wellbeing of your relationship with them at top priority—they will be much more likely to be engaged in the workplace.

Progressive organizations also facilitate channels for employee voice to occur. Many people find it intimidating and stressful to speak up, so having clear guidelines about how and when your organization most welcomes feedback allows them to feel safe to express their views. Should issues be expressed verbally or in writing? In town halls, team meetings or one-on-ones? It can be helpful to create guidelines by considering—or even asking—how your employees



best respond to feedback, and how you prefer to receive it.

A study in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences \(PNAS\)](#) found that employee voice was further encouraged in a company that emphasized *choice*. According to the researchers, having choice gave employees a locus of control and made them feel more empowered to speak up. The key is not to overwhelm people with options, but to create a culture that allows for choice.

Finally, when you receive feedback, it is important to follow up and let the employee(s) know that you take their ideas or concerns seriously. This can take place in either team meetings, town halls, email communications, or on an individual basis. Just ensure you are addressing the issues with tangible action or reasons why you need more time to develop a resolution. In other words, manage their expectations, but never leave them hanging.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion at the forefront

When we look at ED&I, employee voice becomes even more critical and creating a safe environment for each person to bring their full self to work is paramount. An annual employee voice survey by [Workday](#) revealed that employee comments around ED&I increased by a staggering 38% in 2020. This is a great example of how employees are voicing their opinions on topics that are important to them.

If you are seeing similar feedback in your organization, it's on you to *listen* and start or continue the conversation. [Brian Reaves](#), Chief Belonging, Diversity and Equity Officer at UKG, says "companies need to consistently listen, too. We can't act on everything, but we can give people the space to be heard. And that's where transparency comes in—if I, as an employer, didn't act on something, I should at least tell you why."

You may not have all the answers, but the fact you are listening and opening yourself to this important conversation goes a long way. The trick is to listen to understand. When we suspend our views and judgements, we can see the world from the standpoint of the person who is talking. We become a participant in the conversation, not a bystander. A culture of listening to truly understand is more likely to meet the subjective expectations of those sharing their views and providing the feedback.

Creating a culture of ED&I begins when organizations make a commitment to tackling the issues and actively listen to their employees. When employees feel heard and understood there is a greater chance, they will feel a sense of belonging at work.

Employee voice: encouraging, structuring, and preserving trust

Fostering employee voice has been shown to yield clear benefits for both individuals and organizations. Managing it, however, is not easy since some degree of discomfort is bound to emerge. Remember, it's during these uncomfortable conversations where trust is built and reinforced, and positive organizational change is allowed to flourish. It's important to not shy away from it, but rather to chase the discomfort.

Ultimately, open communication starts at the senior leadership level, and it's up to each of them to encourage individuals to come forward with their views—dissension included—using channels and guidelines that preserve mutual respect, keep relationships intact, ensure comments are constructive, and protect the interests and feelings



of those involved.

The last thing any organization needs is a titanic-sized problem that could have been avoided. Employee voice may just be the proverbial lighthouse that provides everyone in the organization with direction, assurance, and a sense of belonging and purpose.

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Our Contributors

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