

Having a Voice and Giving a Voice

The importance of speaking up and encouraging your team to speak up

There is more to diversity than age, ethnicity or gender. For organizations to reap the creative problem-solving benefits of an inclusive workforce they need to hear from everyone. People, whatever their background, outlook, or mindset should be encouraged to 'speak up', and organizations encouraged to create the safe spaces where they are able to do so.

This idea of 'speaking up' can play a vital role for the individual too, where one's 'voice' is a key part of what one's reputation, career progression and personal fulfilment are built on.

It is no longer feasible for small, insular management teams to solve the complex problems faced by organizations today. The collective intelligence of the workforce, along with external stakeholder input, is essential to sustainable, long-term success. In principle, with our less hierarchical, more 'democratic' management structures, there should be no barriers to diverse voices being heard. In practice, individual inhibition, fear of 'scary' or intimidating managers, and discouraging corporate cultures, often do present serious barriers.

From sexual harassment cases to the safety failures of the Boeing 737 Max, there are far too many examples where a fear of 'speaking truth to power' has had calamitous results. Failure to expose malpractice is the high-profile consequence, but silence and unquestioning compliance has a more general deleterious effect on all aspects of corporate culture – hindering communication, innovation and performance.

Through our research, which recently culminated in our book *'Speak Up; Say what needs to be said and hear what needs to be heard'* (FT Publishing), we have identified many of the barriers and motivators that either stymie or encourage speaking up and the equally important capacity to really listen.

Some organizations have instituted whistle-blower hotlines or Friday 'pizza with the boss' sessions. Largely we think these, and other formalised listening, consultation and training exercises – though well-intentioned – are too simplistic. Nor is it enough to just ask people to 'speak up' and leaders to 'engage in conversations'. The key is for leaders to fully understand the relational power, and systemic dynamics in their organization, and then to ensure these dynamics are working towards creating a culture of psychological safety – where team members feel free and motivated to speak openly and where they are truly listened to.

Here are seven implications drawn from our research findings which can have a real impact on 'speaking up' in your organisation:

1. Our survey respondents appeared to see themselves as being superior to everyone around them, at both speaking up and listening. The more senior the respondent, the higher their opinion of their own listening skills. This perception leads to the false conclusion that communication problems are the responsibility of others.
2. The more senior respondents were the more likely to think (wrongly) that those junior to them are speaking up openly and honestly – leading to bad decisions based false assumptions that all the relevant information has been aired. Leaders who think in this way can also be blind to the issue of psychological safety in the workplace.
3. Female respondents reported they were more guarded in formal meetings, and in informal interactions and one-to-ones with the boss, than their male counterparts. They were more fearful than men of speaking up for all of the following reasons: being perceived negatively, upsetting others, legal consequences, pay/promotion, lack of confidence.
4. Line manager relationships are clearly instrumental in encouraging or suppressing speaking and listening up. The quality of manager/direct report relationships depends on well-honed listening skills, so that the speaker feels heard and valued. Ensuring managers acquire this skill should be a key part of management training and performance management processes.
5. Formal meetings provide the setting for a lot of important decisions to be taken. Yet it can be a setting where people are at their most guarded and more junior participants feel intimidated. The limitations of formal meeting as decision making forums should be acknowledged and reducing the 'power distance' in meetings should be a priority.
6. Junior employees on the front-line are often best placed to see potential issues, or risks, as well as opportunities for incremental innovation. Yet junior employees are most likely to stay quiet. Increasing informal forums, making formal meetings more open, and ensuring the consequences of speaking up are perceived to be positive, are key to encouraging junior employees to participate and speak up.
7. 90% of the survey participants thought race and gender 'never' or 'rarely' impact listening. Previous research tells us this is very unlikely to be the case; race, gender, age and numerous other forms of unconscious bias

have a clear impact on all of us. Blindness to unconscious bias stops dialogue and means we are unlikely to focus on mitigating its negative consequences.

The courage of individual employees is of course a factor in their willingness to speak up, as is employee engagement. But our research suggests the listener is as essential to the process as the speaker and the relational power dynamic between the two is key. The choices to speak and listen are influenced by our perception of relative power, status and authority and the systemic patterns of 'labelling' ourselves and others in the organization.

Clearly, not everyone can contribute to every discussion or be at every meeting. So, while being inclusive and open to diverse voices is vital, it is also important to be mindful about the 'rules of exclusion' – i.e. who is consulted about what – so that these are seen to be fair and transparent.

Beyond this, bearing in mind that innovative ideas can come from all parts of the organization, encouraging all employees to speak up should be an organizational imperative in a competitive marketplace. It is also a personal imperative – our choices about what to say at work determine our reputation, career progression, engagement and personal fulfilment. And our capacity to listen makes us better leaders and colleagues.

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Monday 14 October 2019