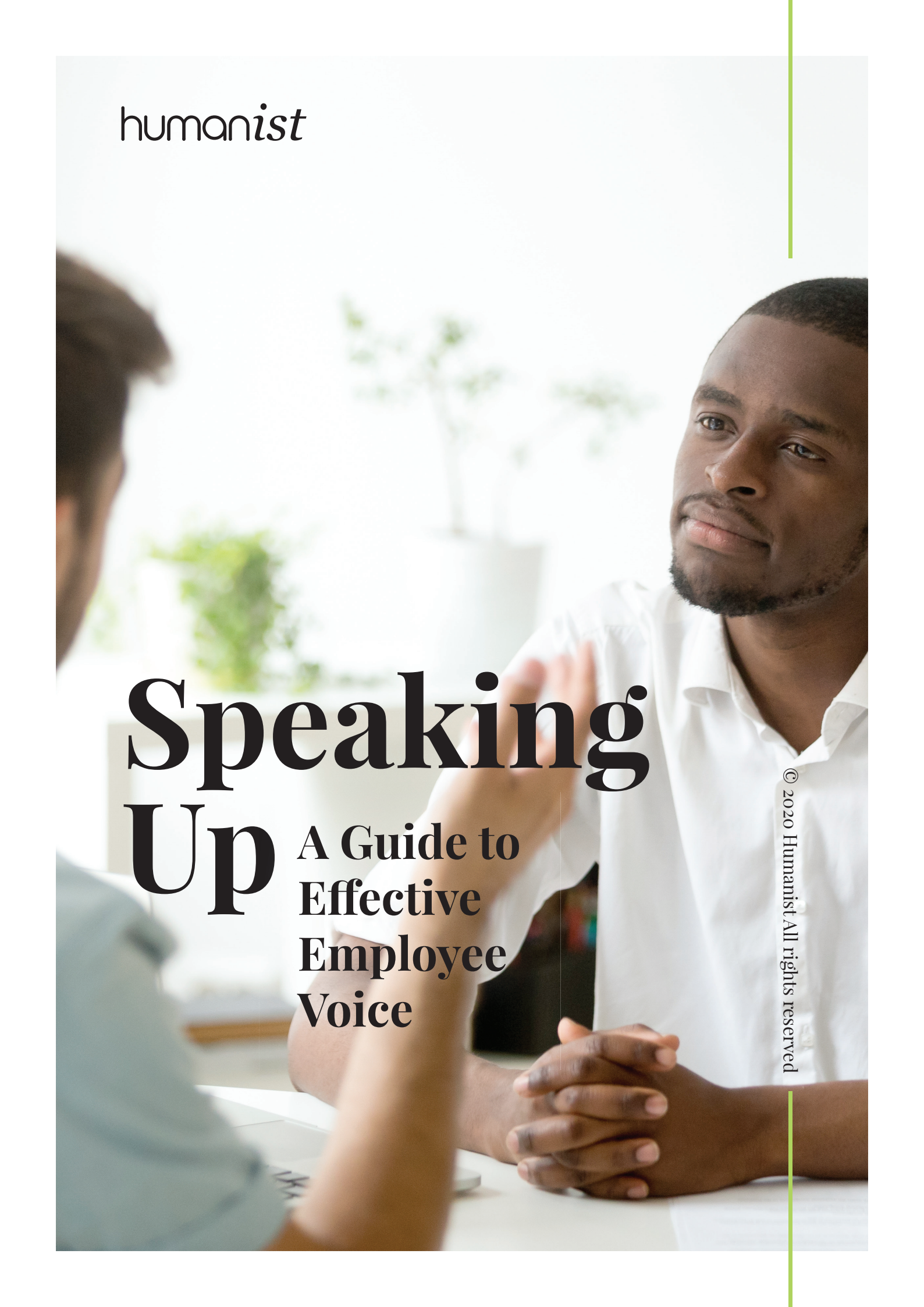


A Black man with a short beard and mustache, wearing a white button-down shirt, is seated at a table. He is looking towards the left of the frame with a focused, attentive expression. His hands are clasped together on the table in front of him. In the foreground, the back of another person's head and shoulder are visible, suggesting a conversation or meeting. The background is softly blurred, showing indoor plants and a bright, airy office environment. The overall tone is professional and collaborative.

humanist

Speaking Up

A Guide to
Effective
Employee
Voice

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What you'll gain from this guide

This guide is based on a simple premise: The employment relationship is evolving. Where, traditionally, power centered around the employer and employees were seen as subordinates, today influence and authority are shifting in favour of employees.

The key principle underlying this shift is reciprocity: By mutual understanding, both employers and employees accept that they share a relationship – one entered into voluntarily and with the potential to benefit both parties.

Of course, key to any relationship is communication. Open, honest and transparent communication builds trust. In today's increasingly diverse workplaces, important questions are being asked, about how to enable everyone to have a say at work, and how to make those conversations valuable, both to people and business.

In this guide, we build a case for the employee voice. We define it and explore its fullest potential within the context of reciprocity, essentially mapping the way for organisations, and the people working within them, to benefit equally.

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Part One

A new understanding of voice

Employee voice, defined

It isn't surprising that there is no single definition of employee voice. For one, the concept is evolving constantly. For another, employee voice is being developed by diverse stakeholders, from organisational development researchers and theorists to human resource specialists and people officers. Of course, employee voice is also being shaped by employees themselves, as agents of change.

A review of the current literature defines employee voice as:

‘The means by which employees communicate views on employment and organizational issues to their employer. It’s the main way employees can influence matters that affect them at work. For employers, effective

voice contributes toward innovation, productivity and business improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development.’

**The Chartered Institute of
Personnel and Development**

‘The ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these to influence decisions at work.’

**Joe Dromey, The Involvement and
Participation Association**

‘It’s when an organization sees its people not as the problem, rather as central to the solution, to be involved, listened to and invited to contribute their experience, expertise and ideas.’

David MacLeod, Engage for Success and Nita Clarke, The Involvement and Participation Association

Implicit in this last definition is an acknowledgement of the power shift between employers and employees. Currently, this dynamic is most visible in the employment marketplace. One only has to visit company review sites,

such as Glassdoor, Comparably and Vault to see authority flowing towards employees. But this shift is becoming apparent in the workplace too, due to digitization, automation and a focus on employee engagement.

It’s important not to confuse the concept of employee voice with employee engagement – they are distinct, yet interdependent concepts. Ultimately, effective voice is both an enabler and an outcome of employee engagement.

As interdependent concepts, the one supports the other, mirroring the larger context of reciprocity between employers and employees.

That’s why it’s so important to address employee voice – for the opportunity it presents to unify and align organisations for success.

Hearing voices

Part Two



The many facets of employee voice

One of the most significant developments arising from digital transformation is multi-channel workplace communication.

Today, we take for granted our ability to 'live chat' with managers and colleagues via collaboration and communication platforms, such as Slack and Workplace by Facebook. So too, our ability to conduct peer-to-peer reviews and recognition.

The effects of this digital democratization can be seen in flatter organisational structures, wider

information sharing and enhanced workflow management. Also, in decision-making that is more diverse and inclusive.

The proliferation of digital communication enables employees to speak up – and out – like never before. But employee voice is complex and multi-faceted. In order to understand it better, we need to look at the different dimensions of employee voice and see how they can be leveraged for greater reciprocity and stakeholder engagement.



Dimension 1

The voice of critique

We've already noted the rise of employee-generated content on sites, such as Glassdoor and Indeed but we need to look closer at the skill required to create company reviews: Critical thinking.

It would be a mistake to reduce employee voice to a means for making adverse or disapproving comments about employers. Sentiment is not the point here. Rather, we need to see employee voice for what it is: A perspective-take, where reason and judgement are used in analytical assessment.

Imagine the possibilities if this capability were fully utilised. When invited to participate in management decision-making, the employee voice – powered by critical thinking – is one that can question assumptions, seek out fresh perspectives, and contribute to problem solving.

Incorporating employee voice into management decision-making is a sure way to mitigate bias, while opening the door to more divergent and innovative thinking.



Dimension 2

The voice of opinion

Social technology has done much to advance the use of voice as a medium of self-expression and communication. Consider the way we use voice messaging software in apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat.

Voice calls remain a popular medium of communication in contact centres, particularly for customers with complex enquiries. In an effort to enhance the customer experience, many contact centres have elected to 'ditch the script' in favour of more personalised engagement. Beyond contact centres, countless organisations are incorporating Voice of the Customer channels into their

stakeholder engagement strategies. The voice note is one such channel, enabling customers to offer opinions and to make suggestions – vital feedback for organisations looking to improve their customer experience.

Many organisations use voice notes as an internal communication channel too. In teams, voice notes keep members up to date, usually faster than email and without the risk of ambiguity that comes with text. Leaders can share information fast and frequently. Also, voice notes enable leaders to make authentic connections with employees because the human voice can convey specific emotions.

But is this enough?

Let's consider the voice of the employee in organisational forums that promote freedom of expression and healthy debate. Google is one such organisation that regularly sponsors staff debates. Given the floor to practice their public speaking skills and to voice their own opinions within a relevant topic, engagement has been shown to improve.



Dimension 2

Of course, formalising organisational debate requires some important ground rules, among them: respect for the organisation's values; zero tolerance for personal attacks; equal opportunity for all to speak; and the presence of a moderator to bring the debate to a meaningful conclusion.

Organisations that promote the productive debate of ideas, as well as the advancement of better ideas through differences of opinion, are organisations that operate with greater trust and transparency.



Dimension 3

The voice of authority

It's a truth seldom disclosed by certain managers and leaders – in order to protect their own positions in the organisational hierarchy, they hire people less intelligent and capable than themselves.

In the future of work, job roles will require new types of skills, many of them human-centric, such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and conflict resolution.

Hiring for success means finding candidates whose skill sets may well outshine the incumbent management's. But hiring intelligently is not enough. In the words of former Ford executive, Lee Iacocca,

“I hire people brighter than me and then I get out of their way.”

Helping new employees to make their mark on the organisation means giving them the freedom to use their

voices. They may be critical of the status quo. They may challenge long-held assumptions. They may spark conflict as they present new ideas and new ways of doing things...

Excellent.

The voices of new employees may be just what an organisation needs to galvanize it into action and to break new ground.



Dimension 4

The voice of silence

Management literature is filled with white papers and articles highlighting the merits of active listening as a communication skill. Active listening involves being fully present when a person speaks, concentrating not only on what they are saying but on their body language too.

having an inner conversation, tuning in to our own thoughts and feelings. This inner narrative can be distracting; it draws our attention away from the speaker, and their needs. We don't always realize it, but our inner voice often prevents us from being with others fully.

Also, it's usually easier for us to speak less than it is for us to control our inner mental chatter. Being fully present in conversation can be a real challenge.

But when done right, the voice of silence and attuned listening is not passive. It is actively engaged in giving undivided attention to the person speaking.

After listening actively, we give feedback, paraphrasing the speaker's words and sharing our observations of their body language and emotional expressions. This dialogical mirroring signals our singular focus. Without fail, active listening is appreciated as a sign of respect and true connection.

There's a reason active listening is described as a skill – it's not easy to do. While having a conversation with another person, we can also be



Harmonising voices



When voices unite

Throughout this guide, we have emphasized that the voice of the employee does not exist in a vacuum. It is dialogical, involving a dynamic exchange between speaker(s) and listener(s). This relational dynamic reminds us of the principle of reciprocity. At the beginning of this guide, we said that employers and employees voluntarily enter into a relationship. Advancing the effective use of employee voice is key for this relationship to flourish and thrive.

But how do you advance the use of employee voice – especially if your organisation's current understanding of the concept is limited or worse, biased?

Here are five powerful steps to unleash employee voice towards improving engagement, innovation and decision-making:

Step 1

Leadership support



Your organisation's leaders are instrumental in creating a harmony of workforce voice. Leaders who actively promote the value of expression, and who put it high on the organisation's strategic agenda, lay the groundwork for open dialogue and free-flowing communication. Yet, effective employee voice also requires that leaders act upon employees' ideas and concerns.

For employee input and feedback to flourish, leaders must be sure to follow up with meaningful and appropriate action. Doing so will bring about wider participation in workforce voice programs and create deeper engagement, which ultimately will lead to better results.

Listening organisations report better business results

Research conducted by IBM's Institute for Business Value and its Smarter Workforce Institute shows that organisations that use multiple employee voice and listening methods rate their organisational performance and reputation 24% higher than those that don't.

Step 2

Embed the value of voice

For employee voice to take full effect, it must be made a priority and become a key component, not only of the organisation's people strategy but of its larger business strategy too. Invariably, organisations that make voice part of their strategy and culture become better aligned.

Why?

Because given the freedom to voice their opinions and to share their ideas, employees come to see themselves as intrinsic and valued contributors to the organisation's success.



The bank that put listening at the heart of its business

The strategic turnaround of Nedbank Group led by CEO, Tom Boardman between 2003 and 2007 remains one of the most successful cultural transformation initiatives in South African business. Key to its success was the example set by Boardman and his executive team in listening to the bank's customers and employees. In rebuilding its strategic narrative, at its core, the bank put 'Great at listening, understanding and delivering' as its brand differentiator. Soon after, the group launched its unique 'Ask Once' initiative, whereby if a client's query wasn't answered on first request, the bank incurred a cash penalty in the form of a donation to a select charity on behalf of the client. In its 2008 integrated report, following a Barrett Values staff survey, the group reported that there had been "a significant shift in staff morale and culture".

Step 3

Access to multiple channels

An organisation's internal communication strategy should address the best ways to engage employees in insight-sharing, idea generation and group decision-making. Engagement should include personal and informal meetups and conversational check-ins, as well as more formal events, such as organisational debates and town-halls.

In engaging employees, be sure to consider their availability and access to technology, especially after office hours. Beyond email, look to invite employees onto communication and collaboration platforms, such as Slack or Workplace. For video and web conferencing, look to cloud-based software, such as Zoom, which combines conferencing, online meetings, chat and mobile collaboration.

Also consider using real-time feedback software. bountiXP is a specialist engagement platform designed to align strategy and culture. It offers a pulse survey directed at employees. This feedback tool encourages individuals and teams to offer input, while providing management with access to actionable insights.



Step 4

Reward the right inputs

To encourage creativity, critical thinking and innovation put a reward strategy in place that is responsive to voice. Set up an employee idea exchange and invite employees to vote on the best ideas. Reward both nominees and nominators, as well as managers who include the ideators in implementation.

Don't forget to celebrate the failures too. It's not the outcome you're rewarding, but the actual creative process of ideation. The behaviours associated with ideation are what you want to make learnable and repeatable.

Using voice to optimise rewards

The most effective rewards are those that are meaningful, personal and memorable. Give employees the freedom to choose the rewards they want. Put out a survey or put it to a vote, making employee voice part of the reward experience.



Step 5

Voice practice

Optimising employee voice takes practice. It starts with creating an environment of openness, trust and transparency. Don't expect to achieve this overnight. The quantity and quality of contributions from employees is directly proportional to the level of authenticity and encouragement displayed by leaders. Voice, as a human expression, will only rise when the conditions are right. When those conditions are controlled with care and deliberation, a sense of organisational community and commitment will result.



A winning culture using voice

Richard Branson is famously quoted for saying that at Virgin, customers come second. In his own management practice, he emphasizes the importance of talking and listening to employees. Then, he puts the insights of his people into action. This value chain builds integrity because it is based on trust. Branson knows that it's the people on the frontline of his business who know what needs to be improved. With access to multiple channels, Virgin employees feel they can communicate honestly. Not surprisingly, Virgin routinely features as a great place to work.



Part Four

Testing, testing 1, 2, 3

The effective employee voice checklist

When used effectively, employee voice enables engagement, fuels innovation and improves decision-making. For organisations wanting to be more agile and adaptive, employee voice is a vital insight tool. For employees, being able to express their opinions, and be heard, leads to higher involvement, commitment and loyalty.

But how do you use voice effectively?

This eight-step checklist will help you to give employee voice the place it deserves in your organisational development plan. Where some organisations only give lip service to employee voice, this checklist points the way towards true, meaningful and value-driven engagement.

01

Get leadership's support

Convincing leaders that employee voice is integral to building a high-performance culture requires that they acknowledge – and support – the shift in power in the employer-employee relationship.

In what has been called 'the employee-first era', workplace transparency is a reality, due to the pervasive influence of social media, and the rise of employee-generated content on company review sites, such as Glassdoor, Comparably and Indeed.

Also, with increasing support for values-driven leadership, and with greater emphasis on leader trustworthiness, seeing employees as legitimate stakeholders rather than as subordinates is a sign of a future-forward, growth mindset.

So, have the conversation about prioritizing employee voice with your leaders – even if it's a difficult one. Times have changed. Does your organisation really want to be left behind?

02

Integrate employee voice into your strategy and culture

It would be a mistake to reduce employee voice to an annual staff survey. Voice is a complex concept, encompassing different aspects, channels and touchpoints. Organisations that integrate voice into their core business functions have the advantage of tapping into a valuable resource of experience and expertise.

So, arrange a strategy session around employee voice; invite a diverse group of participants and put the following questions to them:

- What role should employee voice play in our organisation?
- How can we give employee voice more range of expression?
- How can we make decision-making more democratic and inclusive?
- How can feedback be improved?
- How can we deal with internal challenges and conflict better?
- How should we measure employee voice?
- Who should we share this information with?
- How can employee voice influence our other stakeholder groups?

Once you have answered these questions, you can develop an appropriate narrative around employee voice – a common story that aligns your organisational purpose with your unique approach to workforce voice and listening.

03

Set the scene for trust and transparency

We've already stated how important it is to prioritize employee voice with strategic intent. Next, you need to make this intent visible. Ensure that leaders have explicit conversations about employee voice.

Invite employees to be a part of the dialogue about voice: call for input via surveys, group meet-ups and one-on-ones. Share insights from these gatherings. Show how much the organisation values these insights by integrating them into a co-created employee voice strategy.

04

Training and development

Implementing effective employee voice requires training. Managers, particularly, need to become skilled listeners. They also need to learn how to deliver criticism, constructively not destructively. In a workplace made psychologically safe by the behaviours of managers and leaders, employees will soon learn that admitting to mistakes and taking accountability for failure doesn't end in finger-pointing and blame.

05

Open channels of communication

Review your current communication channels and see how they can be optimised for greater participation and collaboration. Consider widening your choice of channels with the addition of workplace productivity and connectivity platforms, such as Slack, Workplace and bountiXP.

Look to introduce new formats in which employee voice can flourish. Hosting a monthly debate around organisational issues or industry developments helps to sharpen employees' critical thinking and presentation skills, as well boosting their confidence as organisational spokespeople.

06

Direct communication with the CEO

A CEO who seems out of touch with the real world, or who surrounds himself with yes-men and women is never going to win the respect of employees.

On the other hand, a CEO who is authentic and approachable will soon be visited by employees and through dialogue, have the opportunity to learn about the business from multiple perspectives.

While an open-door policy has real benefits, it's important to manage the CEO's time efficiently. Consider creating a variety of forums for dialogue with the CEO – from scheduled meetings at a given time every week to digital interactions via WhatsApp, which supports both text messages and voice notes.

07

Participative decision-making

Unleashing employee voice requires real employee involvement. This is not easily achieved in top-heavy, hierarchical organisations. A way to circumvent this, is to set up a leadership group mandated to promote and proliferate employee voice. This cross-functional leadership team need not include managers – membership can be fluid, comprising individuals who have been identified as influencers, thought leaders and brand advocates.

The group's deliverable is recommendations for strategic or operational improvement.

08

Rewarding voice

The link between motivation and rewards has long been leveraged in the workplace. Yet, employees may need additional encouragement to use their voices, especially in organisations where silence has been the norm. This is when rewards can be useful.

Consider launching a reward-based innovation initiative in which employees are invited to submit their ideas for business growth and development. Build in a voting feature that enables employees to upvote and comment on their colleagues' contributions.

Lastly, give winners the freedom to select the rewards they really want. In choosing their preferences, employee voice is once again made a living and positive practice.

These are eight ways to incorporate different forms of voice into your organisation – there are many more. What's important to understand is that employee voice requires commitment from everyone involved: Leaders need to recognise the intrinsic value of voice and to endorse its advancement; managers need to become better listeners through the acquisition of new communication skills, such as empathy and constructive criticism. Finally, employees need to find their own voices and take part in organisational dialogue. Without this shared commitment, workplaces risk falling silent ... and falling behind.



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