



Work In
Confidence

Employee Voice – Understanding How to Hear it Better

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INTRODUCTION – EMPLOYEE VOICE

Employee voice can surface great ideas and improve the way organisations operate. It can also be a great motivator for making people feel valued and giving them a greater sense of emotional ownership and participation in decisions of the organisation to which they belong.

Employee voice can help stop problems, while lack of it can cause disasters and cost hundreds of lives, as has been seen across the health sector, oil and gas, and aviation industries.

Employee voice is a two-way process. If an organisation wants employee voice to be effective, it needs to ensure:

- Employees feel psychologically safe and at ease using their voice.
- The organisation has effective means and systems in place to listen to employee voice – both formally and informally.
- Make it clear that both the organisation and individual managers within the organisation want to listen and will act upon employee feedback.



WHAT IS EMPLOYEE VOICE?

A useful definition is...

“Employee voice is the means by which employees can express their views, ideas and concerns in an organisation coupled with the ability for those views to be heard and acted on to help make positive change in the organisation”.

If employee voice is to be really effective, it has to be very clear that it can, and often does, result in change.

If this is absent, then employees will soon come to feel that, irrespective of having a voice, there is little point in using it.

Many managers default to the position “staff can speak up if they want to”. All too often this is an incorrect assumption, rather than a tested fact.

According to a 2025 psychological-safety study*, just over half of UK employees say they work in a place where they can truly speak up, challenge the status quo and make mistakes without fear. However, that also means almost half still don't feel safe enough to speak – a sobering insight for organisations serious about genuine employee voice.

That's a large chunk of the workforce left behind. Notably, those employees in small and private sector organisations were more satisfied with voice than those in larger and public sector organisations.



JUST OVER

50%

OF UK EMPLOYEES SAY THEY WORK IN A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN TRULY SPEAK UP, CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO, AND MAKE MISTAKES WITHOUT FEAR*.

*SOURCE IPSOS KARIAN AND BOX

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PROVIDING AN ENVIRONMENT TO HEAR EMPLOYEE VOICE

At the end of the day, it is incumbent on the organisation to provide an environment where employee voice is valued and encouraged, and employees feel that to be the case.

It is not up to the employees to have to fight to make their voices heard in an organisation which has not made it clear whether it will even value the voice and act on any feedback.

The question is whether you can harness that voice internally for the good of the organisation, or whether it's only outlet will be outside, and quite possibly, negatively about you.

If you don't successfully harness voice internally you may well find that your employees' voices are heard externally. For example on platforms like Glassdoor, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook or other social media channels, and as it may not be complimentary, risks your reputation as an employer.

HELPFUL TIPS

IN THIS DIGITAL AGE
ALL EMPLOYEES HAVE A
VOICE



WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Inhibitors to a Voice Culture

Every organisation likes to think that they have a strong employee voice culture. The more you understand the potential inhibitors, the more likely you are to success in providing an environment free from them.

In a perfect organisation, employees would:

- Always feel able to express thoughts, ideas and concerns which are appropriate for and constructive about their workplace.
- As a matter of practice feel the emotional/psychological safety to enable them to speak openly and candidly.
- Be listened to, respectfully.
- Know that where appropriate, learnings will be acted on and celebrated.





WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

There are, however, some key inhibitors to employee voice, the most common being:

Individual Traits – Employees:

Many people find it hard to take the risk of standing out, looking stupid, or risking repercussions from their own managers if they say something with which managers might disagree.

Often it can be far easier to follow the ‘party line’, or stay quiet. When repercussions occur, they can become major inhibitors to future voice – not only for the recipient of such treatment, but also colleagues across the organisation.

Individual Traits – Managers:

Whilst some managers can be consistently and genuinely interested in what their team have to say, this is often not the case. Managers tend to under-estimate how easy it is for their teams to speak up. It’s said that around 75% of managers think they are approachable by their teams, but only 36% of employees believe their managers are approachable. You can rapidly see how this mis-match creates problems for employee voice.



WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Organisational Factors:

Some organisations choose not to care about employee voice. Even in organisations who want to, they can become too busy or feel it's too complex to focus on employee voice, and feedback gets overlooked.


Perception:

One of the greatest inhibitors of employee voice is the perception (actual or real), that even if something is raised by employees it will not result in change and not make any difference.

In these circumstances, the position will rapidly be taken by employees that 'it's not worth our while raising things as it won't lead to change anyway'.

This is even harder to overcome in areas where employees feel they are taking an emotional risk (risking standing out, ridicule, anger), or even worse, a financial risk where they may lose their job or career. Once embedded, these views take considerable resetting, and will be serious inhibitors for employee voice to be heard.

On the flip side, if your organisation can establish a track record of being a place where employees views will be acted upon, and stand a chance of giving rise to lasting, worthwhile change, then employees are far more likely to use their voices.



WHY IS EMPLOYEE VOICE CRITICAL?

Employee voice is critical for many reasons. Some of the benefits are listed below:



Motivation and engagement of your team:

- Feeling listened to and having a voice has repeatedly been shown to be a key motivating factor for employees
- Helps staff to feel valued
- Engenders a feeling of ownership in decisions, which makes their successful implementation more likely
- Creates deeper connection overall to the organisation and its objectives

Notably, Gallup include as one of their Gallup 12 engagement questions “At work, do your opinions seem to count?”

Learning:

In any organisation, the collective knowledge of your employees overall is, by definition, greater than the knowledge of any subset of management – usually considerably greater. Harnessing this knowledge to improve the organisation will be hugely beneficial.

Avoiding problems:

Through Mid staff NHS, VW Emissions scandal, Tesco (horse meat and accounting), Wells Fargo – we could list dozens of organisations who, had they had better systems for listening to employee voice, and a better culture of empowering and listening to employee voice, they might have avoided major problems. In many instances (particularly in aviation, energy and health), these have been problems that have directly cost lives.

Optimising operations:

Your people know what is and isn't working in your organisation. Collectively, they see all parts of your organisation hands-on, every day. What better way to ensure you can improve your organisation than to draw on employee voice?

Reputation:

We live in a world where when things go drastically wrong, it can be out and around the globe in minutes. Increasingly, there isn't always time for management to see problems and dive in and fix them before they impact – bad news spreads and reputations are destroyed. Ensure you are operating optimally and getting things right in the first place – listen to your employees and be the first to know of any issues.

WHAT FORMS CAN EMPLOYEE VOICE TAKE?

Employee voice takes many forms. From a discussion with a colleague, or a chat at the water cooler, to much more formalised processes. It can also be individual or collective – such as via Unions or Staff Councils.

It can be open or anonymous, and can be totally without technology – such as a scribbled note dropped into a suggestion box, or of course, digital/electronic channels. Web apps/apps and digital channels often enable a collection of views, aggregation and analysis of data and time series analysis across a widespread workforce very quickly.

Direct – Informal:

Employee voice can be as simple as your people feeling confident and able to make suggestions, give feedback, highlight concerns in everyday situations with their colleagues, teams and managers. This is a key part of employee voice, and great when it works. This form of feedback will often, but not exclusively, be to Line Management.

“Fireside chat” or One to One Meetings:

These can be great as they really take the distance and formality out of the process, with an experienced manager accessing non-verbal cues, such as body language or tone of voice which can be lost by other means.

Drawbacks of this route are that it is very easy to overassume in a one-to-one situation, how easy it is for the others(s) present to speak openly. It is quite apparent, looking at aggregated statistics, how hard some people find it to speak openly.

Formal:

Formal means of empowering employee voice can have the advantage that when systematising a process properly, it is much less likely to get overlooked by accident.

Surveys:

These can take many forms from the long-form full employee engagement survey, to regular pulse surveys to check the sentiment in the organisation. Mini surveys collect feedback on a particular topic, such as governance or change management and exit or onboarding surveys that specifically create voice in these processes.

Employee Representatives:

The use of employee representatives – whether formal union or staff representatives is another way of giving voice. This will quite possibly be formalised with committees, scheduled meetings with management and a formal means of such representatives seeking input from employees. They can serve as more trusted intermediaries between staff and management, and also have a potential amplification process for staff. They will only ever be as effective as the people and process surrounding them.

Meetings/ “Town Hall” meetings:

Any form of meeting (including two people bumping into each other in the corridor) is an opportunity for employee voice. This may be more formalised into larger divisional or company-wide meetings. As a loose rule the larger these get, the harder it may be for some staff to use them as a means of expressing their voice. Suggestion boxes: Suggestion boxes (physical or electronic) are a great way to collect employee views. In this day and age, electronic means can make it easier to collect, sort, direct to the right manager and publish a response.

Anonymous:

Anonymity can be discarded by some but can play a key part in ensuring that staff feel comfortable giving feedback where you may not otherwise hear it. It can be particularly important in spotting problem areas, such as bullying and harassment. However, it can also unlock candid views in a much wider range of areas, if used in the appropriate way.



GETTING IT RIGHT!

Getting employee voice right takes time and effort. Most organisations fail at some stage – some modestly and without devastating consequences.

The benefits can be enormous:

- That re-defining idea
- Avoiding the next VW/Horsemeat scandal/Mid Staff NHS crisis
- Happier, more engaged staff all round (if you employ 1,000 staff, a 1% enhancement to performance is worth approx. £400,000)
- Lower staff turnover, lower absence and better performance
- Happier clients

If your culture and values embody and respect, and if that value is lived and delivered every day, it is much more likely staff will feel the psychological safety to use their voice.

It's critical to note that lapses in the area of respect are hard to recover from.

Just one person mocked or treated dismissively in a meeting for expressing a view has knock-on consequences. It's not just them – others see, and word spreads. Conversely, where staff views are welcome and acted on, the word will spread too.

Recognise that one size does not fit all:

Different people have different ways of communicating. Some people feel perfectly comfortable speaking openly in a “town hall” style meeting in front of 50 or more others (indeed some thrive on it). Others will never in a lifetime express themselves in such an environment. Recognise this and use the range of tools/means at your disposal. Just be sure to do it in a joined up, consistent way.

Never underestimate how hard it is for some:

We often see the world through our own lens. It’s easy for senior managers to forget (or never know) just how hard it can be for others to speak openly. Many people find it incredibly hard to either speak in large groups or to bridge gaps in a hierarchy. If you are working in a multinational organisation, you also need to bear in mind that cross cultural differences can arise in this area.

Never be complacent:

It’s easy when things are going well to assume that staff voice is fine. To work, employee voice needs continuous focus. Use the tools available: Online and digital can really help. Private social networks, surveys, pulse surveys, discussion forums, anonymous speak up systems. These can all really help as part of your mix of ways to enhance employee voice. Make data a part of the process: Never breach trust, but if you are using digital means for aspects of employee voice, there are many benefits of being able to collect and analyse data in real time and view changes over time. Use these opportunities to gain greater insights into your organisation.

Take heed! The negative can spread far more quickly, and linger far longer than news of the positive, so make sure that does not happen.

HELPFUL TIPS

- **Never lose the human trust**
- **Cut out the negative**
- **Never have 'stars' who are allowed to get away without living your values – everyday**

Embed attention to employee voice:

Build employee voice into the fabric of your organisation.

1. Make it stick.
2. Make it part of business as usual.
3. Put in the time, effort and resources into getting it right.

It's worth it in the long run, but not something you will get the full benefits of unless you work hard at it. Enrol as many advocates in the management structure as possible.



Use the tools available:

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Communicate:

Employee voice is about enabling your people to communicate with and in the organisation to optimal effect. Part of your challenge is to make sure you also communicate out to your people that you want to listen and means they have in which to express their voices. Any plans to enhance employee voice will only be as good as the publicity it gets itself.

Act and appreciate:





Make sure that you act on employee voice in your organisation. Unless staff feedback is of a highly confidential nature, get into the habit of publicising and celebrating successes.



HOW WORKINCONFIDENCE CAN HELP




WorkInConfidence employee engagement solutions simplify the process of enhancing psychological safety, building trust, improving performance, retaining talent and engaging your teams. Ensuring that staff have a voice and feel heard is crucial for understanding their true sentiment.

Open, or Anonymous Speak Up Two-way Reporting

-  Give employees a trusted way to raise concerns openly or via two-way anonymous speak up reporting channel.
-  Anonymity removes the barriers to speaking up, increases willingness to come forward and honesty of feedback.
-  Demonstrates you care and want to help your people, including those who are scared to speak up openly. This will help increase retention and cut recruitment costs, and also improve employee engagement and build trust.
-  Uncover early warning signs and feedback to resolve issues that would otherwise remain hidden.

HOW WORKINGCONFIDENCE CAN HELP

Employee Engagement Surveys

-  Gain valuable insights into employee satisfaction, morale, and areas that require improvement.
-  Ensures anonymity: Emphasise the confidentiality and anonymity of responses to encourage honest feedback
-  See what is working well and what needs development across all areas of engagement, operations, governance and respect.

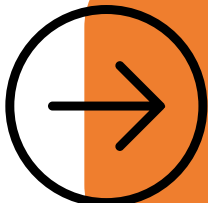


CONCLUSION

We hope you have found this guide a useful resource, and it has at the very least, provided you with ideas on how to enhance, sustain and benefit from employee voice.

You can't tackle any underlying issues if you don't know about them, so make sure you have a good, robust and trusted speaking up process in place.

If you would like any help or assistance with building your speaking up process, please don't hesitate to get in touch.



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About Us

At WorkInConfidence, our mission is to empower organisations to build healthier, safer, more engaged and productive workplaces. Our platform gives every employee a voice within an environment of psychological safety.

 Employee Voice	 Psychological Safety	 Leadership Insights
Creating trusted channels for authentic communication	Building environments where everyone feels safe to speak up	Providing actionable data for informed decision making leading to improved culture and organisational performance.

WorkInConfidence is used across over 100 organisations (c. 200k staff) in the private, public and not for profit sectors. We have a decade of experience delivering a highly secure, easy to use system. WorkInConfidence is registered with the ICO for data protection purposes and is IASME and Cyber Essentials Plus certified.

One Comprehensive Solution Via One Unified Online Platform

 Anonymous Two-Way Speak Up	 Open Case Logging	 Case Management
Removing fear and worry for the nervous or reticent to Speak Up about bullying and harassment, DEI, wellness or ideation.	People who are comfortable with being identified can log cases openly.	All cases (whether received via the platform or directly) can be easily stored, shared, and tracked.
 Clear Central Reporting & Actionable Insights	 Employee Forums	 Surveys
Spot patterns, emerging risks, and identify opportunities for improvement. Provide clear reporting to the Senior Leadership Team, regulators, or the Board.	Enable open discussions to learn and improve.	Gather feedback through pulse, mini or long surveys. Discover and learn from employee viewpoints.

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