



# Creating a culture of voice

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## abstract

Developing a culture of *voice*, in which employees routinely speak up and organizations capitalize on the ideas from rank-and-file workers, is central to success in modern business. Such a culture enables organizational leaders to identify and correct problems they might have otherwise overlooked, to innovate in ways they would not have considered without employee input, and to more readily gain employee buy-in for organizational changes. Yet employees routinely withhold their ideas. When ideas do bubble up, managers frequently fail to act on them. Leveraging the literature on employee voice, we offer insights into why employees do not speak up and why managers often resist acting on ideas from below, and we suggest how organizations can develop policies that promote employee voice and its many benefits.

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## Core Findings

### What is the issue?

Organizations are better able to achieve positive performance outcomes and avoid disaster when employees are able to voice their ideas and concerns effectively. But there are significant barriers to ensuring that employee voice carries to upper management and throughout the organization. For a number of reasons, employees and managers can be reluctant to speak up and act accordingly. This contributes to a general sense of futility.

### How can you act?

Selected recommendations include:

- 1) Decreasing power distance between leaders and employees and removing power cues to cultivate employee comfort
- 2) Shifting workflow management away from a short-term preoccupation with execution and key performance indicators to continuous improvement and learning

### Who should take the lead?

Researchers, employees, managers, and organizations

Business history is rife with corporate disasters that might have been averted if only top managers had heard and heeded the voices of their own employees. Consider the 2014 recall by General Motors of more than million cars due to a faulty ignition switch. GM engineers and lawyers had known about the problem—which caused at least 124 deaths and ultimately cost the company \$4.1 billion—for about a decade.<sup>1</sup> And yet corporate leaders did not seem to have heard about or grasped the risks of the problem. Something similar happened at Boeing, where engineers working on the 737 MAX aircraft were concerned about its rushed production schedule and a flight control system that relied on only one sensor—issues that led to two fatal plane crashes, the global grounding of the planes, and yet untallied costs to Boeing.

Identifying critical issues with products is just one reason to cultivate a culture in which employees feel empowered to make their voices heard and where managers take those voices seriously. By fostering what researchers refer to as *employee voice* or simply *voice*, organizations can tap grassroots ideas that catalyze the launch of new products, reduce operational inefficiencies, enrich employee morale, and improve core business functions, as well as receive early warnings on potential disasters.

The concept of voice connects to core virtues seen in many societies. From the democratic ideal of free speech in the United States to the ancient Chinese adage “Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend,” the notion that individuals can and should have a voice is a fundamental human value. Those who contribute their ideas see the opportunity to use their voice as a worthwhile experience and a sign that they are respected.

Research on employee voice has documented its distinct benefits for organizations, leaders, and employees. At the organizational level, the evidence comes from a wide variety of industries and describes a range of outcomes. For instance, a 2014 study involving employees at 38 hospitals found that hospitals that had successfully facilitated employee voice in

customer relations had 27% and 41% higher service-performance scores, as rated by the organizations’ chief executive officers and vice presidents, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Leaders who develop practices for cultivating employee feedback can likewise reap significant benefits, measurably improving the success of their units. James R. Detert, Ethan R. Burris, and two colleagues examined patterns of communications in financial service organizations, looking specifically at the people to whom employees directed their voice.<sup>3</sup> When the flow of ideas gravitated toward the leaders of individual units, those leaders could address the issues that had been raised and improve the functioning of their workgroups. As a result, the financial and operational effectiveness of units where voice flowed to leaders was 16% higher than in units where voice flowed around (but not to) leaders.

Finally, voice can yield emotional and motivational benefits for individual workers. Studies show that when organizations offer their rank-and-file members fair and consistent mechanisms for participating in managerial decisionmaking, such as by suggesting ways to correct errors, employees more frequently reported feeling positive emotions toward their job<sup>4,5</sup> and evaluated a given task at hand as more enjoyable and thus more intrinsically motivating.<sup>6</sup> Consistent with longstanding research findings that higher job satisfaction and work engagement affect employee retention, research has shown employee attrition is approximately 50% lower in business units where voice is managed effectively by a manager who encourages new ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Yet a consistent theme in this stream of research indicates that getting people to speak up at work is easier said than done. It is particularly challenging to enable employees to communicate their ideas in ways that spark action. Many workers choose to remain silent rather than alerting leadership to an issue that might disrupt the status quo or cause alarm. For instance, in their book *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace: Creating the High-Trust, High-Performance Organization*, Kathleen D. Ryan and Daniel

K. Oestreich reported that 70% of employees across numerous industries said they had felt uneasy about raising an issue to their supervisors, even though they thought the issue was important.<sup>8</sup> Another study found that 85% of employees in a number of industries feared speaking up and therefore withheld their ideas.<sup>9</sup>

A second and equally persistent challenge is that many managers end up discouraging or ignoring the very input they claim they need. They may respond this way because they feel that the input threatens their leadership, runs contrary to business as usual, or requires a complex response they feel unprepared to make. For instance, Burris found that managers were 69% less likely to endorse ideas from subordinates if those ideas significantly challenged some aspect of the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

In short, creating a culture of voice is difficult. But getting it right is critical, as organizational failures such as those at GM and Boeing demonstrate. Simply put, having employees who do not speak freely and managers who do not act on employee suggestions threatens the effectiveness and long-term functioning of organizations.

Next, after characterizing the term *voice* more formally, we discuss the two interrelated challenges to developing an effective culture of voice: the various barriers that prevent employees from speaking up and the separate set of barriers that impede managers from acting on ideas that are shared. In each case, we offer policy recommendations for how organizations and their leaders can counter these obstacles and more effectively leverage ideas from below.

## What Is Voice?

The concept of employee voice—the discretionary communication of work-related ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions<sup>11</sup>—first appeared in academic literature in Albert O. Hirschman’s 1970 book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*.<sup>12</sup> Hirschman, a political economist, was interested in understanding when citizens,

employees, and customers would speak up about their reasons for dissatisfaction or simply withdraw (that is, not vote, voluntarily quit, or switch brand loyalties, respectively). Since that time, most organizational research on employee voice has centered on understanding the conditions that lead employees to engage in voice, which has come to be defined by four qualities:

- Voice is improvement oriented and prosocial. It provides ideas that enable learning and effective change<sup>13</sup> and affect entire groups, departments, and organizations.<sup>7</sup>
- Voice is inherently discretionary—that is, speaking up is not usually prescribed as part of employees’ formal responsibilities.
- Voice requires action from leaders to be implemented.<sup>14</sup>
- Voice is challenging to the present state of affairs, which means it can feel threatening to those very leaders in charge of carrying out the current procedures.

For the purposes of research, voice is usually quantified with a survey instrument in which an employee indicates the degree to which he or she speaks up about problems and gives suggestions for improving the business unit (the work group or organization). Employees typically are rated (by themselves or by others, such as their boss) on a five- or seven-point scale on items such as “I challenge my supervisor to deal with problems around here”; “I give suggestions about how to make this unit better, even if others disagree”; and “I speak up with ideas to address employee needs and concerns.” Qualitative research usually involves in-depth interviews with employees and, in some cases, managers.

## Barriers for Employees

As mentioned earlier, employees are often reluctant to put their ideas on the table. They tend to keep their ideas to themselves for two primary reasons: fear of negative consequences and a sense that speaking up will be futile.<sup>11,14–18</sup>

## “They feared being labeled a troublemaker, tattletale, or complainer...”

Without addressing these core concerns, organizations will be unable to tap their employees' unique insights and experiences.

Researchers have identified a number of ways that fear of negative consequences inhibits employee voice.<sup>14,17,19</sup> At times, the consequences people worry about are interpersonal, such as getting ridiculed or embarrassed in front of colleagues or being ostracized for challenging the system. For instance, in a series of in-depth interviews with 40 full-time employees working in a wide range of industries, employees expressed strong concerns that they might appear to be too radical or to be overstepping the boundaries of authority if they exercised their voice. They feared being labeled a troublemaker, tattletale, or complainer and worried that speaking up would damage their personal and professional relationships with colleagues.<sup>9</sup> One investment banker expressed her reluctance to speak up this way: “Because it is a consensus-oriented environment, your power comes from whether people see you as agreeable and easy to work with. Being a rebel is not embraced.”<sup>9</sup>

Employees also expressed concern that the act of speaking up might damage their future career potential in the organization (such as by causing them to be excluded from promotion opportunities, to receive less generous raises and bonuses, or to be fired). Voice was viewed as something that fractures unity and weakens collective commitment to organizational goals, which could lead managers to evaluate employees more negatively.<sup>20</sup> For example, a chemist at a biotechnology firm described her fear of retaliation or punishment for speaking up: “Managers would take mental notes and you couldn't really express yourself. They would hold it against you. They valued loyalty above all else. . . . You had to watch what you said. If you did

an okay job and never said anything controversial, you would move up in the organization.”<sup>9</sup> In another study, a salesperson told researchers, “My manager determines my destiny at this company, therefore I dare not challenge him and what he's telling me to do. So, in a sense, it's not safe to speak up.”<sup>20</sup>

These examples from qualitative studies show how perceived interpersonal and career risk stymies the willing contribution of ideas to a shared enterprise. Multiple quantitative studies have substantiated the impact of fear and its opposite, psychological safety, on voice and silence. For instance, in a study of 3,149 employees in a corporate-owned restaurant chain, Detert and Burriss found that frontline employees who felt higher levels of psychological safety, as indicated on a survey, reported speaking up 27% more frequently at work than those who reported feeling lower levels of safety.<sup>14</sup> (The calculations compared people at the 67th percentile of psychological safety scores with those at the 33rd percentile.) A meta-analysis combining data from 21 different studies with a total of 8,544 employee participants came to a similar conclusion: with each one-point increase on a five-point scale measuring employees' sense of safety in speaking up, there was a 24% increase in expression of voice.<sup>21</sup>

Researchers have also highlighted the barriers to voice posed by feelings of futility. If employees believe their managers are unlikely to take meaningful action in response to their ideas, they become reluctant to speak up. In a study based on interviews with 89 employees at four units of a high-tech multinational corporation, employees made this point clearly: They reported that a leader's apparent lack of interest in their ideas led them to feel that it was useless to speak up.<sup>16</sup> One employee recalled, “I think it would help if you saw them take your suggestions back to whomever and actually consider it, rather than just throw it in the trash bucket as soon as you walk out the door. I think that's the way a lot of people feel—you can speak in a meeting, you can tell your manager. It doesn't go any further.”<sup>16</sup>

The futility factor has also been confirmed by quantitative research. In a classic study of speaking up about gender-equity issues at work, researchers asked employees to use a seven-point scale to rate their confidence in being able to influence positive change.<sup>22</sup> Each additional point of confidence correlated with a roughly 35% greater willingness to voice their suggestions. Conversely, a meta-analysis of six studies involving 1,557 employees tied perceived futility to a 21% lower level of voice.<sup>21</sup>

## Strategies That Support Employee Voice

Research into how to combat fear in the workplace and encourage employees to speak up points to strategies aimed at all three levels of enterprises: employees, managers, and organizations.

With respect to employees, several studies show that personality matters. For instance, Jeffrey A. LePine and Linn Van Dyne have reported that employees who score high on the Big Five factors of conscientiousness and extraversion are more likely to voice their ideas or concerns, whereas the factor of agreeableness is negatively associated with voice.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the sense of personal control—that is, employees' belief that they have significant ability to change their environment, rather than having to just let the world happen to them—has been identified as a crucial factor leading to voice.<sup>24</sup> Although such findings suggest that organizations seeking to boost voice should seek out these qualities when recruiting new employees, the effects of individual differences on voice are much smaller than the effects of other factors. Detert and Burris reported that employees with more proactive personalities spoke up 8% more than those with less proactive personalities, whereas having more receptive leadership had more than twice the impact.<sup>14</sup> Another team found an even more striking difference for voice directed to the manager's manager: the quality of the relationship with skip-level leaders had up to 17 times the impact that personality had on the extent of employee voice directed to those leaders.<sup>25</sup> Thus, although organizations could establish

hiring practices favoring such traits as conscientiousness or proactivity, they are likely to find that concentrating on training for managers and on developing a more psychologically safe organizational culture will pay bigger dividends.

Not surprisingly, then, research has repeatedly pointed to the marked impact of having the right kind of leaders to support employee voice. Team leaders and middle-level managers are the most essential actors for receiving, evaluating, and responding to employees' ideas. Specifically, research shows that middle managers who are seen as open, transformational, and ethical tend to create a culture of voice. The aforementioned large study of employees and managers in a national restaurant chain demonstrated that when employees perceived that their managers communicated a compelling vision for the organization, they were 19% more likely to engage in voice.<sup>14</sup> Another study asked employees to use a seven-point scale to rate the quality of their relationship with their supervisors; those with a higher quality relationship engaged in voice 24% more frequently.<sup>26</sup> And a third investigation showed that leaders who were rated as more proactive in soliciting voice from employees received roughly 7% more voice from below.<sup>27</sup> However, if a leader was seen as abusive or disrespectful<sup>28</sup> or as treating subordinates in an unfair and untrustworthy way,<sup>29</sup> the amount of self-reported voice in the workgroup decreased by 13% and 8%, respectively. Although no research has directly examined the impact of a training intervention aimed at teaching leaders to listen more and act on ideas from below, it is logical that such training could ultimately lead to more voice from employees.<sup>22</sup>

Research has also underscored the importance of organizational culture. A study involving 32 groups with a total of 253 engineers from a large chemical company revealed that employees working in teams with a positive climate toward speaking up displayed 32% more voice when compared with those in teams with an unfavorable environment.<sup>30</sup> A positive climate for voice is characterized by a number of factors, but the most prominent is a decreased power distance between leaders and employees—meaning

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16%

Financial and operational effectiveness gain of business units where voice flows directly to leaders over units where it does not

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50%

Reduction in employee attrition for business units where voice is managed effectively by a manager who encourages new ideas

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## “feedback loops play a vital role in enabling organizations to adapt, learn from experience, and continually improve...”

it has a flatter hierarchy with fewer tokens of prestige for the top brass (such as fancy offices or parking spaces reserved for specific executives).<sup>31</sup> A 2009 study found that employees who felt more distance in power between themselves and their leaders displayed over 50% less voice.<sup>32</sup>

Removing power cues seems to help employees feel more comfortable about expressing their views, according to a study conducted at a high-tech multinational firm. For instance, one manager there decided against sitting at the apex of a horseshoe-shaped table, as was customary for managers, because doing so was intimidating to subordinates. The change was noted and appreciated. “[He] realized that meetings are way too stiff, so he’s done things like rearranged the furniture,” a subordinate told researchers. “He’s thinking of ways to get more associate level people to contribute and for presenters to be less stiff.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, limiting formalized interactions in which employees are made to feel like they are under a spotlight for evaluation and creating more opportunities for low-key interactions can help employees speak up more often. An employee in the same study recalled a time when he connected with his supervisor in a more relaxed setting: “[Senior Manager Z] approached us in the cafeteria when I was sitting there with a friend of mine and we just started talking. I felt comfortable because of the atmosphere. It wasn’t his office. And ever since then, I was just relaxed.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, researchers found that employees at the Taiwan Customs Bureau demonstrated greater creativity in solving problems when they perceived decisionmaking to be less formal and less concentrated in the hands of a few. This was especially so when managers expressed a desire to learn from below.<sup>33</sup>

Studies show that feedback loops play a vital role in enabling organizations to adapt, learn from experience, and continually improve.<sup>34</sup> For employees, a key feedback loop is being

informed of the fate of the ideas they voiced. Even in organizations that try to act on employees’ ideas, managers often do not follow up with the employees who offered the suggestions. Because it can take time to evaluate an idea and make a decision about its implementation, employees can come to feel like their ideas have vanished into a black hole. Research suggests that providing updates on the status of employee suggestions, even if the idea is on hold or rejected, is better than providing no feedback at all.<sup>35</sup> Encouraging managers to informally update employees on the status of their suggestions (as in a weekly team meeting) can provide the transparency employees need to know that their ideas are being considered and that their efforts are not fruitless. If the suggested idea entails controversial elements that may not be appropriate to raise in a group setting, managers may hold informal one-on-one meetings to follow up. Additionally, organizations can use technology (for instance, an employee suggestion platform) to both catalog the ideas submitted by employees and provide updates on their status.

Finally, employees could, in theory, be trained on when and how to offer voice. Although this sort of intervention has not been formally tested, it is clear that employees do best when they “read the room” and choose the right opportunity and the right framing for their suggestions. In 2015, Wu Liu and several coauthors showed that a leader’s emotional state is a useful cue for gauging whether it is appropriate to speak up, especially when the employee does not have a strong relationship with his or her manager.<sup>36</sup> In such cases, employees had an 18% higher intention to speak up when their supervisor was judged to be in a good mood compared with times when a negative mood was detected. In another study, employees who used language that supported a moral cause, such as corporate social responsibility, were 10% more effective in influencing management when the values associated with the espoused cause were aligned

**Table 1. Encouraging employees to speak up**

Barrier to offering voice	Example	Policy recommendation
Fear of negative consequences (feeling that it is psychologically unsafe safe to speak up)	<p>Worker worries over</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• damaged credibility.</li> <li>• being labeled a troublemaker, a complainer, or not a team player.</li> <li>• tangible career-related costs (such as receiving a negative performance evaluation or an undesirable job assignment, or being laid off).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Train employees</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach employees on how to read the room for clues to the best times to offer voice. (For instance, leaders in a positive mood tend to be more receptive to subordinate voice.)</li> <li>• Teach employees to frame the argument in ways that align with the values or mission of the organization or that suggest task efficiencies.</li> </ul> <p><b>Train team leaders and supervisors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give coaching on open, transformational, proactive, and ethical leadership behaviors that create a psychologically safe team environment.</li> <li>• Emphasize the importance of forming a close relationship with subordinates.</li> <li>• Encourage managers to provide employees with transparent feedback on voice and with regular updates on the status of their suggestions.</li> </ul>
Feeling that speaking up is futile (that leaders will not listen or take appropriate action)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worker senses that leader is uninterested in employee ideas.</li> <li>• Worker perceives that leader is ill equipped or unwilling to obtain buy-in from stakeholders whose approval is needed.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Alter organization-wide policies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decrease the power distance throughout the organizational hierarchy.</li> <li>• Decentralize decisionmaking processes.</li> <li>• Develop policies to provide feedback to employees about their ideas.</li> </ul>

with the organization’s mission.<sup>37</sup> Thus, training employees to be more sensitive to the values of the organization or of their manager could help ensure that their voice is well received. For instance, one research team notes that “while an issue seller may care most about gender equity from a social justice standpoint, he or she may want to focus on talent diversity when talking to people in the human resources department, or creative diversity when talking to people in the design department.”<sup>37</sup> By surveying the landscape, employees can develop effective strategies for pitching their ideas. Table 1 lists suggested ways to foster employee voice.

### Barriers for Managers

Getting ideas on the table certainly has its challenges. But once those ideas are raised, a second and arguably trickier hurdle comes into view: getting managers to act on those ideas. Although novel suggestions may initially succeed in drawing attention, employees often see them die on the desk of their manager. Those employees who expect that an organization’s standard practices will result in their voice being addressed by leadership can become frustrated and feel helpless when their ideas

are ignored by or not even presented to the people who could act on them. Thus, encouraging managers to create an open and inclusive environment may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustaining a virtuous cycle of voice. In this sense, it is also critical for corporate leaders to understand why many middle managers may be reticent or unable to act on the ideas raised by their subordinates. Research illustrates that managers tend to avoid acting for three primary reasons: ego threat, inadequate resources, and the challenge of gaining buy-in from multiple stakeholders.

In the first case, managers can be reluctant to act on suggestions if they perceive ideas from below as a threat to their status in the organization. For some, it is difficult to receive candid, critical feedback about policies they have devised or are charged with carrying out. Some managers even perceive the exercising of employee voice as an act of defiance. For example, Nathanel J. Fast, Burris, and Caroline A. Bartel have shown that leaders who reported feeling insecure in their role tend to feel threatened by any possible criticism from their employees.<sup>38</sup> They found that when these insecure managers in a large oil and gas company

# “managers are less open to voice from their subordinates when they lack the requisite resources and influence to effect changes in their workgroups”

experienced a threat to their ego, they were 18% less likely than more secure managers to engage in voice-soliciting behavior.

In a study that involved a business simulation with 204 students in 51 small teams, each with a randomly assigned leader, Burriss showed that even when confronted with ideas that would objectively improve team performance, supervisors tended to be defensive and even retaliatory.<sup>10</sup> They rated employees who spoke up and challenged the status quo as 33% less loyal and 37% more threatening than those speaking in support of the status quo. Further, as employees continued to speak up, the repercussions became stronger—those who spoke up and challenged the status quo more frequently were rated as 68% less promotable by leaders than those who spoke up less often. Perhaps this response is, in part, due to the way that many employees voice their ideas. For example, managers tend to rate employees who complain without proposing constructive solutions as worse performers.<sup>21</sup> Managers are, understandably, more receptive when employees point out new opportunities. Nevertheless, managers need to be aware that even complainers could be raising issues that need their attention, and companies may want to provide training in how to react more constructively to all employees who speak up.

A lack of time, budget, and other resources can also impede managers from following up on employee suggestions. Middle managers

function as nerve centers for their organizations, and they must attend to hundreds of discrete incidents per day, usually spending no more than a few minutes on any one task or conversation.<sup>39</sup> With multiple deliverables vying for their time and attention, they may lack the cognitive slack to encourage and process additional ideas from below.<sup>40</sup> Encouraging employees to speak up only adds to a heavy workload, given that pursuing a thorough cost–benefit analysis on every voiced suggestion is nearly impossible. Research confirms that managers are less open to voice from their subordinates when they lack the requisite resources and influence to effect changes in their workgroups. For instance, in one study, ideas that required fewer resources to implement were endorsed 26% more strongly by managers than those requiring more external help and support.<sup>41</sup>

The third obstacle to supporting voice can arise when managers lack adequate authority to address the issues raised by their subordinates. When they lack the power to act alone, managers must seek out and convince others to enact the needed change, which potentially entails coordinating with multiple stakeholders across the organization. Some ideas require support from more senior leaders, which burdens the manager with the task of convincing his or her superiors, potentially at multiple levels of the organization, of the importance of a change. The more managers believe they have the influence to push ideas through, the more receptive they are likely to be to hearing from their employees. In a study of managers across a variety of industries and organizations, supervisors with higher degrees of personal control—that is, those who did not need to coordinate with other stakeholders to enact change—were found to be 19% more active in soliciting voice from their subordinates.<sup>42</sup> These results illustrate that organizational practices inhibiting middle managers’ perceived autonomy and control over their responsibilities (such as micromanagement by the top management, poor job designs, and inadequate opportunities for social interactions at work) might lead to trickle-down inhibition of employee voice.

## Strategies That Encourage Responsive Management

To spur managers to respond effectively to voice, it is necessary to address the threat they may feel when receiving ideas from subordinates while also empowering them to take action on those ideas. Several strategies have been identified. First, organizations should design their workflow management to allow flexibility for continuous improvement and learning. Most leaders organize their teams and business units around *execution*—completing sets of tasks to improve key performance indicators that are easily quantifiable and tracked. In this model, the team leaders are handed a set of goals from upper management, which often leads them to structure activities around standardized protocols while implementing accountability systems to ensure employees follow the rules. Although this model may excel in generating short-term efficiency, it can also discourage employees from reporting errors and highlighting opportunities for innovation. Amy C. Edmondson has documented the benefits of an alternative management approach: organizing to learn.<sup>43</sup> Managers who do so routinely talk about mistakes, invite questions, seek feedback, experiment with unproven strategies, and encourage the sharing of information. For instance, when employees of a hospital perceived that they were working in a supportive learning environment, they tended to display high levels of voice, which was, in turn, associated with an 83% reduction in the number of errors.<sup>44</sup>

At its root, a learning orientation emphasizes attending to whether team performance is improving, searching for information the team might need, and soliciting feedback from people at all levels. When leaders actively encourage such an orientation, employees are more likely to want to share ideas for improvement. Therefore, organizations would be wise to provide concrete incentives to encourage managers to adopt and foster a learning orientation in their subordinates. For instance, managerial raises and promotions could be tied to such criteria as the number of innovative ideas generated by the team. Further, organizations could reward those

managers who routinely act on voice to further motivate their employees to offer insights and suggestions.

Second, organizations should give middle managers discretionary resources they can use to address issues raised by employees. Centralized budget control, a typical arrangement, is efficient but forces middle managers to go through administrative red tape to request additional resources from above, increasing their feelings of powerlessness and alienation.<sup>45</sup> Empowering them to take action on issues they deem essential can encourage them to cultivate more and better ideas from their employees and to be more open and proactive toward addressing employee concerns—which, in turn, may generate positive outcomes throughout the workforce. For example, a 2013 study demonstrated that employees who spoke up to managers who had access to organizational resources had 21% lower turnover over a six-month period compared with employees who spoke up to managers who did not have such access.<sup>7</sup> Of course, resources can come in the form of budgets, but other resources are simply the time and the internal political capital to encourage collaboration.<sup>46</sup>

A third way to support managers in their efforts to act on employee voice is to facilitate ways for them to acquire support from key stakeholders. Middle managers are typically the first gatekeepers of voice, but many ideas require the coordination of several teams or business units. When Jennifer A. Howard-Grenville observed teams that were successful at selling new ideas, she found that what they had in common were managers who had the authority and skill to coordinate with other teams and spur cooperation among everyone whose buy-in was needed to make the desired changes.<sup>47</sup> Organizations can provide managers with structured opportunities for cross-team coordination by holding brainstorming sessions, interdepartmental strategy meetings, and the like that are routinely attended by key decisionmakers.<sup>48</sup> The practice would provide a forum in which team leaders could share ideas they acquired from below with the people who could act on them and sustain

**Table 2. Encouraging managers to respond to voice**

Barrier to receiving and implementing voice	Example	Policy recommendation
Ego threat	<p>Leaders may</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• perceive subordinates' voice as criticism.</li> <li>• see employees as defiant.</li> <li>• see voice as an attack against the leaders' status in the hierarchy.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Set organization-wide policies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize around a learning orientation.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Incentivize both team leaders and subordinates to search for avenues of improvement.</li> <li>– Write criteria for evaluating managers to include objective counts of innovative ideas generated within a work group.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Provide tangible rewards to employees who frequently contribute ideas and insights and point out important concerns to the work group (such as a Voicer-of-the-Month Award).</li> </ul> <p><b>Improve resource allocation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicate a discretionary budget for middle managers (such as allocating separate funds for following up on employee ideas).</li> <li>• Help navigate resource constraints and administrative red tape in securing additional support from the organization.</li> </ul> <p><b>Enable stakeholder support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish structured opportunities to meet with decisionmakers on other teams (such as regularly scheduled coordination meetings for idea discussion and implementation).</li> <li>• Have higher-ups of the organization participate in such forums as regular members of the audience.</li> </ul>
Lack of discretionary resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers are often overloaded.</li> <li>• Managers often lack adequate financial resources to address the issues raised by employees.</li> </ul>	
Difficulty obtaining buy-in from multiple stakeholders	<p>Buy-in can be hard to obtain when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• top-management micromanages or uses ineffective organizational work designs (such as excessive bureaucratic red tape).</li> <li>• managers have inadequate opportunities for cross-team interaction at work.</li> </ul>	

momentum for meaningful changes throughout the organization. Table 2 lists suggested ways to increase managerial responses to employee voice.

### Conclusion

Effective decisions cannot be made solely at the top of an organization. Leaders need to develop avenues for idea generation, error detection, learning, and innovation at all levels. Our central tenet in this article is that organizations cannot benefit from new knowledge or ideas from workers unless those ideas are both expressed by employees and acted on by managers. Both research on voice and the attention of executives are focused on getting employees to speak up, on the assumption that if organizations can get people to be honest, corrective actions will somehow follow. However, if organizational leaders do not think about the challenges facing managers—and do not address the barriers that

managers face in responding to employees' ideas—the benefits of voice will be minimal.

We have suggested specific policy prescriptions for creating a safe environment that encourages employees to speak up about issues they see as important. We have further proposed specific mechanisms that would enable managers to be less threatened, to have more resources for responding to employee voice, and to be more empowered to transform new ideas into concrete initiatives. By considering the attitudes of both employees and their managers toward voice, organizations stand a much better chance of benefiting from ideas for change.

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