Can Your Employees Speak Freely?

Ethan Burris
Who I am, What I Do

- **Teaching**
- **Center for Leadership Excellence**
- **Research & Consulting:**
  - How to effectively speak up in organizations (without getting killed)
  - How to maintain strategic focus and capitalize on employee ideas
  - How to best to lead and build employee engagement

- **Collaborators:**
  - Technology (Google, Microsoft, AMD, Rackspace, Samsung)
  - Financial Services (Hartford, BBVA Compass, several regional banks)
  - Food Services and Grocery (Whole Foods, Steak ‘n’ Shake)
  - Healthcare (Mt. Sinai Hospital, UMC Brackenridge)
  - Gov’t and Gov’t Contracting (Forest Services, Northrup Grumman)
  - Energy (ISN, BP Oil, NOV)
  - Professional Sports (Philadelphia Eagles, Indiana Pacers)
The Center for Leadership Excellence

Setting the standard for the Next Generation of Leaders

Business + Science
Busting Bias
Building Leaders

Research | Learning | External Partnerships
Questions

- Do you really want your employees to speak up? (when would you like them to shut up?)

- What is the benefit of creating a culture of voice? (what is the cost of silence?)

- How can you create that culture? (why is this harder than it seems?)
Types of voice

- Organizational wrongdoing
  - Focus on issues that are illegal or immoral
    - Whistle-blowing, principled dissent

- Organizational improvement
  - Pro-social voice
    - Focus on speaking up about problems and possibilities for improvement in job tasks or organizational processes and actions
Flavor of Ideas

HR Issues (e.g., staffing)

"They tried to cut back on our police staffing that we had here, and we absolutely refused and pitched a fit...we had a nurse that got beat up in one of our rooms by a psych patient. She ended up leaving the ER for that, and that devastated us."

-- ER Nurse
“When we ask underwriting questions concerning accidents, violations, or other moving violations, we are not asking the full range of questions up front regarding things that can affect the premium.

In many states, comprehensive claims such as vandalisms and hitting a deer impact the rates. We are not required to ask about these factors up front even though it is premium bearing and affects the price. By fixing this, the customers will be happier because the quote would be more accurate and it will prevent the price from increasing later on, which turns off customers because they don't understand why "non accident" claims change their rates.”

--Insurance Company Sales Associate
Management

“I like my job, but I wish the management was better.”

--Food Service Employee
Why Study Voice?

- Competitive success requires tapping…
  
  “all organizational members for their ideas, intelligence, and commitment to making the organization successful.” (Pfeffer, 1998: 121).
Theme 1: Voice that leads to action is beneficial

Manager Access to Organizational Resources (Do managers have resources to make change)?

Manager Participation in Decision-Making (Can managers instigate change?)

Employee Voice

Manager Orientation toward Change (Are managers comfortable with change)?

Issue Effectively Addressed
Theme 1: Voice that leads to action is beneficial

![Graph showing the relationship between voice and turnover reduction. The graph displays a line with Low Voice on the x-axis and Annualized turnover on the y-axis. The graph shows an orange line indicating High Willingness to Change and a blue line indicating Low Willingness to Change. The graph highlights a 32% reduction in turnover for High Willingness to Change.](image-url)
Theme 1: Voice that leads to action is beneficial

- 26% increase in turnover
- 32% reduction in turnover
- High Willingness to Change
- Low Willingness to Change
Theme 2: Voice that is directed to people who can take action is beneficial

1) Voice to leader from inside unit

2) Network/pattern of voice among subordinates

3) Voice from subordinates to leaders outside unit

4) Voice to leader from outside unit
Theme 2: Voice that is directed to people who can take action is beneficial.
High performing unit  

• Units perform better when voice flows to leaders  
• Unit perform worse when voice flows around leaders  
• Financial and operational performance differed by 20%  

Low performing unit
Theme 3: Voice that leads the managers to be receptive is beneficial

Ideas can be pitched as:

- **opportunities** (upside of adopting)

or

- **threats** (downside of not adopting)
Managers’ Regulatory Focus

- **Regulatory focus:**
  - Describes two motivational systems governing behavior (Higgins, 1997). People tend to favor one of these.

- The two systems differ on the following:
  - How people attain overall goal of satisfaction
  - Types of outcomes that are most salient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotion Focus</th>
<th>Prevention Focus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play to win</td>
<td>Play not to lose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated to take chances on new ideas</td>
<td>Motivated to avoid things going wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worst outcome is an opportunity not taken</td>
<td>Worst outcome is upsetting status quo</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Matching Between Framing and Manager

Framing and Manager Regulatory Fit

Managerial Endorsement

- Prevention Focused Managers
- Promotion Focused Managers

Framing - Threat
Framing - Opportunity

McCOMBS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Matching Between Framing and Manager

Framing and Manager Regulatory Fit

Managerial regulatory focus biases reactions to framing (are we systematically missing out on ideas?)
Themes

Voice is beneficial when

- **Action is taken** to address the issue raised
- It is **directed to people** who can take action
- It leads these people to **be receptive** to take action
Why Study Voice?

- Competitive success requires tapping...
  - “all organizational members for their ideas, intelligence, and commitment to making the organization successful.” (Pfeffer, 1998: 121).

- But, getting people to speak up is hard
  - Voluntary behavior (not part of the requirements for the job)
  - Individuals trained to “do their job,” not “find ways to improve it”
  - It can challenge leaders
  - Act of not speaking up with an idea is not observable
Do employees speak up to their managers?

- Of the roughly 1700 people who gave an anonymous suggestion, only 40% told their manager.

- Among people who contributed the best 100 ideas, only 40% told their manager.

- Among those most vocal employees, 42% still withhold some ideas from their manager.
Why Employees Withhold

- Fear

- A specific work problem that we have been experiencing lately is that when one person speaks their mind about the company they have been either fired or moved to a different branch. (Financial Service Rep)
“It’s not so much that we can not speak up in the sense that we will be fired, it’s more that people would not speak up because they knew they would not be heard. And, in a sense, this is even worse.”

(“Hi-Co” Senior Marketing Manager)
What to do?

- Be nice – don’t explicitly punish those who speak up
- Be available – give people the opportunity to offer their ideas
Half-hearted attempts to address SAFETY

- Anonymous reporting systems remind us all that it’s not safe
Half-hearted attempts to address SAFETY

- Anonymous reporting systems remind us all that it’s not safe
- Whose turf? - Come speak up where I’m comfortable, not you
Leader Influences

- Sometimes leader influences are proximate and obvious:
  
  *My boss is* “the bulldozer who blows nasty commands all the time. *He* destroys these meetings when he’s there. No one will speak up.”

- Other times, employees’ fears about speaking up to leaders have no obvious cause:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interviewer Follow-up to Stated Fear of Consequences</th>
<th>Interviewee Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Do you know of anyone who has ever lost their job because they spoke up?”</td>
<td>“Everyone knows that we never fire anybody. I’ve never seen it happen.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Has anything ever happened for asking hard questions?”</td>
<td>“Nothing whatsoever. Nothing happens to anybody for asking any questions.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The long shadow of the past

Conversation with a manufacturing supervisor:

“So ever since – that was 12 years ago, I still don’t trust anybody. I’ll say what I think is the right thing in a meeting.”

Q: This is the same manager that's the current plant manager?

“No, that was three managers ago. Three plant managers ago.”

Who caused this problem?

Who is responsible for fixing it?
Beliefs about speaking up are rooted in much more than current experience.

- Current, Proximate Work Environment
- Distal or Past Work Environment
- Prior Experiences with Hierarchy
- Personality, Cultural, and Evolutionary Influences

Beliefs about Speaking Up at Work
Half-hearted attempts to address SAFETY

- Anonymous reporting systems remind us all that it’s not safe
- Turf battles - Come speak up where I’m comfortable, not you
- I’m not defensive unless it’s personal (by the way, it’s all personal)
Threatening nature of conflict

- “To some leaders, allowing employees to participate is viewed as an abdication of authority” (Beer, 2009, p. 174)

- Seen as an implicit criticism - “I don’t want to embarrass [my boss]. I think there’s a level of embarrassment to say, ‘Gee boss, that’s factually incorrect.’”
Half-hearted attempts to address SAFETY

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- Turf battles - Come speak up where I’m comfortable, not you
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Half-hearted attempts to address FUTILITY

- Courage is for other people
Half-hearted attempts to address FUTILITY

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- Courage is for other people
- Ask for input that you don’t want to hear

Some Employees
- Operational Efficiency
- Costs/budgets
- Methods to improve current patient satisfaction metrics

Other Employees
- Patient care
- Coordination of care with other departments
- Adequate staffing

Sensitive to resources and interdependencies to implement

Insensitive to resources and interdependencies
Half-hearted attempts to address

**FUTILITY**

- Courage is for other people
- Ask for input that you don’t want to hear
- Please waste more time
Faculty/Staff Site Launched October 2009

The Ideas of Texas
Your ideas to advance the University

Your ideas matter
The Ideas of Texas initiative lets everyone in the campus community share and review ideas to improve our university. Submit your ideas, vote or comment on others, and help shape the future of The University of Texas at Austin. Bill Powers, President

Post
We want to know what you think. Share your ideas with the campus and help make the University even better.

Vote & Discuss
Horns up, or horns down? Vote for your favorite ideas and join the conversation.

Top Ideas
Check out the top ideas submitted by faculty and staff.
The Ideas of Texas program has concluded. As an austerity measure in this time of budget reductions, it was decided not to renew the license for the proprietary software on which this program ran.

The initiative generated just over 50 implementable ideas out of some seven hundred submissions. Many of the approved ideas are working their way through the implementation process in various units. As the very top ideas reach full implementation, we'll be posting updates on this webpage.

Thank you for your interest and ideas.

The Ideas of Texas Team
Ideas of Texas

- Online for 3 years
- 700+ unique ideas submitted
- 50+ approved and implemented

Would this make you feel as though speaking up results in actual action?
HOW CAN YOU MORE ROBUSTLY ENCOURAGE VOICE?
Robust Strategies for Voice

- Get out of your office – “open door” is not enough
A model of voice encouragement

More passive; little effort by focal manager

Informal Mechanisms

Managerial “openness”

Managerial “closing the loop”

Managerial “solicitation”

Proactive solicitation; high effort by focal manager

Formal mechanisms
Robust Strategies for Voice

- Get out of your office – “open door” is not enough
- Soften the power cues
  - Lunch with the Pres.
Who is “the authority” in each meeting?

Table shapes and seating arrangements are signals.
Imagine you are the patient in this photo, and you are there to discuss a stomach problem that has been troubling you for some time. After a basic examination that felt dismissive to you, the doctor tells you you’re worried about nothing and is ready to end your examination. You’re still convinced there’s something more going on.
3 versions, randomly assigned
Findings for “How unconformable, intimidating to speak up to this doctor?”

mean = 3.22

mean = 3.19 < mean = 4.09

t = 2.5; F = 6.2
p = .015

mean = 3.15
Robust Strategies for Voice

- Get out of your office – “open door” is not enough

- Soften the power cues
  - Lunch with the Pres.

- Make feedback a regular and casual thing
  - Huddles, cookie chats, check-ins

- Be the example

- Close the loop
“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen”

- Winston Churchill
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BACKUP
Considerations in Speaking Up

- Tailored to the target
- Activating appropriate effect
- Consciously framed
- Timed right
- Involving interested others
- Considerate of context
- Suggesting a sensible solution
crucial conversations
Tools for talking when stakes are high
KERRY PATTerson, JOSEPH GRENNY, RON McMIllAN, AL SWITZLER

Difficult Conversations
HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST
Updated with Answers to the 10 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Difficult Conversations
DOUGLAS STONE • BRUCE PATTON • SHELLI HEEN OF THE HARVARD NEGOTIATION PROJECT
With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of GETTING TO YES

Giving Voice to Values
How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right
MARY C. GENTILE

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Foreword by Stephen R. Covey
Author of THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

The New York Times BESTSELLER