



COMMUNICATION

# Can Your Employees Really Speak Freely?

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**C**hances are, your employees are withholding valuable intelligence from you. Maybe it's about a project that's gone off track or a manager who's behaving badly. Or maybe they're not sharing their thoughts on ways the business could grow its sales or improve operations. No matter how open you are as a manager, our research shows, many of your people are more likely to keep mum than to question initiatives or suggest new ideas at work.

This is true even if, like most leaders, you believe you have an open-door policy. (In our years of studying employee "voice" and advising organizations, we've never heard anyone say, "I have a closed-door policy.") Think about it: How often do employees come

to you, on your turf, to tell you the unvarnished truth simply because you've encouraged them to do so? The reality is, they worry—rightly or not—that you'll take their comments personally, or that they'll come across as disrespectful know-it-alls.

Leaders use a variety of tools to get people to speak up, like “climate” surveys and all-staff feedback sessions. Many of these efforts focus on improving communication up and down the hierarchy. But they usually fall short, regardless of good intentions, for two key reasons: a fear of consequences (embarrassment, isolation, low performance ratings, lost promotions, and even firing) and a sense of futility (the belief that saying something won't make a difference, so why bother?). Here, we'll look at how leaders' misguided attempts to promote candor fail to address—and sometimes stir up—those feelings. We'll also discuss tactics that are much more effective.

In a number of studies, we've found that when employees can voice their concerns freely, organizations see increased retention and stronger performance. At several financial services firms, for example, business units whose employees reported speaking up more had significantly better financial and operational results than others. And at one national restaurant chain, managers were able to persuade senior leaders to make improvements that reduced employee turnover by 32% and saved at least \$1.6 million a year.

So getting all this right pays off—not just for the individuals eager to make contributions but for the organizations they want to improve.

## **The Fear Factor**

It doesn't take a tyrannical boss to inspire fear within an organization. Nor does it matter if an unsettling event like a restructuring or a takeover happened long ago. Once people become afraid to speak their minds, they'll keep justifying their silence with explanations like “That's the way our culture is—you don't disagree with your boss.”

Without realizing it, leaders tend to make the problem worse with the following practices:

## **Relying on anonymous feedback.**

The promise of anonymity is a common way to encourage frank input. Suggestion boxes, whistle-blowing hotlines, ombudspeople, 360-degree assessments, and satisfaction surveys all serve this purpose. Here's the logic: If no one knows who said what, no repercussions will follow, so people can be forthright about any topic.

This line of reasoning has three flaws.

First, allowing employees to remain unidentified actually underscores the risks of speaking up—and reinforces people's fears. The subtext is “It's not safe to share your views openly in this organization. So we've created other channels to get the information we need.”

Second, anonymity can set off a witch hunt. That was a theme at one *Fortune* 500 company we studied. When employees provided negative feedback through hotlines, suggestion boxes, and such, some bosses demanded to know “Who said this?!” People in other organizations had similar experiences. Many told us that they go to libraries and coffee shops and use public computers to complete online employee surveys—because they worry they'll be tracked through their IP addresses otherwise. One man said he wouldn't even report a problem to an ombudsperson. When asked why, he countered, “Who pays his salary?”

Third and perhaps most important, it can be difficult to address issues while protecting the identity of the people who raised them. Reporting in a survey that a manager acts abusively, incompetently, or in racist or sexist ways won't do any good unless HR or an ombudsperson can assess the extent of the problem, explore the causes, and develop recommendations. That means interviews need to be conducted, stories corroborated, and additional data collected—all of which involve talking to the person who has accused the manager of wrongdoing. And if a complaint refers to a specific incident, it's often quite clear to the manager which person filed it.

## **Issuing general invitations to come forward.**

Open doors and attitudes are simply too passive. People still have to approach you to initiate a conversation, and that's intimidating.

In a U.S.-based call center at a *Fortune* 500 insurance company, for example, frontline employees had a very nice manager who expressed interest and even took action when people raised issues. Yet call center staffers hardly ever brought him script problems, ideas for improving efficiency, or suggestions for cross-selling. Why not? Because his office was on another floor, and getting to him involved walking through four *closed* doors and past three secretaries. The hundreds of employees under him almost never saw him, so they didn't feel they knew him and weren't comfortable approaching him.

With anonymity, the subtext is “It's not safe to share your views openly.”

“But my people come tell me things,” you may be thinking. Fair enough, though there may be other things they aren't coming to you about—issues that feel less safe. In particular, if you closely identify with an initiative, they'll probably withhold constructive criticism about it, assuming you'll take it personally.

A study we've run with hundreds of managers and professionals from different countries bears this out. In it, one group of randomly assigned respondents are asked to imagine they're on a multifunctional team developing a new product. They're told that the project keeps hitting major technical problems and that they ought to recommend ending it before it becomes a disaster. A second group are told the same thing but get one additional piece of information: Their boss has invested a lot of time in the project. Individuals in this group are significantly less likely to speak up, we've found. As one pointed out, frankness might wound or provoke the boss. “The old saying is ‘Don't kill the messenger,’” he added, “but usually the messenger gets killed.”

## **Sending signals that you're in charge.**

Whether you realize it or not, you're probably conveying your power through subtle cues (social psychologist Richard Hackman called them "ambient stimuli"). This can cause employees to clam up.

When someone ventures into your office, do you lean back in your chair with your arms clasped behind your head? You may think you're setting a relaxed tone, but you're really displaying dominance. (The posture makes you look bigger, a tactic animals and humans use to warn away others.) Are you sitting behind a big oak desk, in an expensive ergonomic chair, while your employee sits in a much smaller, cheaper, less comfortable one? Despite your good intentions ("Come on in!"), you're inadvertently telling him to watch his step around you.

We've seen the effects of subtle power cues in many organizations. The COO of one large hospital in Texas told us a story about a prominent emergency room physician. For years this doctor had an excellent safety record and was well regarded among colleagues for delivering high-quality care. Yet he routinely received low scores on patient satisfaction. Although his diagnoses were accurate and his treatments effective, patients never felt comfortable with him. When his nurse pointed out this was causing them to withhold diagnostically important information, he finally understood what a problem it was.

With some prodding from the COO, the doctor made one simple change: He sat in a chair when making rounds, so he could talk to patients face-to-face rather than stand over them in their beds. Though his conversations were still brief and his bedside manner virtually nonexistent, sitting down made a world of difference. It seemed to convey that he took more time with people and cared about them, even though his other behavior changed very little. The next month, his patient satisfaction scores soared.

## **The Futility Factor**

In many organizations we've studied, the biggest reason for withholding ideas and concerns wasn't fear but, rather, the belief that managers wouldn't do anything about them anyway. At one *Fortune* 100 high-tech company, employees cited futility as a reason for reticence almost twice as often as fear.

This “why bother?” attitude stems from—and persists because of—these leadership behaviors:

### **Failing to model free expression.**

When leaders themselves aren’t vocal, their employees take note. One of us saw this while serving as an external researcher on a task force of senior managers at a large science-driven company. Charged with understanding the causes of employee silence and then proposing solutions, the task force conducted more than 200 interviews across many sites and at all levels. But when it came time to present the findings to the CEO and the division presidents, the task force members failed to report how often they had heard about top management’s candor-inhibiting behavior.

Sure enough, the top team approved a relatively toothless set of recommendations and called it a day. Imagine how that felt to those 200 people who were interviewed (and the thousands more who had filled out the survey that led to the task force). Even speaking up about speaking up had proved futile. As more than one employee had predicted, senior people couldn’t be trusted to talk about the proverbial elephant in the room (in this case, top managers’ negative behavior). So why would others in the organization conclude that voicing concerns was worth their time?

If you don’t share what you hear from below with your higher-ups, without excessive filtering or sugarcoating, your employees will stop wasting their own breath. The same thing is likely to happen if they see you sitting silently in meetings when they know you’ve got a mental list of problems or ideas that you could be raising. Formal power comes with an expectation that you’ll be the voice of your subordinates and take action on their behalf. Failure to do so is a big demotivator.

### **Being unclear about the input you want.**

Leaders are most responsive to ideas that support their own agendas. That’s actually not a bad thing—they need to focus on their priorities to be effective. But they also have a hard time admitting that they’re not interested in an idea, which results in “pseudoparticipation”—going through the motions of listening, with little intention of

following up. They compound this problem by sending out vague calls for employee feedback—asking for a “single best idea” on a survey, for instance, or inviting people to speak up in meetings about whatever is on their minds.

If you cast that wide a net, what you reel in might not mesh with what you’re trying to accomplish. We’ve found this discrepancy in service and health care settings: When asked what they’d like to improve, frontline employees tend to focus on customer satisfaction, while their managers are looking for ways to boost sales and reduce transaction times (in call centers) or to increase efficiency and protect against legal liability (in hospitals). If you don’t specify the kind of input you’re seeking, you may end up discarding most of what people tell you—and send the message that it’s useless for them to contribute ideas. Frustration is inevitable.

Some leaders spend millions collecting ideas but then never really review them.

When leaders take on new roles or join new organizations, they often, as part of a “listening tour,” conduct surveys or individual interviews to hear from employees about possibilities and problems. This can make a lot of sense if you have time to synthesize the information and then take action. But it can backfire if you don’t. Suppose you’re a new manager brought in to lead an expansion into a new region. You already have your marching orders. Holding a series of open-ended meetings so that people can tell you about all the other things they wish you’d do or fix isn’t going to change your main path. It’s a waste of everyone’s time.

### **Providing no resources to address issues.**

In our consulting work, we’ve seen leaders in higher education, financial services, retail, and other contexts who spent thousands or millions of dollars collecting ideas but then didn’t allocate a single employee to read through the data, much less design a systematic evaluation process. Sometimes we transcribed and analyzed the ideas according to their level of creativity, feasibility, and apparent overall value, only to learn that senior leaders

had no intention of holding people accountable for implementing the suggested improvements. Or the company's leaders simply said they were too strapped to fund any new projects.

Devoting resources to collecting ideas without making commitments, financial and otherwise, to see at least some of them to fruition can only lead to a sense that employee input will change nothing.

## **Creating a More Vocal Culture**

Though leaders clearly struggle to get employees to speak up, it can be done. From our research, we've gleaned the following best practices:

### **Make feedback a regular, casual exchange.**

If you ask for input frequently and hold the conversations face-to-face, idea sharing will feel less ominous and more natural. Schedule regular meetings with your employees, and don't cancel every time you don't have an agenda. In fact, you might occasionally announce that the top item on the agenda will be employee feedback. Tell people in advance what sort of conversation you'll be having (a brainstorming meeting, for instance, or a planning session), and explain the kinds of problems or possibilities you want to discuss. That will give a sense of what's fair game. Also assure people that they needn't make an ironclad case for every suggestion, so they won't worry that they'll look dumb or get in trouble if they don't have all the answers. When the first brave souls speak up, especially with comments that challenge how things are done, thank them and publicly acknowledge how much you value their input. Then be sure to adopt at least one idea or solve at least one problem that was mentioned, letting everyone know who deserves the credit for bringing it up.

### **Be transparent.**

Transparency about feedback processes can reduce anxiety and increase participation. In one midsize health services company, a VP for quality outlined a six-week plan for gathering and acting on employee ideas for improvements in three major areas. She laid out three clear phases: two weeks to collect ideas through an online platform; two weeks



for task forces to evaluate the impact and feasibility of the ideas; and two weeks to prioritize which ideas would be implemented, create timelines, and announce plans to the rest of the company. Spelling out guidelines and commitments up front made contributing feel less daunting and futile to employees.

### **Reach out.**

If you really want to know what people think about something, go ask them. Otherwise, employees might seek you out only when things are getting really bad for them. However, try not to shut out good suggestions that don't happen to jibe with your current priorities. A VP of manufacturing in a health products company told us he'd once saved about a million dollars because, during a plant visit, he'd veered from the scheduled "dog and pony show" to walk the floor by himself and talk with frontline employees. One of them mentioned a flaw in the design of some bubble wrap, which the VP jotted down and was able to quickly address.

Soliciting feedback informally can be much more effective than just being open to it when it comes your way. In our study of financial institutions, we found that proactively reaching out to subordinates for suggestions increased employees' willingness to speak up twice as much as simply being open did.

When you do ask for feedback, go to the people who know something you don't. The folks in your immediate network probably are similar to you in background, perspective, and knowledge—so branch out. Counteract the all-too-common norm of expecting new people to quietly fit in until they understand "how we do things around here." New people can tell you how other organizations operate and will have a fresh perspective on your firm's strengths and weaknesses.

### **Soften the power cues.**

If you really want to get the truth from below, play down your power when interacting with employees. One reason MBWA (management by walking around) is so effective is that it shifts the home field advantage to the staff—the conversation happens on their territory, not yours.

Of course, some conversations will need to happen in your office, but you can take steps to make your guests feel more comfortable. Add a small table with chairs of the same size and quality so that when someone comes to talk, you can sit together. Table shape matters, too. It's usually easy to guess who has the most power at an oval or a rectangular table, but there's no "head" at a round table. And consider your attire: Do you really need a tie for meetings with the creative team? You want employees to feel you're one of them.

If you really want to get the truth from below, play down your power.

Ken Freeman, a successful corporate executive for decades before becoming the dean of Boston University's Questrom School of Business, is someone who understands power signals. When he arrived at the school, the dean's office was on a high floor with limited access. It was larger and more luxurious than any corporate office he'd ever had. Hardly anyone came to see him. So he moved to a small office with a clear-glass exterior wall, located on a classroom floor just down the hall from a heavily trafficked coffee shop. And he made another conscious choice to signal who he is and what he cares about: The only awards he put on prominent display were those for ethics and his academic diplomas.

### **Avoid sending mixed messages.**

In one R&D organization, the managers were baffled that the brilliant researchers they'd recruited turned out to be uninspiring. But while the firm boasted that it hired only the best, it made its talent feel dumb. When researchers presented to senior managers, they were routinely beaten up and their ideas shot down. Challenging the status quo felt unsafe there. Even informal "blue-sky" sessions were stifled by reminders to use the company's standard PowerPoint template and adhere to rules about maximum words per slide, which reinforced the feeling that people needed to stay within certain bounds.

### **Be the example.**

Most employees understand that you don't have full control over the resources or decisions needed to address their issues. To determine whether it's worth bringing things to your attention, they calculate how likely you are to represent their interests to the

leaders above you. To document this implicit calculus, we asked more than 10,000 restaurant employees to what extent their shift supervisors took their problems and suggestions to the general manager for action. Those whose bosses frequently acted on their behalf had significantly reduced feelings of futility. What's more, they shared their concerns and ideas with their supervisors 10% more frequently than employees whose bosses didn't represent them.

Employees feel inspired when they see you advocating for them. That message came through quite clearly when we spoke with people at a real estate firm. A team there had inherited a project that its members quickly realized would lead to a dangerous and illegal situation if allowed to continue. One employee described the group's leader as "courageous," explaining that he was "unafraid to speak up and point out the issues involved. He was fearless in challenging the status quo, as the project had already been approved by senior managers, who clearly were not paying attention to the details."

While it's great when your subordinates can see you speaking up, in many cases that's not possible, because they aren't present when you interact with your own boss. But you can tell them what happened and involve them directly in any follow-up steps. For example, rather than letting subordinates suspect you didn't fight hard for their project, tell them that senior management was skeptical about some of your numbers and unsure whether it deserved prioritization in light of many other options being considered. And then bring them with you to present additional data that might convince higher-ups. This has a few benefits: First, it shows your people that you were willing to make an effort on their behalf, something they're likely to appreciate no matter how things turn out. Second, it gives them a broader perspective on the barriers you, and those above you, face. And third, it keeps them informed about your progress so that they aren't left wondering what's happened since they spoke with you—which brings us to our final recommendation.

**Close the loop.**

If you don't want people to think their ideas went straight to the trash can, make sure you tell them what you did next and what they can expect as a result. In surveys of more than 3,500 employees in multiple companies, we found that bosses' failure to close the loop increased subordinates' belief that speaking up was futile by 30%. But if managers had closed the loop in the past, their reports spoke up 19% more frequently—even after we accounted for any increase that happened simply because managers were perceived as open, interested, and willing to make changes.

Even the best-intentioned leaders often fall down on follow-up just because they are busy fighting fires. So consider adopting processes that formally include next steps, such as the “strategic fitness process” developed by Mike Beer and his colleagues at the consulting firm TruePoint. It calls for managers to receive input from a task force that gathers employees' comments and highlights themes. The managers then report to the task force what they will do in response to the feedback. Task force members are responsible for communicating plans to the staff and helping implement the changes. Another effective tactic is simply to adhere to strict, well-publicized timelines for collecting, evaluating, and implementing ideas.

Getting the ideas you want and need from your employees will always be a challenge. Most people care too much about their social and material well-being to routinely speak truth to power—unless you clear some obstacles out of the way. Halfhearted efforts like anonymous reporting systems and vague invitations to submit ideas won't do the trick. What will make a difference is taking steps to assure people that it's both safe and worthwhile to contribute, no matter where they sit in the organization.

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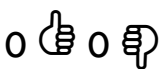
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