How to Stop Silencing Employees by Mistake

By Jessica Collins

Employee voice is crucial for high performance and innovation, yet leaders continue to silence and disengage their employees unknowingly.

Bubbles form around management that reinforce beliefs that their communication is sufficient, yet modern research suggests otherwise.

> "One of the mistakes we make in business is that we sit around the table nodding in agreement."   — Dr. Angela Pratt, HR Director, Kellog's Frozen Foods and North America Marketing

In this post, we're going to cover some of the most common misconceptions among both managers and employees, and identify some best practices you can implement right away to encourage more frequent, rich, and honest communication in your team.

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Management beliefs

1. Employees have no problem voicing their opinions

Although great strides have been made in encouraging open communication, studies show employees continue to keep silent:

- 85 percent of employees recently failed to speak up
- 90 percent of nurses hold back from speaking up to physicians even when the patient's safety is at risk
- 93 percent of organizations are at risk of an accident due to employee silence.

It's easy to miss employee silence if you are simultaneously seeing instances of employee voice. In a survey of 1,000 randomly selected Americans, 42 percent of those who spoke up at least once in the past year also decided not to speak up on other occasions.
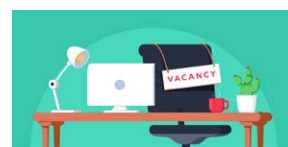
Even for those who spoke up at least six times, 32 percent withheld on other occasions. Employees self-censor based on fluctuating relative power and openness of others.

2. It's not a problem if employees don't always speak up

In a survey of 1,025 managers and employees, everyone provided at least one example of silence costing the company an average of $7,500. They found the average

person wasted seven days for every issue they kept silent:

- 78 percent complained to coworkers
- 66 percent had to do extra or unnecessary work
- 53 percent ruminated about the problem
- 50 percent felt angry

Beyond budgets and deadlines, silence can lead to corruption, low morale, and accidents.

3. The business doesn't really benefit from voice

Employees work hands-on with products, processes, customers, business partners, and/or competitors. Such valuable exposure gives employees early and deep insights into opportunities and threats.

Besides profitable ideas, more voice fosters more divergent thinking for better decisions. Procedural justice also means more satisfied and committed employees deliver more discretionary effort.

Furthermore, B-lab and the Global Reporting Initiative recognize employee participation in decision-making as a corporate social responsibility. Companies impact communities through the members who work for them. Both skills and stress can spillover into the community.

4. People only need to vent — nothing else has to change

Photography retailer Black's set up a web page and email to encourage feedback to the CEO. A former assistant store manager recalls writing detailed suggestions on business practices:

> "I never received a reply, which only solidified my suspicion that the entire system was nothing but lip service. The irony of the matter is when Black's went out of business a couple of years later, the CEO cited some of the same concerns I had written about as reasons behind the company's failure."

Asking for input and then ignoring it is worse than never asking in the first place. Twenty-five percent of employees withhold suggestions because they think offering their feedback would be a waste of time.

The President of PixeLINK Corporation, a Canadian manufacturer of industrial cameras, asserts:

> "the employee/employer contract should always work two ways — employee gives 100 percent to the organization and employer gives 100 percent to the employee."

Employees need resources like pay, role clarity, and employee voice to meet the demands of their work.

Employee beliefs

1. There's no point to making suggestions because management won't change anything

A nurse remembers the first time he made a suggestion. He noticed first aid kits had expired and so he emailed his supervisor and the nursing manager.

When he didn't get a response, he spoke with his supervisor but she dismissed his concern. He says, "it jaded me significantly."

> "If you're not going to take this kind of stuff seriously, why would I report anything in the future?"

He sees peers receive the same disregard from management: "pretending to listen and saying they want to hear ideas and then implementing nothing."

An IT rep at a large company believes senior leadership is well-intentioned, but may not have time to process feedback.

> "I feel that the 'big-picture' types of folks are either unable or unwilling to work on finer points. From my personal experience, they haven't referred any of these suggestions to their subordinates who may be able to look into the matter."

2. I will be punished if I speak up

People remember when coworkers label someone a "trouble-maker." They pay attention if it seems like supervisors retaliate to dissenting views.

One study showed that employees who spoke up were less likely to receive a raise or promotion. For the nurse's peers, "they have seen other people fired that they consider agitators or independent-minded people in the organization."

On the other hand, research suggests suffering in silence is

comparable to the distress of whistleblowing. It can teach helplessness; diminish self-efficacy and motivation; and, grow cynicism and alienation.

Bottled up emotions can also resurface in unproductive ways.

3. My input is too small to say anything

After management cut off and shut down his suggestion, the IT rep questioned if he knew enough to speak up.

> "Since that occasion, I've made sure that my opinions or suggestions are well-researched and filtered through colleagues and my supervisor before being brought forward."

His cautious approach has since kept him silent on occasions his opinions were warranted.

Employees usually withhold suggestions because they believe they are trivial. In fact, improvements of any size contribute to making the organization more competitive.

Speaking up about smaller issues also prepares people to speak about larger issues. PixeLINK's President explains effort and perseverance build the confidence to speak.

Even if you strike out, you'll be up to bat again. If you never step up to the plate, though, you will never hit a home run. Showing commitment also earns respect, which increases the weight of a person's voice.

Best practices

1. A bias toward action

[Virginia Mason Medical Center](#) used to file away and forget safety concerns. They now train managers and executives to offer support and resources. The Center shares raised concerns to show they value them for better safety outcomes. Plus, they integrated related systems to check in real-time if reports lead to improvements. The number of raised concerns went from ten in 2004 to 840 in January 2014.

2. Emotional intelligence

[When employees feel negative emotions](#), it leaks into the way they express suggestions. Fear comes across as lack of confidence or competence. Anger comes across as aggressive and threatening. Organizations can teach emotion regulation techniques:

- Re-framing obstacles as challenges
- Channeling anger into passion
- Planning appropriate timing and setting
- Partnering with better communicators

3. Conflict management

All levels of an organization should learn how to have difficult conversations. This involves building rapport and speaking candidly without provoking resistance. The key is respecting people and their perspectives.

4. Active dialogue

Leaders model the behaviors for ongoing, active two-way conversations:

- Reduce formality and power cues
- Acknowledge you can make mistakes and want to improve
- Bring up controversial topics and encourage disagreement
- Align how you listen and how you act with purpose
- Make asking for input routine in day-to-day operations

5. Appropriate venues

There is no need to reinvent the standard census surveys, sample surveys, and focus groups. Instead, amplify their impact with quicker, less top-down, and more social tools:

- Mini-polls deliver real-time visualizations of responses
- [Collaboration platforms](#) share information informally and bring unknown issues to light
- [Wearable devices](#) produce data like location and vital signs to analyze productivity and safety

Technology also helps to understand and apply data:

- Intranet analytics interpret usage and employee-published content
- [Cognitive analytics](#) provide insights and even predictions based on survey and workforce data

6. Culture of recognition

PixeLINK's President reflects,

> "Employees react positively to acknowledgement of their successes and gain confidence once

> management shows confidence in them. The more confident the individual, the more open one is to suggestions for improvement. My rule of thumb was always three positives before I suggest an area in which they can improve. That ratio has changed to 5:1 to reflect changing times."

Recognize often and recognize publicly:

- Show empathy for the other perspective, validating their concerns
- Commend people for asking tough questions, raising difficult issues, and suggesting new ideas
- Reward employees for the input and feedback that contribute to successes

In conclusion

Employees are silent when they see nothing to gain and/or they see something to lose.

Employers seeking high performance need to prove employee voice is worthwhile and safe. Senior leaders, direct supervisors, and colleagues are all essential to building that trust.

You can build an environment of rich communication in your team, but in order to achieve the benefits of that environment, you need to be aware of the different perspectives each participant brings to the table, and the common misconceptions they may already hold.

Are you ready to take the next step in building an extraordinary organizational culture? Check out our latest guide:

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