

## Typology of Employee Improvement-Oriented Voice: An Exploration of Voice Content

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### Abstract

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This qualitative study explores the typology of employee improvement-oriented voice, or the ideas and suggestions employees speak up the hierarchy with the intention to enhance organizational processes. Research suggests that the content of employee voice can affect the voice calculus and influence whether or not the speaker voices his suggestions or ideas up the hierarchy. Further, characteristics of employee voice can affect a manager's decision to propagate employee voice up, down and across the hierarchy. Thus, exploring the typology of employee voice can lead to a finer-grain understanding of the types of ideas and suggestions that employees pass up the hierarchy, and the process in which these types of ideas and suggestions can influence the flow of communication up, down and across the hierarchy. In other words, understanding *what* suggestions and ideas employees choose to speak up to their managers can have an importance in unpacking the process of *how* managers pass on valuable employee input to other levels of the organization, as well as understanding further why employees choose to speak up or remain silent. This study surveyed 135 full-time working managers to collect data on actual suggestions and ideas voiced by their subordinates. A typology of employee improvement-oriented voice is put forth, and implications are discussed.

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**Keywords:** Employee voice, typology of employee voice, suggestions and ideas from employees

### Introduction

In contemporary organizations, employees are able to exert influence through speaking up with suggestions and ideas in the workplace. Organizations require bottom-up employee input to innovate, change and make optimal decisions. Bottom-up communication is frequently a source of innovation (M. Aiken, Bacharach, & French, 1980). Speaking up about work-related suggestions and ideas, in particular, can be a precursor to organizational innovation (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Scott, 1994).

Hirschman's conception of voice as an alternative to leaving one's company further opened up the path to investigating how an employee can influence the company through direct communication (Hirschman, 1970). Employees can play an active role in changing the organization by speaking up against something that has caused job dissatisfaction rather than quitting the company or neglecting the job (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988). More recent research extends this stream of work by proposing employee voice as more than one possible "either or" option in the workplace in response to job dissatisfaction. Voice researchers have delved deeper into employee voice as an expression of work-related issues with the intention of enhancing organizational process or outcomes (Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998).

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When employees speak up, organizations benefit in the forms of innovation ((Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Sutton & Hargadon 1996), improved organizational teach (Milliken & Lam, 2008) and team learning (Edmondson, 2003), lower turnover rate ((Batt, Colvin & Keefe, 2002) and enhanced performance (Glaser, 1984). Speaking up also leads to better personal outcomes such as procedural justice ((Lind, Kanfer & Earley, 1990) and increased job satisfaction (Gorden, Infante & Graham, 1988).

### **2.1 Improvement-oriented voice**

This qualitative study focuses on improvement-oriented voice, defined as the deliberate and voluntary expression of information up the hierarchy that may challenge the status quo by proposing to improve organizational processes or functioning (Detert & Burris, 2007). Improvement-oriented voice occurs when the speaker intends to constructively improve the organization rather than to solely communicate criticisms and complaints. It is an other-oriented behavior based on a desire to enhance an organization (Van Dyne et al., 2003) without the necessary perception of job dissatisfaction nor sense of injustice (E. Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2006; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Stamper & Van Dyne, 2001). It is seen as a form of prosocial behavior (Crant, 2000, 2003; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) and an act of overcoming risk in order to positively change status quo (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Improvement-oriented voice is exhibited to those within the organization, usually up the hierarchy. Although it may be a response to frustration or sense of injustice and may be both in-role or extra-role, improvement-oriented voice constructively challenges the status quo with an intention to affect change (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Improvement-oriented voice (from hereon improvement-oriented voice is referred to as voice or employee voice) is particularly crucial for organizations because organizational change is often initiated from suggestions or ideas for improvement.

Speaking up about ideas and suggestions for organizational improvement is an expression of employee creativity and can lead to organizational innovation, which is essential for long-term sustainable survival (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Voice has been studied at the collective level (F. J. Milliken et al., 2003; Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Huang, 2005) and in response to perceived negative stimuli such as job dissatisfaction (Zhou and George, 2001), unethical practices (Near and Miceli, 1985) and unprincipled organizational processes or events (Graham, 1986). A smaller volume of work has examined voice in response to opportunities for organizational improvement and innovation, although more recent work has further focused on improvement-oriented voice.

### **2.2 Fear and risk**

The set of potential suggestions and ideas from employees is often greater than the set of actual communicated employee improvement-oriented voice. Why don't employees voice more often, if voice is beneficial for the organization and for the speaker? One of the primary hindrances to voice is the speaker's fear and perception of risk associated with speaking up. Fear and risk are two psychological underpinnings that may self-sensor potential speakers and prevent latent voice from becoming actual voice. Voice researchers have found that fear of retaliation, tarnished image, and damaged relations are commonly perceived hindrances to voice (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Bringing up an issue that is seen as opposing to management objectives, for example, may result in a label of the speaker as a troublemaker or rebel (F. J. Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Hence, potential speakers may attach negative consequences to communicating with their supervisors, despite having compelling reasons for voice that may benefit the organization. Indeed, employees who do not feel psychologically safe, a belief that it is not harmful to undertake interpersonal risk-taking, are less likely to discuss errors or speak up about suggestions (Detert & Burris, 2007; A. Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

The perception of fear and risk affects a potential speaker's voice calculus, or the weighing of risks and benefits associated with speaking up. In the event that risks outweigh benefits, the employee is likely to withhold voice. On the other hand, if the employee perceives benefits to outweigh risks, she is likely to speak up. Thus, many organizations already have suggestions and ideas within them. But these suggestions and ideas may not be unleashed because of employees' perception that it is risky to speak up.

### 2.3 Content matters

Characteristics of the voice content may impact an employee's voice calculus and how she weighs risks and benefits to speaking up. Findings from voice research suggest that voice content matters in an employee's decision to speak up. Using interview data, Milliken et al. (2003) observed that employees feel more comfortable speaking up about some issues such as work processes than other concerns such as criticizing other personnel. The authors found that issues about ethics or fairness and concerns about a colleague's competence were deemed difficult to bring up to management. In support of the study's findings, Detert and Edmondson (2006) showed that potential speakers judged the degree of psychological safety in speaking up based on the message content.

Managers weighing the decision to propagate voice may also assess employee voice on certain characteristics of the content. Because managerial voice propagation involves speaking up to others in the organization, certain qualities about the content of voice may facilitate or inhibit propagating of employee voice. In other words, *what* suggestion or idea an employee speaks up about may influence whether or not a manager propagates the suggestion or idea to other levels of the organization.

The persuasion literature proposes that a receiver of information may form or change attitudes using both systematic and heuristic processing (Bohner, Moskowitz, & Chaiken, 1995; Chaiken, 1980, 1984). The heuristic-systematic model posits that systematic processing requires more in-depth deliberation of information while heuristic processing is more effortless and automatic (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994). Similarly, the elaboration likelihood model argues that there are both central and peripheral routes to persuasion (R. Petty, Wegener, Chaiken, & Trope, 1999). The central route to attitude change or formation results from attentive consideration of issue-specific reasoning while the peripheral route employs cues about the attitude object to arrive at persuasion. Studies on both heuristic processing and peripheral routes demonstrate that source and message characteristics, cues that require more effortless processing, largely influence the message receiver especially when personal involvement or relevance is low (Chaiken & Eagly, 1983; R. E. Petty et al., 1981). Since the suggestions and ideas originate from employees, managers may have low involvement because they do not automatically champion each and every issue proposed by subordinates. Further, managers may consider filtering of information their in-role responsibility and thus may not devote complete attention to every issue voiced.

Characteristics of the voice content may be heuristics that a manager utilizes for evaluation of employee input. Factors relating to the voice content may quickly and effortlessly indicate value of input or feasibility of suggestions or ideas. For instance, a manager may view suggestions and ideas about internal processes with which he is familiar to be more feasible, and thus more likely to propagate the employee voice to others in the organization. This may be in line with the assertions of persuasion research that external cues not relating to issue-relevant arguments, such as qualities of message content and source, can influence judgments.

Thus, the content of employee voice may affect both the employees' decision to speak up or remain silence, as well as the managers' (voice recipients) decision to propagate employee voice. In other words, the content of employee voice may be antecedents to both voice and managerial voice propagation.

### 3. Methodology

To investigate the typology of voice, surveys were distributed to full-time working professionals to gather data on actual suggestions and ideas voiced by employees. Industries represented included health care, information technology and finance. Those in the information technology sector may be more inclined to speak up more about ideas and suggestions because ideas and suggestions may be key in managing and navigating the rapidly changing technology world. Employees in the health care sector, on the other hand, may be more conservative in expressing voice because it is not typically a sector known for its innovative ideas. The finance sector may stand in between the health care and IT industries as the "middle ground" of employee voice. All three of these industries are represented as a way to delve into industries that may run the spectrum of frequency of employee voice.

Respondents have direct reports and are asked about the last time her direct report proposed a suggestion or idea. Thus, all collected suggestions and ideas are perceived to be actual voice from the perspective of the voice recipient.

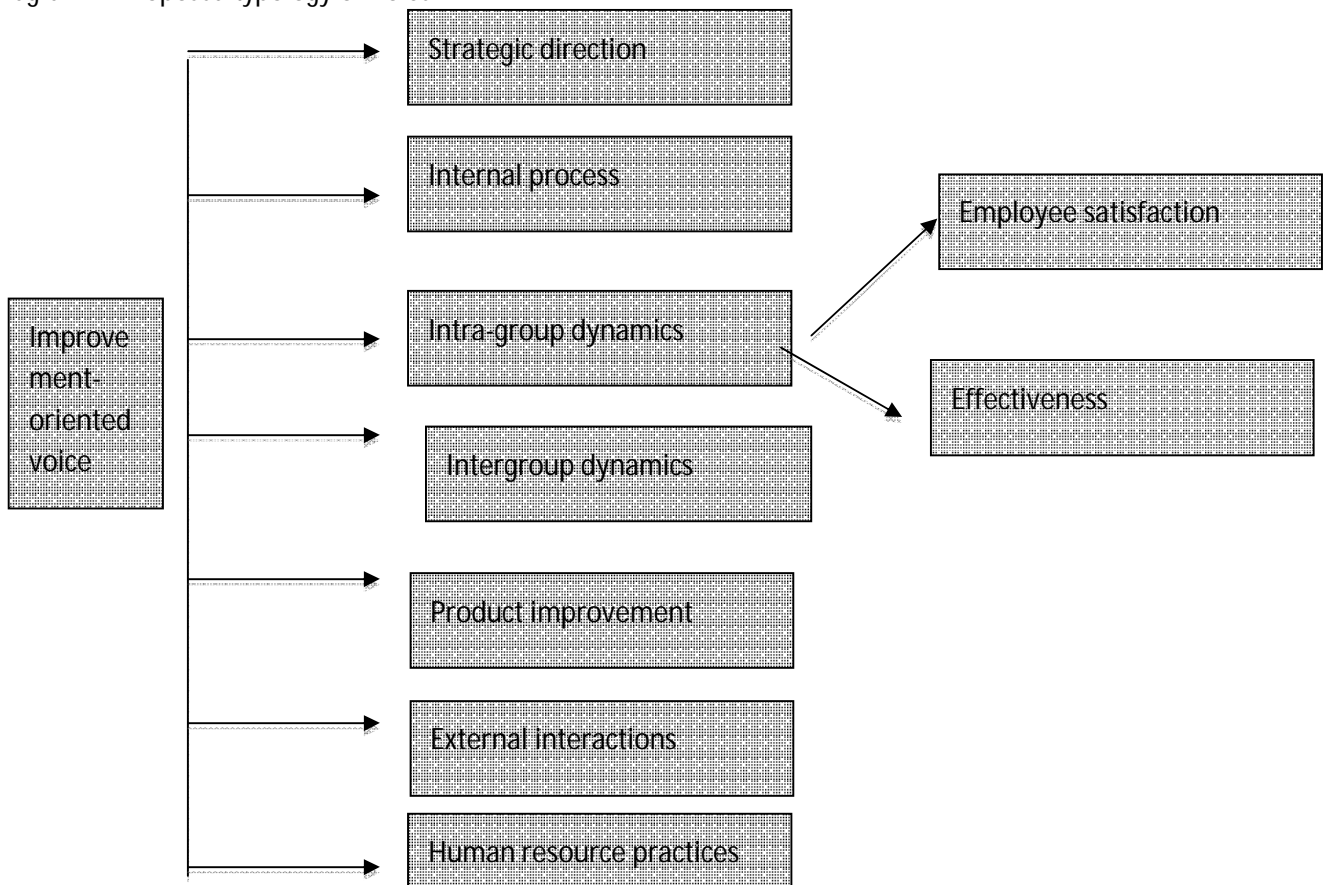
A total of 185 respondents completed the surveys. Only improvement-oriented voice is included in this sample. That is, employee suggestions and ideas must have the intent to improve the organization. Voice that criticizes other employees, for example, is taken out of the sample.

After taking out unusable data (e.g. no suggestion or idea given, non improvement-oriented voice), 134 participants were included in the final sample. The average age is 31.4. Slightly more than half (53%) of the sample was male and 47% were female. The average tenure on the job is 6 years and 3 months. The sample was situated in the middle of the hierarchy as indicated by the average number of levels between participant and CEO (4.7) and the average number of levels between the participant and the lowest level in the organization (2.3).

#### 4. Proposed typology of improvement-oriented voice

Responses were coded into categories based on the content of the suggestion or idea. After four iterations of coding, seven categories were distinct. The following is the proposed typology consisting of the categories of strategic direction, internal processes, intra-group dynamics, intergroup dynamics, product improvement, external relations, and human resource practices:

Diagram 1. Proposed typology of voice



##### 4.1 Strategic direction

One type of improvement-oriented voice concerns suggestions and ideas that attempt to affect the strategic direction of the organization. This type of voice attempts to exert influence by strategically directing the attention of upper management to specific issues that can stimulate potential organizational change (Dutton et al., 2001). The primary purpose of this voice is to affect the longer-term tactical plan of the organization in a positive way. For example, one respondent described a suggestion from his employee:

"Target the Virgin mobile company as 2 potential new sponsors for one of our events." Another respondent "received a suggestion about trying to start a clinical specialty program for amputer patients."

#### **4.2 Internal process**

A second type of voice involves suggestions and ideas that intend to improve the internal processes of the organization or group. This type of voice appears most frequently. The main goal of these suggestions or ideas is to improve process effectiveness or increase employee satisfaction. Thus, there are two sub-categories of internal process voice – effectiveness and employee satisfaction. Some internal process voice attempts to enhance process effectiveness. Other internal process voice strives to improve satisfaction of employees. For example, an internal process effectiveness voice described by a manager: "[My] employee suggested to reorganize the software database for easier lookup and so that pieces of the library do not get lost." This employee is recommending to change an existing way of database compilation in order to streamline the process. An internal process employee satisfaction voice strives to increase employee satisfaction as an outcome of implementing the suggestion or idea. One example given by a respondent: "A nursing staff suggested doing a unit-employee recognition as a corrective action in the recent employee satisfaction report." In this example, the employee is proposing an idea to give recognition to employees in order to increase employee satisfaction. Neither the employee nor the process is necessarily more effective upon implementation of voice.

#### **4.3 Intra-group dynamics**

A third type of voice is associated with suggestions and ideas that address organizational issues within the employee's own group or team. These suggestions and ideas focus on the forces within the employee's group or team and strive to enhance group dynamics. This type of voice can address significant group rifts, or can further enhance currently positive group dynamics. One example of the latter: "I work for a startup. We are about to release a product. My direct report suggested we should have a small celebration to mark the event."

#### **4.4 Intergroup dynamics**

Another type of voice entails suggestions and ideas that address organizational issues between two or more groups or teams within the organization. These suggestions and ideas deal with group dynamics *between* and *among* multiple groups in the organization. Often, they implicate power and politics between and among the groups. An example given by a manager in the finance sector: "Our office should have equal rights and power as the NJ office. But since the NY office is smaller, we don't."

#### **4.5 Product improvement**

The fifth type of voice involves suggestions and ideas that strive to enhance an existing product or service by changing some part of the product or service. This type of voice is the most second most frequent, preceded by internal process voice. These suggestions and ideas focus on improving a physical product or service. One respondent describes his subordinate's voice: "[My employee] came up with an innovative idea to fit a GUM flash memory device in an SOIC package. This allowed us to meet the needs of the customer."

#### **4.6 External interaction**

External interaction voice is suggestions and ideas that relate to interaction with the organization's external players, such as one's suppliers, clients or customers. This type of voice deals with people outside of the organization, though it does not necessarily have to originate from employees who are tasked with managing external relations. That is, employees who are not external-facing may also propose external interaction voice. One example of external interaction voice: "One of my subordinates suggested that we give one of our suppliers a negative feedback survey to reflect concerns we had securing a recent contract."

#### **4.7 Human resource practices**

The final type of voice is associated with suggestions and ideas that strive to change or improve existing human resources practices and policies.

A respondent described a subordinate's suggestion to "[introduce] the option of part-time work for new parents, i.e. after parental leave if the [employee] would prefer to continue on a part-time capacity for an indefinite period of time, they should legally have this option."

This type of voice most likely entails managerial voice propagation, or passing along of the employee voice to others in the organization, since the immediate supervisor (voice recipient) may not have the resources and power to implement the voice. That is, other players' involvement is likely necessary to bring the suggestions and ideas to fruition.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Voice researchers have identified a number of antecedents to improvement-oriented voice, though there is a lack of consensus on some important leadership and contextual variables. For example, leadership behavior such as manager openness to voice is shown to lead to voice (e.g. Detert & Burris, 2007), but transformational leadership does not exhibit correlation with voice. Perhaps different types of voice may have different sets of antecedents for both employee voice and managerial voice propagation. That is, transformational leadership may affect specific types of voice but not all improvement-oriented voice. In particular, internal process, product improvement and intra-group voice may be impacted by transformational leadership because of these suggestions and ideas may involve the internal organization most intimately.

Psychological safety, the organizational climate that signals to employees that engaging in interpersonal risk will not invite personal harm, is also shown to correlate positive to voice. Organizations that are more psychologically safety enable employees to speak up more frequently and lead to more organizational learning. Do psychologically unsafe organizations have voice from employees? How then do organizations that are not psychological safe invite employee voice? The key may be the delineating the different types of voice. For example, organizations with low psychological safety may still have improvement-oriented voice relating to external interactions since these suggestions and ideas involve members outside of the organization and may be perceived to be less risky. If there is indeed a relationship between external interaction voice and lack of psychological safety, organizations can utilize external interaction voice as a starting point and encourage employees to speak up about other types of voice.

Rather than treating improvement-oriented voice as a collective category, it may be useful to further unpack the typology of voice in order to delve deeper into understanding both employee and managerial voice and silence.

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