

Introduction

Employee voice has been sharply discussed since 1970 when Albert Hirschman first coined the term in his book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Nearly forty years later, the topic is still under scrutiny as researchers attempt to find the best fitting models and methods. This paper intends to give the reader an introductory view defining employee voice, explaining models and frameworks, and discussing the theories as to why employee voice is important. Further, the second half is dedicated to identifying organizational methods and behavior, affecting factors, and the leading benefit for employers that implement a high level of employee voice mechanisms in the workplace.

Defining Employee Voice

In order to understand employee voice, one must first understand participative management. According to Stueart and Moran (2007), participative management focuses on increasing lower level employee empowerment through team building and direct participative methods in order to involve the employee with the decision making of the organization. It has become one of the leading styles of management. Though the importance of empowerment may not seem as though it is relevant, Stueart and Moran (2007) discuss that there is a positive correlation between employee empowerment and better customer service, staff creativity and innovation, and flexibility. By flattening the hierarchical, top-bottom structure through the means of groups or teams and direct participation, employees are able to share in the decision making of an organization. Team and group work involves smaller sets of individuals which may share the duty of being a leader or has one specific team director. In either situation, these employees have the opportunity to take a more direct role in the decision making, thereby leading to a high level of participation. Additionally, it allows for individual accountability and an autonomous satisfaction in one's job.

Employee voice is one of the most important characteristics of employee participation. If it is understood that employee participation is positively related to greater customer service, then it can be stated that employee voice is a defining factor in this equation. While participative management programs can be varied depending on the organization, the amount of intended participation, and the general scope, the underlying theory remains the same, which is that “employees possess sufficient ability, skill, knowledge, and interest to participate in business decisions” (McCabe & Lewin, 1992, p. 112). Though this may contradict the traditional idea that only those that are formally invested with the company should affect decisions, it can be argued that employees spend a significant part of their adult lives as part of an employing organization and that work actually defines the individual (McCall, 2001).

Michael Armstrong (2006) states that there four specific purposes for employee voice. First, it is to articulate individual dissatisfaction with management or the organization. Second, employee voice serves as an expression of collective organization to management. Third, it contributes to management decision making, particularly regarding work organization, quality, and productivity. Last, employee voice demonstrates the mutuality of the employer-employee relationship. Additionally, Gorden (1988b) proves a fifth purpose. He conducted a study with 150 students that confirmed higher employee satisfaction with his or her career and employer when the organizational conditions are conducive to receiving and creating employee voice opportunities. These purposes assist in defining voice and provide a background on which one can base all of the studies and research.

There are many types of employee voice. McCabe and Lewin (1992) discuss four specific types that involve due process for grievance resolution. The first type is the ombudsman, which is similar to a confidant that is designed to sympathetically listen to the grievance and offer help to resolve the problem. The ombudsman acts more like a channel of employee voice, rather than actual employee voice. The authors state that in order for this to be effective, the ombudsman must be intimately

acquainted with the organization and must advocate specifically for the employee. The second type defined by McCabe and Lewin is mediation. Again, the mediator acts as a channel for voice. In this situation, the mediator enters into a dispute between two parties and assists in settling and resolving the problem. He or she does not specifically make the resolving decision, but instead encourages solutions for the employees to ultimately decide. The third type is arbitration and is characterized differently by the fact that the arbitrator can make the final, binding decision. Arbitration is usually seen as the last step in a grievance procedure and must fully comply with employee standards, policies, and procedures as laid in the handbook. Last, McCabe and Lewin discuss tribunals and peer reviews. Like arbitration, the final decision is binding and must be in scope of the employee handbook. The advantage to these internal tribunals is that employees generally prefer to be judged by a “jury of their peers” rather than an administrator or manager.

Beyond the grievance procedure, there are two other types of voice: representative participation and upward problem solving (Armstrong, 2006). Representative participation is characterized by collective representation. It involves a formal mechanism that allows for employee representation regarding matters of mutual interest and work more like a partnership between employer and employee that tackle issues together in a cooperative manner. Trade unions or other staff associations are examples of this representative participation. Employee voice is heard, but it is through an organized channel. Upward problem solving involves more of a teambuilding perspective. It involves two-way communication between managers and staff or groups. This communication is characterized by suggestion schemes rather than partner schemes where employees independently suggest ideas or changes and the employer generally rewards them. It also includes the application of attitude surveys which seeks the employee opinion via questionnaires. Employee voice is more communicative based on a direct level from employee to employer in this situation. Instead of formal representation, the main means of expressing voice is through suggestion forms and questionnaires.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are two noteworthy frameworks that seek to explain and predict employee voice. The first being the two-spectrum Active/Passive and Constructive/Destructive model by Gorden (1988a) (see Figure 1). This model states that there are four quadrants in which employee voice can land. Active constructive is characterized by making suggestions, union bargaining, and principled dissent. It is also ordered by increasing intensity. Passive constructive is ordered by decreasing intensity and it involves attentive listening, quiet non-verbal support, and unobtrusive cooperation. Active destructive is also ordered by increasing intensity and consists of verbal complaining to coworkers, verbal aggression, and antagonistic exit. Passive destructive, like passive constructive, is ordered by decreasing intensity and entails murmurings, apathy, silence, and withdrawal.

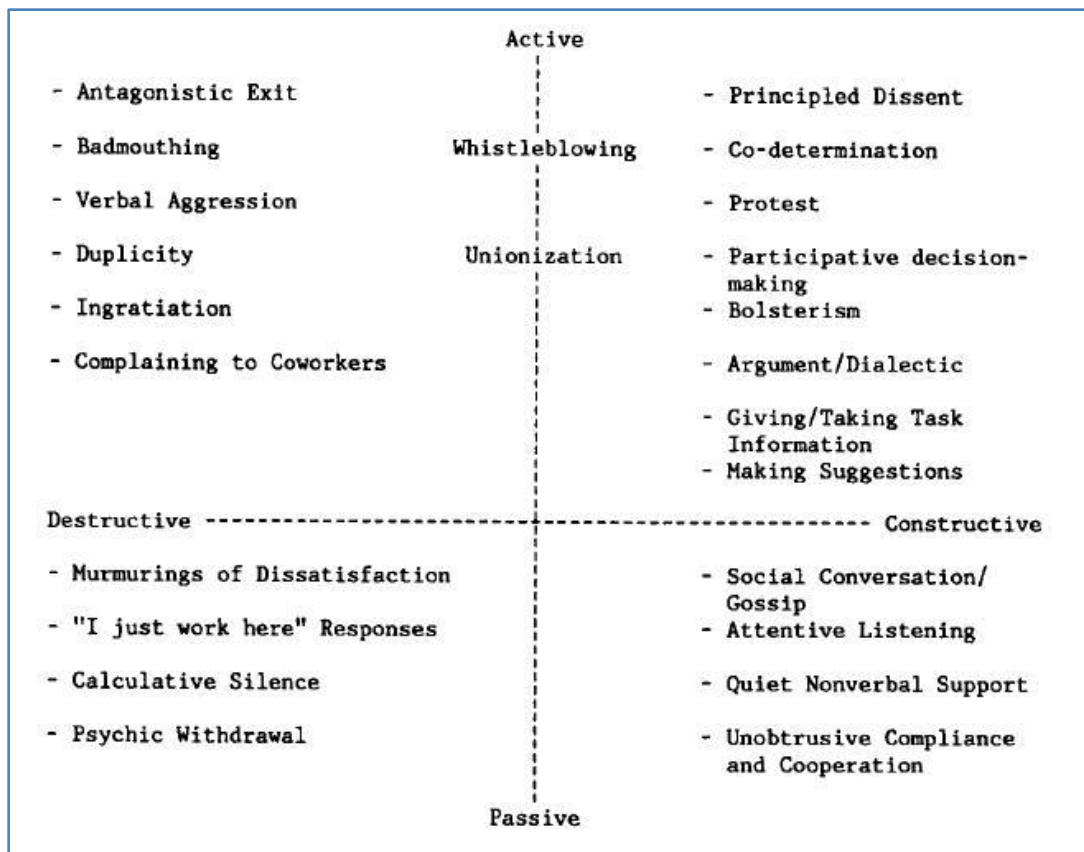


Figure 1 Gorden's Two-Spectrum Model (1988a)

The second model is presented by Van Dyne, Soon, and Botero (2003) and considers the motivation behind voice or silence as the driving point towards the behavior (see Figure 2). Van Dyne, et al., focus on three employee motives (disengaged, self-protective, and other-oriented) and three types of silence and voice (acquiescent, defensive, and ProSocial). This model can be used to explain why employees react in a specific way, both verbally and nonverbally. This framework hinges on the point that silence and voice are not opposites, but simply multi-dimensional concepts. The three types of voice can be easily defined. Acquiescent Voice involves the verbal expression of information based on an employee's attitude that they cannot make a difference in the organization. Defensive Voice is the verbal expression of information based on fear and protecting the self. ProSocial Voice consists of verbally expressing information based on cooperative motives. These are similar to the three types of silence. Acquiescent Silence entails passive withholding of information due to a feeling of being unable to make a difference. Defensive Silence is the withholding of verbal information due to a personal fear of the organizational consequences of speaking out. ProSocial Silence involves the withholding of information based purely on altruistic motives with the goal of benefiting the organization.

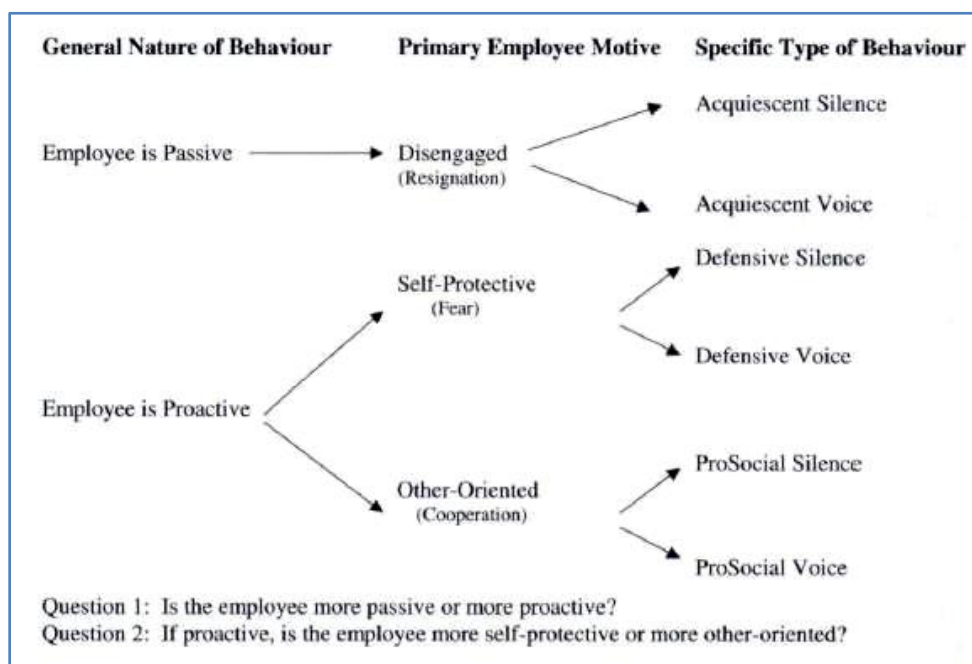


Figure 2
 Van Dyne, et al., (2003)
 Silence & Voice Model

There are two studies that directly support Van Dyne's (2003) model and framework. First, in a confidential survey of over 3,000 individuals, employees revealed that the more open a leader is, the safer an employee felt to voice his or her opinion (Detert & Burris, 2007). The risk that was associated with speaking out against an employer must be neutralized in order to obtain an employee voice. The second study was conducted in order to predict the likeliness of employee voice (Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992). Questions were asked to evaluate the supervisor's or leader's ability to manage employee voice (or be a "voice manager") and the study found that if an employee found their voice manager to be approachable and responsive, he or she were more likely to voice an opinion.

In addition the models and frameworks above, there have been many publications that seek to discuss why employee voice is critical to the employing organization. In particular, two specific theories have arisen. The first theory involves a moral and ethical perspective while the second theory is more centered on a political perspective.

The first theorist who discussed a moral need for employee vocal expression was Gorden (1988a) who stated "Communication ... is a fundamental social tool. Expression of voice is rooted in human survival" (p. 291). Gorden wrote that there is a universal need to express oneself. Twenty years later, Van Buren and Greenwood (2008) agree with Gorden and expand the moral rights argument. The authors place the loss of employee voice on the employer as a business ethics issue on the basis that a well-ordered society is comprised of "social institutions within which human beings may develop their moral powers and become fully cooperating members of a society of free and equal citizens" (Van Buren & Greenwood, 2008, p. 212). Additionally, as a part of the employee-employer contract, Van Buren and Greenwood state that the managing organization owes the employee the moral right to voice opinions and participate in the decision making in return for the employee's work.

From a political perspective, Gorden (1988a) believes that human voice falls under basic rights. Gorden quotes John Locke's belief that an individual owns his or her labor and states that an employee robbed of voicing opinions regarding the decisions that affect the employee's labor is a breach of this basic human contract. Additionally, McCall (2001) argues that employee participation is a derivative human right, similar to the right to property, as it is instrumental in achieving other rights, such as freedom and democracy. McCall defends employee rights on five grounds that are both political and moral. First, the right to employee voice is simply a part of being treated with dignity. Industry treats employees as "anonymous and replaceable human resources that are to be managed for the goal of corporate profit" (p. 197) and fails to see the human dignity in their employees. McCall argues that the average employee spends one third to one half of their adult lives at their place of employment. Jobs and careers establish an individual's social worth and help people define themselves. McCall also uses fairness as grounds to defend employee rights, stating that the managing organization must have a commitment to equality and accountability. Third, self-respect is discussed, as individuals base their perception of self-worth by the institutional relationships they have cultivated. When employees begin to burn themselves out, they in turn begin to disassociate themselves from the workplace. If the organization allows participation in decision-making, it reaffirms the employee's sense of influence. Fourth, McCall argues that by not providing employee voice mechanisms, the organization increases the stressors on the employee and thereby increases the possibility of physical and mental health problems. Last, McCall believes that the implementation of employee rights is a political stand for the implementation of democracy, both in the work place and in the country. McCall states:

"Only by increasing citizens' sense of power over more local and immediate aspects of their lives will we be able to reverse trends toward voter apathy and disengagement from active participation in the political process. Of course, the workplace is a prime example of the kind of environment where persons can learn lessons either of impotence or efficacy. Hence, participation mechanisms can be instrumental in protecting the health of democratic politics by encouraging people toward greater civic involvement." (pp. 198-199)

Organizational Methods

There are many methods that can be used to implement employee voice mechanisms. One of the most consistent methods that reach across the majority of the researched and referenced literature is one of administrative and managerial openness. In order to achieve this openness, there are many leadership behavioral and environmental traits that can be adopted.

Gorden (1988a) states that an organization should first transform itself from “space to place” (p. 293), shifting into an environment where employees and managers are linked by a common place, a common language, and common experiences. Once an open environment has been achieved, it is vital to also create an open organization that encourages dialogue. Organizations should encourage individual voice, make visible efforts to appoint employee voice channels, create group speak-up sessions with supervisors, provide question and answer columns with administrators in company newsletters, and offer other methods to increase communication from the bottom to the top. Additionally, Gorden suggests that employers give their workers stock and/or ownership plans in order to cultivate a genuine feeling of loyalty to the organization.

Armstrong’s (2006) upward problem solving theory regarding employee voice is based on a communicative environment between staff and administration. As discussed previously on page three, Armstrong utilized the attitude survey method in order to obtain feedback from employees. These attitude surveys can provide extensive information regarding employee work preferences, predicting potential problems, and evaluating job satisfaction, commitment, and morale. Armstrong gives four methods of conducting attitude surveys: the use of questionnaires, the use of interviews, the combined use of questionnaires and interviews, and the use of focus groups. These attitude surveys also help establish the forms of voice that seem appropriate for the organization. When implementing a

participation management program, there is always a level of planning that is first initiated. Using attitude surveys to help plan the program is an effective method to gather information regarding what employees want.

Another method is to increase the strength of identification employees feel with the organization. In a study by Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008), it was found that the highest amount of employee voice was rendered when an employee felt a high level of personal control and a strong organizational identification. Employee voice was also high when an individual felt either completely in control or completely not in control with a weak organizational identification. Those who have a strong organizational identification and low personal control offered the least amount of employee voice. These results can be interpreted as individuals who do not feel a strong attachment to their employer willingly speak out when they feel as though they are in a position of high power or when they feel they are in a position of extremely low power. If there is a strong organizational attachment and an individual has a low amount of employee voice, it may be explained by the Van Dyne (2003) model. The employee may feel afraid to speak out or may feel that their silence helps the organization. The most impressive result of the study, however, was that the employees who felt that they had some control in their work life and also had a strong identification with their employer also had the highest amount of employee voice. This result can be interpreted that employees are willing to participate if they feel like they are valued and also value the organization. Gordon (1988a) predicted this result twenty years earlier when discussing conformity. He stated that conformity does not mean mindless obedience, but that employees and employers should conform their goals and objectives to match. "The benefits of high identification and commitment to the organization are a manager's dream: low absenteeism, little turnover, no internal theft, no union disruption, sacrificial effort, and boosterism" (p 287).

Another organizational method that will help increase employee voice and satisfaction is identified in the Value-Expressive model by McFarlin and Sweeney (1996). In their study, the authors found that voicing an opinion on a decision was very important to employees, regardless of whether the end decision agreed with their opinion or not. This is exhibited in the following model:

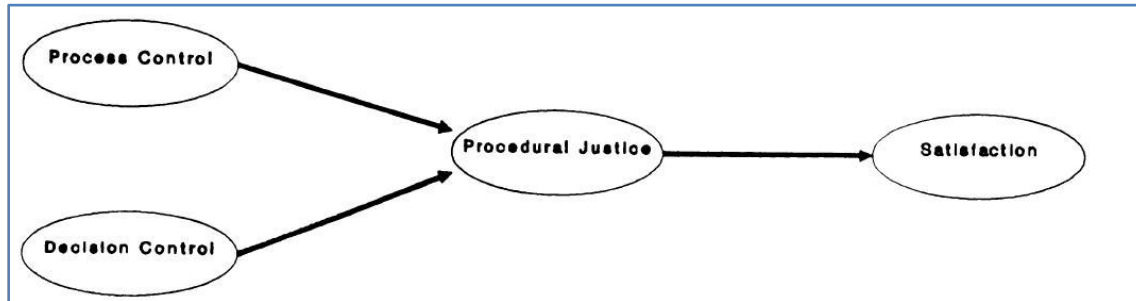


Figure 3 McFarlin & Sweeney, 1996, Value-Expressive Model

Organizations can utilize this method by allowing employees to actively voice opinions on decisions that affect them.

The last organizational method that can be implemented is the feeling of conformity. Gordon (1988a) discusses that conformity does not necessarily mean mindless obedience, but that employees and employers can conform their goals and objectives to match. This coincides with the organizational identification idea (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), despite the twenty year difference. “The benefits of high identification and commitment to the organization are a manager’s dream: low absenteeism, little turnover, no internal theft, no union disruption, sacrificial effort, and boosterism.”

Employee Retention

The largest benefit that has been studied when implementing high voice mechanisms has been a better retention rate. Albert Hirschman (1970) began the study into defining and understanding employee voice. He stated that when employees have a problem or grievance with the organization in

question, they either voice their opinion or they leave. This has been the basis for many studies and two, in particular, will be discussed here.

In 1986, Daniel Spencer conducted two studies. The first study concluded that the more an organization gives employees the opportunity to voice dissatisfaction over their work with the goal of changing the situation, the greater the likelihood that its employees will remain with the organization. The second study found that high numbers of voice mechanisms are associated with high levels of employee's expectancies for problem resolution and high perceived effectiveness of an organization's procedures for problem resolution. Overall, the study concludes that if a high number of voice mechanisms are present, then employees are generally satisfied with the organization and will remain at their position rather than quit.

In a second study, a conclusion was found that if a collective voice was represented (in some cases, a union, in others, teams or other work associations), then the amount of exits were reduced (Batt, Colvin, & Keefe, 2002). The study was done out of a realization that high quit rates cause great financial strain on a company both because they raise labor costs and because they lower organizational performances. The authors also noted that as unions are beginning to decrease in the workplace, companies are beginning to change their tactics to mimic some of the union methods to continue encouraging collective voice. In particular, the study focused on non-union companies that implemented team-based work systems, direct participation in bottom level decisions, and dispute resolution procedures to solve grievances.

Conclusion

Employee voice is an integral factor in studying participative management. From an organizational point of view, it would be in the company's best interest to involve a participative management program that includes several employee voice mechanisms. By encouraging employee

voice in the workplace through various methods, an organization can fulfill an ethical and political need while also fortifying their bottom line by avoiding high exit and resignation rates. Employee voice takes many forms both individually and collectively and also verbally and non-verbally. The models that have been published seem to have relevant and historic value to the subject and many studies that have been conducted verify the theories. Additionally, the idea behind employee voice seems to be a timeless concept, as many of the publications throughout the past forty years have agreed with each other.

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