

# Public versus Private Voice

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## Valorization Addendum

In recent years, there were multiple cases in which whistle-blowers have brought media attention to major shortcomings of companies, government departments, and non-profit organizations. It would be naïve to suggest that openness and constructive responses to employee voice could have addressed all of the fundamental issues underlying these scandals. However, in many cases, a willingness to listen to employee voice, would have given organizations the chance to take steps to address problems away from the glare of cameras and social media. Many of the individuals who leaked stories to the press did so as a result of their frustration with internal processes that did not deliver appropriate action. While these may be dramatic examples of organizations resisting employee voice, they do demonstrate, at the extreme end of the spectrum, the destructive consequences of environments in which contrary opinions are not welcomed.

In fact, although many practitioners develop programs and tools focusing on improving communication up and down the hierarchy, today's organizations still often face problems with fostering open and transparent communication at the workplace, particularly when it comes to such challenging forms of communication as employee upward voice. One finds many examples of organizations that did not manage voice well, and, in consequence, experienced serious problems or faced disasters. Prominent examples are the Enron scandal, the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, and the Asiana 214 airplane crash. Hence, although everybody advocates the importance of being responsive to employees' ideas and opinions, in reality managers, or people with power and resources to act upon upward voice, often disregard employee voice or react defensively to it. In return, employees who may possess critical knowledge grow reluctant to speak up or remain unsure about how to speak up most effectively (i.e., that they are heard and not punished). Consequently, better understanding of employee voice and managers' reactions to employee voice is highly relevant for today's organizations. It is important to note that, although in this dissertation voice is primarily discussed in a business context, issues that I address are relevant for any organization with a hierarchical structure (e.g., governmental organizations, educational institutions, etc.). Insights from this dissertation have

meaningful practical implications for managers, employees, and human resources specialists.

For managers, this dissertation highlights the important role of the context in how they respond to upward voice. In particular, when reacting defensively to employee voice in public, a manager not only may lose the benefit of this specific piece of input, but also discourage other employees present from speaking up. This may have negative implications for team functioning. This is because when voicing publically employees likely expose other team members to new perspectives that they might not have previously considered, thus stimulating more in-depth discussions (De Dreu & West, 2001; Nemeth et al., 2001). In contrast, voice that is privately expressed in the confines of closed-door one-on-one meetings with the manager can fail to similarly mobilize collective contemplation of issues (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). In addition, employees waiting for a private opportunity to express their ideas or concerns may speak up too late when their input is no longer useful or can no longer be implemented (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Thus, managers should be wary of the fact that by disregarding or discouraging public voice, they let their concerns about social image come in the way of more effective team functioning.

Furthermore, the finding that managers react particularly negatively to public voice from employees who are outside the loyal circle of confidants illustrates to managers that they are likely to miss out on potentially contrary viewpoints to which they might not otherwise have access. This is because such employees are more likely to have non-overlapping perspectives vis-à-vis the manager (e.g., Granovetter, 1983).

For employees, this dissertation also provides insights into the tactics that they may use when wishing to effectively raise suggestions, ideas, or concerns. If employees aim for bringing about change, they will be more likely to succeed if they speak up in public rather than in private. Yet, employees should be aware that public voice might trigger image-related concerns in managers, as a results of which the manager may initially react defensively by showing low willingness to endorse such voice. Hence, we recommend that when speaking up in public, employees be especially careful in order to assure that their voice does not come across to managers as criticism of their prior actions or decisions. One way to do so is to invest more time in developing closer and trusting relationship with one's manager. Furthermore, employees who are in the loyal circle of confidants to the manager may find it useful to know that their public voice is less threatening for managers; thus, they, more than other employees, should feel confident in expressing their voice in the presence of other people. This is a particularly important insight because, as we have seen in Chapter 4, regardless of whether managers come across as open and supportive of voice or not, high LMX employees typically prefer to voice in private settings, thereby failing to utilize the benefits of public discussions.

For human resource specialists, these findings highlight the need to foster an organizational culture in which both managers and employees perceive public voice to be normative. In this regard, we suggest that human resource specialists use the findings from this dissertation to develop specific training programs for both managers and employees which would foster such a culture. An important element in these programs should be the clear communication and explanation of the benefits and drawbacks associated with public voice. This may help reduce the possible negative effect of individuals' implicit theories about public voice. Furthermore, in such programs, managers should actively practice various techniques of how to actively solicit voice (e.g., organizing regular feedback meetings), while employees should discuss and practice the do's and don'ts of speaking up in public settings. Next to that, such training programs may include intervention programs directed at reducing managers' concerns about their social standing in the group. Finally, we believe that both managers and employees would greatly benefit from having regular coaching sessions in which they can analyse and discuss their experiences of public and private voice events. Development of such training programs seems especially relevant because too many managers often assume that having "open-door policies" is sufficient to motivate employees to share their ideas or concerns (Detert & Burris, 2016). In fact, such passive initiatives typically fall short, and organizations need to learn to create an environment where employees are comfortable in sharing their input and opinions in public and private settings.

Finally, insights from this dissertation are also relevant for educational purposes. Lecturers in business and management schools and universities can incorporate findings from this dissertation in courses focused on organizational behaviour, leadership, effective communication, and human resources management. Today's business and management students are tomorrow's employees and managers and discussing with them that the setting in which voice occurs matters will prepare them to be more effective in managing and utilizing upward input.

To conclude, findings from this dissertation provide insights to employees, managers, and human resources specialists on the relevance of the social setting in which voice occurs. The recognition of differences in perception and consequences of public versus private voice is a small but an important step in building an environment in which the potential of upward voice is used to its best effects.

