

Employee Voice

Key concepts and terms

- Attitude survey
- Improvement group
- Joint consultation
- Quality circle
- Employee voice
- Involvement
- Participation
- Suggestion scheme

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- The meaning of employee voice
- Expression of employee voice
- Attitude surveys
- Effectiveness of employee involvement and participation
- EU Directives affecting employee voice procedures
- The forms of employee voice
- Joint consultation
- Suggestion schemes
- Planning for voice

Introduction

The phrase ‘employee voice’ refers to the say employees have in matters of concern to them in their organization. It describes a form of two-way dialogue that allows employees to influence events at work and includes the processes of involvement, participation, upward problem solving and upward communication. This chapter covers the meaning and purpose of employee voice and how it is expressed.

The meaning of employee voice

As defined by Boxall and Purcell (2003): ‘Employee voice is the term increasingly used to cover a whole variety of processes and structures which enable, and sometimes empower employees, directly and indirectly, to contribute to decision-making in the firm.’ Employee voice can be seen as ‘the ability of employees to influence the actions of the employer’ (Millward *et al*, 1992). The concept covers the provision of opportunities for employees to register discontent, express complaints or grievances and modify the power of management, and sometimes brings collective and individual techniques into one framework. Direct employee voice involves contacts between management and employees without the involvement of trade unions. Union voice is expressed through representatives and can be power-based.

Dundon *et al* (2004) suggested the following meanings of direct and union employee voice.

SOURCE REVIEW

The meaning of employee voice, Dundon *et al* (2004)

- Expression of individual dissatisfaction raised with line manager or through grievance procedure.
- Expression of collective dissatisfaction raised by trade unions through collective bargaining or industrial action.
- Contribution to management decision making through upward problem solving, suggestion schemes and attitude surveys.
- Demonstration of mutuality through partnership agreements, joint consultative committees and works councils.

The forms of employee voice

The elements of employee voice are:

- Participation, which is about employees playing a greater part in the decision-making process by being given the opportunity to influence management decisions and to contribute to the improvement of organizational performance. As Williams and Adam-Smith (2006) explain, the term ‘participation’ refers to arrangements that give workers some influence over organizational and workplace decisions.
- Involvement, which is the process through which management allows employees to discuss with them issues that affect them. Williams and Adam-Smith (2006) suggest that this term is most usefully applied to management initiatives that are designed to further the flow of communication at work as a means of enhancing the organizational commitment of employees.

As defined by Marchington *et al* (2001), these elements of employee voice can be categorized as representative participation and upward problem solving.

Representative participation

- Joint consultation – a formal mechanism that provides the means for management to consult employee representatives on matters of mutual interest (discussed in more detail below).
- Partnership schemes – these emphasize mutual gains and tackling issues in a spirit of cooperation rather than through traditional, adversarial relationships.
- European Works Councils – these may be set up across European sites as required by EU legislation.
- Collective representation – the role of trade unions or other forms of staff association in collective bargaining and representing the interests of individual employees and groups of employees. This includes the operation of grievance procedures.

Upward problem solving

- Upward communication, which is any means through which employees can make representations to management about their concerns through their representatives, through established channels (consultative committees, grievance procedures, ‘speak-up’ programmes, etc) or informally.
- Attitude surveys – seeking the opinions of staff through questionnaires (discussed in more detail below).

- Suggestion schemes – the encouragement of employees to make suggestions, often accompanied by rewards for accepted ideas (discussed in more detail below).
- Project teams – getting groups of employees together with line managers to develop new ideas, processes, services or products or to solve problems (quality circles and improvement groups come into this category, although the former have often failed to survive as a specific method of involvement).

The framework for employee voice

The framework for employee voice has been modelled by Marchington *et al* (2001) as shown in Figure 56.1.

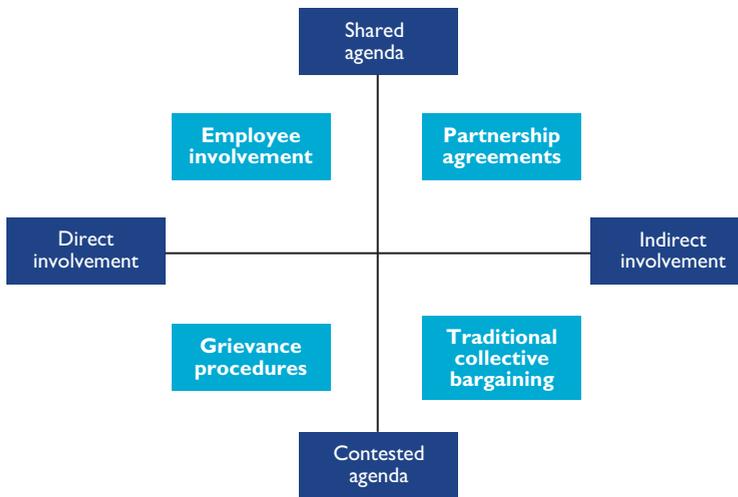


Figure 56.1 A framework for employee voice

This framework identifies two dimensions of voice: 1) individual employees, and 2) collective – union and other representation. The shared agenda of involvement and partnership is a form of upward problem solving. This is on the same axis as the contested agenda of grievances and collective bargaining. But these are not absolutes. Organizations will have tendencies toward shared or contested agendas just as there will be varying degrees of direct and indirect involvement, although they are unlikely to have partnership and traditional collective bargaining at the same time. As Kochan *et al* (1986) point out, one of the strongest factors affecting the choice of approach to employee voice is the values held by management towards employees and their unions.

Expression of employee voice

The degree to which employees have a voice will vary considerably. At one end of the scale there will be unilateral management and employees will have no voice at all. At the other end, employees might have complete self-management and control as in a cooperative, although this is very rare. In between, the steps in the degree to which employees have voice, as defined by Boxall and Purcell (2003), are as follows.

SOURCE REVIEW

The degrees to which employees have voice, Boxall and Purcell (2003)

- Little voice – information provided.
- Downward – right to be told.
- Some – opportunity to make suggestions.
- Two way – consulted during decision making.
- Two way plus – consulted at all stages of decision making and implementation.
- A lot – the right to delay a decision.
- Power to affect outcome – the right to veto a decision.
- Substantial – equality or co-determination in decision making.

Levels of employee voice

Involvement and participation takes various forms at different levels in an enterprise, as described below.

The *job level* involves team leaders and their teams, and the processes include the communication of information about work and the interchange of ideas about how the work should be done. These processes are essentially informal.

The *management level* can involve sharing information and decision making about issues that affect the way in which work is planned and carried out, and working arrangements and conditions. There are limits. Management as a whole, and individual managers, must retain authority to do what their function requires. Involvement does not imply anarchy; but it does require some degree of willingness on the part of management to share its decision-making powers. At this level, involvement and participation may become more formalized, through consultative committees, briefing groups or other joint bodies involving management and employees or their representatives.

At the *policy-making level*, where the direction in which the business is going is determined, total participation would imply sharing the power to make key decisions. This is very seldom practised in the UK, although there may be processes for communicating information on proposed plans (which would almost certainly not reveal proposals for acquisitions or disinvestments or anything else where commercial security is vital) and discussing the implications of those plans.

At the *ownership level*, participation implies a share in the equity, which is not meaningful unless the workers have sufficient control through voting rights to determine the composition of the board. This is not a feature of the British employee relations scene.

At one end of the scale, management makes decisions unilaterally; at the other end, in theory, but never in practice except in a worker's cooperative (almost non-existent in the UK), workers decide unilaterally. Between these extremes there is a range of intermediate points, as shown in Figure 56.2. The point on this scale at which participation should or can take place at any level in an organization depends on the attitudes, willingness and enthusiasm of both management and employees. Management may be reluctant to give up too much of its authority except under pressure from the unions (which is less likely today), or from EC Directives on worker consultation.

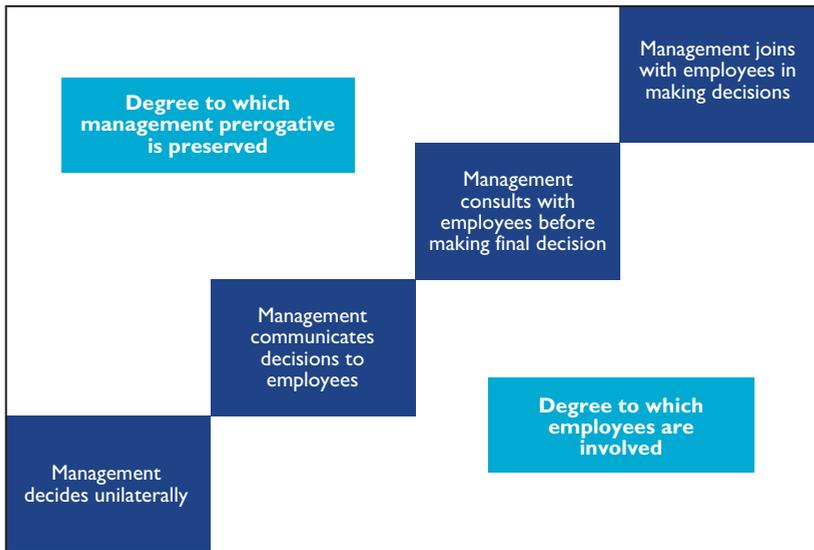


Figure 56.2 Levels of employee voice

Factors affecting choice

Research carried out by Marchington *et al* (1992) identified the following factors that influenced employers to implement employee voice initiatives.

Factors influencing employers to implement employee voice initiatives, Marchington *et al* (1992)

- Information and education – a desire to ‘educate’ employees more fully about aspects of the business and to convince them of the ‘logic’ of management’s actions.
- Secure enhanced employee contributions – seeking employee ideas and using them to improve performance.
- Handling conflict at work and promoting stability – providing a safety-valve for the expression of employees’ views.
- A mechanism for channelling employee anxieties and misgivings without their resorting to the disputes procedure and industrial action.

Joint consultation

Joint consultation enables managers and employee representatives to meet on a regular basis in order to exchange views, to make good use of members’ knowledge and expertise, and to deal with matters of common interest that are not the subject of collective bargaining. Meaningful consultation involves the actions by management set out below.

Meaningful consultation

- Tell employees what management proposes (not intends) to do.
- Give employees sufficient time to respond to the proposed action.
- Give consideration to the employees’ response.
- Explain fully the response of management to the employees’ view.

For joint consultation to work well it is first necessary to define, discuss and agree its objectives. These should be related to tangible and significant aspects of the job, the process of management, or the formulation of policies that affect the interests of employees. They should not deal only with peripheral matters such as welfare, social amenities or ‘the quality of the sausages in the staff restaurant’. Consultation should take place before decisions are made. Management must believe in and must be seen to believe in involving employees. Actions

speak louder than words and management should demonstrate that it will put into effect the joint decisions made during discussions. The unions must also believe in participation as a genuine means of giving them voice and advancing the interests of their members, and not simply as a way of getting more power. They should show by their actions that they are prepared to support unpopular decisions to which they have been a party.

Joint consultation machinery should be in line with any existing systems of negotiation and representation. It should not be supported by management as a possible way of reducing the powers of the union. If this naïve approach is taken, it will fail – it always does. Joint consultation should be regarded as a process of integrative bargaining complementary to the distributive bargaining that takes place in joint negotiating committees. Consultative committees should always relate to a defined working unit, should never meet unless there is something specific to discuss, and should always conclude their meetings with agreed points that are implemented quickly.

Employee and management representatives should be properly briefed and trained and have all the information they require. Managers and team leaders should be kept in the picture and, as appropriate, involved in the consultation process – it is clearly highly undesirable for them to feel that they have been left out.

Attitude surveys

Attitude surveys are a valuable way of involving employees by seeking their views on matters that concern them. Attitude surveys can provide information on the preferences of employees, give warning on potential problem areas, diagnose the cause of particular problems and compare levels of job satisfaction, commitment and morale in different parts of the organization.

Methods of conducting attitude surveys

There are four methods of conducting attitude surveys.

1. By the use of structured questionnaires

These can be issued to all or a sample of employees. The questionnaires may be standardized ones, such as the Brayfield and Rothe Index of Job Satisfaction, or they may be developed specially for the organization. The advantage of using standardized questionnaires is that they have been thoroughly tested and in many cases norms are available against which results can be compared. Additional questions especially relevant to the company can be added to the standard list. A tailor-made questionnaire can be used to highlight particular issues, but it may be advisable to obtain professional help from an experienced psychologist, who can carry out

the skilled work of drafting and pilot-testing the questionnaire and interpreting the results. Questionnaires have the advantage of being relatively cheap to administer and analyse, especially when there are large numbers involved. Many organizations use electronic means (the intranet) to seek the views of employees generally or on particular issues. Examples of attitude surveys are given in Appendices A and B.

2. By the use of interviews

These may be ‘open-ended’ or in-depth interviews in which the discussion is allowed to range quite freely. Or they may be semi-structured in that there is a checklist of points to be covered, although the aim of the interviewer should be to allow discussion to flow around the points so that the frank and open views of the individual are obtained. Alternatively, and more rarely, interviews can be highly structured so that they become no more than the spoken application of a questionnaire. Individual interviews are to be preferred because they are more likely to be revealing, but they are expensive and time-consuming and not so easy to analyse. Discussions through ‘focus groups’ (ie groups of employees convened to focus their attention on particular issues) are a quicker way of reaching a large number of people, but the results are not so easy to quantify and some people may have difficulty in expressing their views in public.

3. By a combination of questionnaire and interview

This is the ideal approach because it combines the quantitative data from the questionnaire with the qualitative data from the interviews. It is always advisable to accompany questionnaires with some in-depth interviews, even if time permits only a limited sample. An alternative approach is to administer the questionnaire to a group of people and then discuss the reactions to each question with the group. This ensures that a quantified analysis is possible but enables the group, or at least some members of it, to express their feelings more fully.

4. By the use of focus groups

A focus group is a representative sample of employees whose attitudes and opinions are sought on issues concerning the organization and their work. The essential features of a focus group are that it is structured, informed, constructive and confidential.

Assessing results

It is an interesting fact that when people are asked directly if they are satisfied with their job, most of them (70 to 90 per cent) will say they are. This is regardless of the work being done and often in spite of strongly held grievances. The probable reason for this phenomenon is that while most people are willing to admit to having grievances – in fact, if invited to complain, they will complain – they may be reluctant to admit, even to themselves, to being dissatisfied with a job that they have no immediate intention of leaving. Many employees have become

reconciled to their work, even if they do not like some aspects of it, and have no real desire to do anything else. So they are, in a sense, satisfied enough to continue, even if they have complaints. Finally, many people are satisfied with their job overall, although they grumble about many aspects of it.

Overall measures of satisfaction do not, therefore, always reveal anything interesting. It is more important to look at particular aspects of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to decide whether or not anything needs to be done. In these circumstances, the questionnaire will indicate only a line to be followed up; it will not provide the answers. Hence the advantage of individual meetings or focus group discussions to explore in depth any issue raised.

Suggestion schemes

Suggestion schemes are established procedures for employees to submit ideas to management with tangible recognition for those suggestions that have merit. They can provide a valuable means for employees to participate in improving the efficiency of the company. Properly organized, they can help to reduce the feelings of frustration endemic in all concerns where people think they have good ideas but cannot get them considered because there are no recognized channels of communication. Normally, only those ideas outside the usual scope of employees' duties are considered, and this should be made clear, as well as the categories of those eligible for the scheme – senior managers are often excluded.

The most common arrangement is to use suggestion boxes with, possibly, a special form for entering a suggestion. Alternatively, or additionally, employees can be given the name of an individual or a committee to whom suggestions should be submitted. Managers and team leaders must be stimulated to encourage their staff to submit suggestions, and publicity in the shape of posters, leaflets and articles in the company magazine should be used to promote the scheme. The publicity should give prominence to the successful suggestions and how they are being implemented.

One person should be made responsible for administering the scheme. He or she should have the authority to reject facetious suggestions, but should be given clear guidance on the routing of suggestions by subject matter to departments or individuals for their comments. The administrator deals with all communication and, if necessary, may go back to the individual who submitted the suggestion to get more details of, for example, the savings in cost or improvements in output that should result from the idea.

It is desirable to have a suggestion committee consisting of management and employee representatives to review suggestions in the light of the comments of any specialist functions or executives who have evaluated them. This committee should be given the final power to accept or reject suggestions but could, if necessary, call for additional information or opinion before making its decision. The committee could also decide on the size of any award within

established guidelines, such as a proportion of savings during the first year. There should be a standard procedure for recording the decisions of the committee and informing those who made suggestions of the outcome – with reasons for rejection if appropriate. It is important to take care when explaining to employees that their ideas cannot be accepted so that they are not discouraged.

Effectiveness of employee involvement and participation

Research conducted by Cox *et al* (2006) indicated that to be effective, employee involvement and participation mechanisms have to be embedded in the organization – well established and part of everyday working life. Combinations of involvement and participation practices worked best. The main barriers to effective employee voice appear to be a partial lack of employee enthusiasm, absence of necessary skills to implement and manage employee voice programmes, and issues concerning line managers – such as middle managers acting as blockers through choice or ignorance. Making employee voice effective requires top management support, good leadership skills and finding the right mechanisms for involvement and participation.

Planning for voice

The forms of voice appropriate for an organization depend upon the values and attitudes of management and, if they exist, trade unions, and the current climate of employee relations. Attention has also to be paid to the EU Directives on works councils and information and consultation of employees; see below.

Planning should be based on a review of the existing forms of voice, which would include discussions with stakeholders (line managers, employees and trade union representatives) on the effectiveness of existing arrangements and any improvements required. In the light of these discussions, new or revised approaches can be developed; it will be necessary to brief and train those involved in the part they should play.

EU Directives affecting employee voice procedures

European Works Councils (EWC) Directive

This Directive, put into effect in the UK in 2000, requires works councils to be set up in European undertakings or groups of undertakings as a means of informing or consulting with

employees. The Directive covers undertakings, irrespective of ownership, with at least 1,000 employees located in the EU area, of which at least 150 are located in each of two EU countries. The subjects for discussion may include the general economic and financial situation of the business, and other matters with a major impact on employees such as relocations, closures, mergers, collective dismissals and the introduction of new technology. The formation of an EWC can be triggered either by a formal request from employees or by the employer.

Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Directive

This Directive was put into effect by UK regulations in 2005. These give employees the right to be informed about the business's economic situation and their employment prospects, and informed and consulted about decisions likely to lead to substantial changes in work relations or contractual relations, including redundancies and transfers. The regulations apply to organizations with 50 or more employees and procedures can be triggered either by a formal request from employees or by the employer.

Employee voice – key learning points

The meaning of employee voice

'Employee voice is the term increasingly used to cover a whole variety of processes and structures which enable, and sometimes empower employees, directly and indirectly, to contribute to decision making in the firm' Boxall and Purcell (2003).

The forms of employee voice

The basic elements of employee voice are participation and involvement. These take the forms of joint consultation, participation, collective representation, upward communication (consultative committees, etc), attitude surveys, suggestion schemes and project teams (quality circles or improvement groups).

Expression of employee voice

The degree to which employees have voice will vary considerably.

Joint consultation

Joint consultation enables managers and employee representatives to meet on a regular basis to exchange views, to make good use of members' knowledge and expertise, and to deal with matters of common interest that are not the subject of collective bargaining.

Attitude surveys

Attitude surveys are a valuable way of involving employees by seeking their views on matters that concern them.

Suggestion schemes

Suggestion schemes can provide a valuable means for employees to participate in improving the efficiency of the company.

Effectiveness of employee involvement and participation (Cox *et al*, 2006)

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Employee voice – key learning points (continued)

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Planning for voice

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EU Directives affecting employee voice procedures

The two relevant EU Directives are: the European Works Councils (EWC) Directive and the Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Directive.

Questions

1. From the operations director: ‘The term “employee voice” is being bandied about a lot, but what does it mean?’
2. From a friend studying for her CIPD exams: ‘Could you please explain to me the difference between employee involvement and employee participation?’
3. From your chief executive: ‘I seem to spend more and more of my time meeting employees in our various consultative committees. Do they really add value to the business? If so, I would like to know how.’

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