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Smiling, but not with his eyes: authentic employee voice for inclusive organisations

Conference Paper

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Summary

The focus of this paper is the nature of leadership communication required for effective employee voice as a core component of organisational inclusivity. The study addresses an under-researched aspect of communicative leadership and inclusivity: senior manager communication capabilities for employee voice. It argues that dialogue is fundamental to embedding employee voice in organisations in ways that support an inclusive culture. This requires a new understanding of leadership communication capabilities that emphasises listening and responding in authentic ways that are respected and trusted by employees.

Employee voice

The CIPD (2017a) describes employee voice as:

The means by which employees communicate their views to their employer. It's the main way employees can influence matters that affect them at work. For employers, effective voice contributes towards innovation, productivity and business improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development.

In practical terms an employee can, for example, exercise voice by raising a work issue with their line manager or by expressing an opinion in a town-hall meeting with senior managers. Likewise, an employee can exercise silence by withholding an idea in a team meeting or by not expressing criticisms in an engagement survey.

If employee voice is listened to and acted upon, employees may respond with heightened engagement. Ruck et al (2017) report positive and statistically significant correlations between senior manager receptiveness to voice and organisational engagement. Senior managers seeking views, responding to suggestions and allowing influence in final decisions were all found to be aspects of voice that are positively associated with organisational engagement.

Employee voice is cited as a key component of inclusive organisations (Higgins 2016) and many organisations are now taking it more seriously. The CIPD's *HR Outlook* survey (2017b) found that over half of organisations report they are taking steps to improve

employee voice, but highlighted that employee attitudes including apathy, lack of engagement and fears around expressing their voice can act as barriers. If employees perceive that managers don't want to hear their views, and observe management turning a 'deaf ear' to them, they may be deterred from exercising voice (Beaugré 2010). If employees view voice calls within their organisation as a sham, this leads to frustration (Price et al 2001, cited in Beaugré 2010).

Tourish and Robson (2006) argue that critical upward communication is valuable to organisations because it provides a potential safeguard against unrealistic senior management views of opinion within their organisations. They observe reluctance to engage in upward critical feedback on the part of employees due to fears about retaliation from managers. They also highlight a tendency for managers to hyper-scrutinise critical feedback, while treating positive upward feedback in the opposite manner. These authors consider informal upward communication and call for the development of additional methods of communication capable of facilitating contact between senior managers and employees. They argue that critical upward feedback should be thoroughly institutionalised into organisational life. One way this could be facilitated is by ensuring that internal corporate communication methods and HR processes are designed to maximise opportunities for employee voice.

Communicative leadership

Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) argue that all great leadership starts with listening with an open mind, heart and will. Illes and Mathews (2015, p10) explain that effective listening shows that the leader is benevolent and has their employees' interests at heart. According to Johanssen et al (2014, p148), the concept of 'communicative leadership', categorised by Eriksen (1997, p164) as '*openness and dialogue with the employees*', can be questioned, as leading without communicating seems virtually impossible. However, they go on to point out that leaders who are 'communicative' are not just communicating, but that they are 'good communicators'. Indeed, as Ashman and Lawler (2008, p253) argue '*leadership ... when all is said and done, is communication*'. However, they go on to observe that '*taking account of the intimate connection between leadership and communication it is remarkable that the concept of communication is taken so much for granted in the literature on leadership*' (p254).

Johanssen et al (2014, p154) identify a number of principles of communicative leadership, including '*communicative leaders are willing to listen, receive questions or complaints, and share appropriate information in a truthful and adequate manner*'. Illes and Mathews (2015, p12) state that employees want to see their leaders in person and in action. Visibility and accessibility are emphasised by Clavelle (2012, p346) as an approach to transformational leadership in a US-based hospital, where '*to achieve face-to-face visibility [she] rounds with nurse leaders on a weekly basis and attends staff meetings to present content and facilitate roundtable discussions*'. This emphasis on 'transformational' leadership reflects a distinction made by Burns (1978) between transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is based around formal exchanges between groups and leaders pursuing their individual objectives,

whereas transformational leadership is focused on changing the goals of individuals or groups for the 'common good' of the organisation. Men (2014, p259) states that *'transformational leaders convey a strong sense of purpose and collective mission and motivate employees by communicating inspirational vision and high performance expectations'*. However, transformational leadership is critiqued by Tourish (2013, p21) as it cannot be assumed that goals proposed by leaders are necessarily of mutual benefit to employees. Furthermore, Tourish (2013, p28) argues that the transformational leadership model *'tends to preclude the possibility of corrective feedback from followers to leaders'*. Ashman and Lawler (2008, p265) also critique a transformational leadership model. Adopting an existentialist approach, they argue *'there is an inherent danger in much of the leadership literature that leadership relations are viewed in more or less entirely instrumental ways: the leader interacts so that certain organizational aims can be achieved'*.

Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012, p1043) argue for an alternative relational view of leadership where it is seen not as a trait or behaviour, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions among people acting in context. At the core of this view is the assumption that leadership is co-constructed in social interaction processes, and therefore Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012, p1043) conclude that communication is a key element of relationally oriented leadership. This has parallels with a 'discursive leadership' approach (Carroll and Gillen 1987, p41) focused on unplanned, informal and brief conversations. This can be linked to dialogue and it is worth noting that according to Neill (2015), millennials also expect more dialogue in internal communication. Dialogue is based on four premises, namely that participants act authentically, that they focus on the future while allowing change to occur, collaborate and share insights and knowledge, and that they are present within the dialogical process (Theunissen and Noordin 2012). However, Gutiérrez-García et al (2015) point out that there has been little research into its applications or the management processes involved. In terms of practice, Taylor and Kent (2014) contend that many communication professionals erroneously conclude that dialogue is impossible because there is too much risk to organisations, because it is too time-consuming, or because senior management does not see the value. Furthermore, they argue that dialogue will not be possible until two related conditions are met: (a) professionals are trained in how to facilitate dialogue; and (b) management becomes convinced of its value.

Walker and Aritz (2014, p13) argue that a discursive approach to leadership means that communication becomes *'the primary concern rather than a secondary or tertiary consideration'*. However, there appears to be a gap between this aspiration and practice, as Nilsson (2010, p141) found that senior managers expected messages to be transferred from sender to receiver, not co-created. Furthermore, according to a report by PR Academy (2015, p10), public relations practitioners do not rate senior managers very highly for listening or engagement. If employee voice is to be embedded within inclusivity, clearer leadership communication capabilities may be required to go beyond transformational leadership towards relational leadership.

Research questions and research method

A qualitative research methodology was used. Employees at five different organisations in the UK participated. A total of 27 interviews were completed. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face at the organisation's premises and some were conducted on the telephone. Nine focus groups were also conducted involving 77 employees. An interview and focus guide was used for the research, which included questions such as:

- 1 How important is it for you to have a say about what goes on?
- 2 What are your perceptions of the ways that managers facilitate employee voice?
- 3 How does having a voice affect your feelings about your organisation?

A probability sampling approach was used to target employees at non-senior managerial grades with an emphasis on gathering participants from across the organisation rather than from the same division to counter potential contamination of focus group discussion (Remenyi 2011, p60; Bryman and Bell 2007, p526). All focus groups took place in meeting rooms at the organisation's premises. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Open comments were also collected in a survey that was conducted in each organisation amounting to 23,991 words.

Three primary themes emerged from template analysis (Brooks and King 2014, p4) of qualitative data:

- **active listening:** adopting an open mind to what is said by employees
- **authentic responsiveness:** being prepared to seriously consider what is said by employees
- **safety to speak out:** alleviating the fear of retribution.

Authentic listening

Analysis of the transcripts and verbatim comments in the survey indicated that employees were very conscious of how managers seemed to listen, or not, to what they have to say when the opportunity to express ideas or concerns is provided. Some interview and focus group participants felt that managers did listen to what they had to say. Others did not. In general, participants felt that managers should listen to what they have to say as this is a sign of a progressive organisation. When managers do not listen it can have a profound impact, as the following quote illustrates: *'You know, he was not interested in listening to me. So after thinking of an idea, I actually stopped my input.'* Participants said that they can sense when there is a feeling that what is said is not going to go anywhere – described by one person as *'smiling, but not with your eyes'*.

Authentic responsiveness

It was with some irony that one local authority interviewee noted that *'I have seen things change significantly following a public consultation but not an internal one'*. Participants understood that not every comment may get an individual response. They stated that if they can see that, in general, feedback is being taken on board, this would be engaging and make them *'feel valued'*. When managers do listen and give *'a decent answer that they could understand'*, this is noted by employees and it can generate a greater level of

understanding about the organisation's plans. However, responding goes beyond an answer to a specific point for some employees. It extends to a deeper level of consideration and ultimately seeing demonstrable results from what has been said, as the following quote illustrates:

We had 'Planning for Future', you know over these last few years we've had meetings about the budget cuts and forums where the Corporate Management Team spent time coming round to different services having a chat, talking about people's ideas. I think for me and the people that I'm working with, lots of ideas were generated. I think it's about feeding back to make sure that, yes, my voice has been heard.

And when a good idea is acted upon employees expect to be recognised for it and not for the suggestion to be *'badged as a Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) decision'*.

Safety to speak out

The fear of retribution in speaking out is real, as illustrated by the following quote: *'I think you will find a lot of people won't come forward and ask the burning questions that are keeping them awake at night because they're scared of the response, no matter how pleasant the senior person.'* Employees were complimentary about senior managers when the communication was more of a conversation with an open question and answer format and less of a formal presentation with slides. This can generate what was described as *'banter back and forward between the senior team and some of the staff that worked really well'*. This supports De Vries et al's (2009, p377) findings that a friendly and caring approach *'seems to be the most important communication style variable'*.

Practical importance and implications of research

The results of this study suggest that organisations need to go beyond the simple provision of opportunities for employees to have a say. Not surprisingly, employees expect their comments and suggestions to be treated seriously. And they very quickly detect sham employee voice processes. This requires leaders to understand how to listen and to embrace meaningful dialogue with employees based on an open mind, heart and will. Participants stated that they prefer informal communication settings for employee voice, where senior managers talk the language of employees rather than corporate jargon. These can be face-to-face or using enterprise social network (ESN) platforms; it is the informality that participants stated creates trust and safety to speak out. This runs counter to some aspects of transactional and transformational leadership based on 'telling' and 'selling' approaches to communication. Instead of coaching senior managers to use slick, corporate PowerPoint presentations, HR and internal communication managers could emphasise listening as a valuable leadership capability that can lead to increased organisational engagement.

Organisations that are interested in increasing levels of inclusivity and employee engagement should note that fear of retribution is a potential inhibitor to the process. One way to address this is to limit the numbers at face-to-face communication events.

Participants in this study stated that small groups of employees, around 15–20 people, are preferential to larger style ‘town hall’ events with larger numbers of employees. This is because some employees can feel intimidated in larger settings. HR managers and internal communication managers should also focus on coaching and training leaders in listening capabilities so that they develop safe spaces for employees to express their voice without any perceived fear of retribution.

The results of this study support the argument for a relational view of leadership where it is seen not as a behaviour, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions among people acting in context (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien 2012, p1043). The results also support a ‘discursive leadership’ approach (Carroll and Gillen 1987, p41) focused on unplanned, informal and brief conversations. As Walker and Aritz (2014, p13) suggest, this approach to leadership means that communication becomes ‘*the primary concern rather than a secondary or tertiary consideration*’. In summary, communication approaches based solely on informing should be complemented by systemic employee voice that incorporates authentic listening if the full potential of employee engagement is to be realised.

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