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Employee voice: cultural differences make a difference

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Employee voice is currently one of the more topical areas of research in:

- HRM
- organisational behaviour
- organisational development
- management
- leadership
- industrial relations
- psychology
- law
- political sciences
- economics research areas



Fig 1. Research volume for employee voice since 1900

The primary reason for the explosion in research interest around employee voice is the fact that it is associated with a range of positive outcomes for both employees and managers, as well as organisations.

Employee voice

As would be expected with interest in the research area of employee voice spanning so many different disciplines, there are a range of slightly different definitions being used. However, across all of the research channels, the idea of employee voice really boils down to employee behaviour that is aimed at either suggesting improvements and/or raising complaints or dissatisfaction about work-related issues, through either formal or informal voice channels. These can include oral, written and other methods of communicating.

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Conditions for employee voice

The primary issue with employee voice is that employees usually need to feel a level of safety in order to express either enhancements that can be made to the workplace or to complain, critique or express frustration or dissatisfaction to the manager, leader or other functions, like human resources.

Additionally, previous studies found that safety is not the only condition that is required in order for people to speak up. A second issue of effectiveness, or whether an individual feels that something will actually happen as a result of their speaking up, is also a predictor of employee voice behaviours.

As a result of these two conditions, safety and effectiveness, employee voice has come to be seen as a bit of a litmus test for organisational, leadership, and management health. The primary reason for this is that all employee voice behaviours are in effect challenging the status quo. The organisational, leadership and management reactions to employee voice are actually reactions to challenge. A healthy organisation, leadership and management should respond positively to challenge and with a learning orientation. Negative reactions to employee voice, however, are common and reduce safety, trust and a range of other organisational health characteristics. A range of previous studies have also shown that employee voice predicts, and is predicted by, organisational citizenship behaviours. These are the behaviours that employees engage in that are above and beyond those required by their job role and, as such, are also seen as major indicators of organisational, leadership and management health.

A new study

A new study by researchers from the School of Labour and Employment Relations at the Pennsylvania State University and the Department of Human Resource Studies at Tilburg University in the Netherlands conducted a wide-ranging literary review of previous peer-reviewed research to see what can be learned about how employee voice is impacted by national culture.

It is clear that not every employee will feel the same level of capability to engage in employee voice behaviours. In part, this disparity between employees will be based on individual perceptions of safety and anxiety levels and individual levels of trust and sense of effectiveness.

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Organisational culture

Engaging in employee voice behaviours has been identified as a core organisational cultural issue. As would be expected, in organisational cultures with low employee voice habits, it becomes significantly harder for individuals to feel that they can speak up. Conversely, in 'high organisational employee voice cultures', where people habitually speak up and offer suggestions for improvement or talk about problems and issues, and where there is a learning culture which results in change, it is significantly more likely that greater proportions of people will engage in voice behaviours.

National culture

Whilst this is common sense, less is known about the impact of national cultures on employee voice behaviours. Clearly, there are some national cultures, particularly in the West, where employee voice behaviours would be more of an accepted and expected norm. On the other hand, there are other more permissive cultures, such as in some eastern countries, whereby the cultural norms are for employees to follow orders. Such cultures are unlikely to lead naturally to high levels of employee voice.

The question is, what effect does national culture actually have on employee voice behaviours, particularly in multicultural organisations?

Two types of voice

Throughout the organisational research arena there are largely considered to be two forms of employee voice:

1. informal
2. formal

Informal voice

Informal voice refers to the opinions, suggestions, ideas and complaints that tend to be intimated during more casual conversations, emails, messages and meetings. Employees using informal voice channels usually carefully choose who they are expressing their opinions to in order to minimise risk to themselves. In terms of informal voice there are both direct and indirect channels. Direct channels of informal voice involve the individual being in a casual communication with their managers or other person in authority. Indirect channels are those whereby an individual will mention a suggestion or complaint to someone they know, who themselves either feel safer to then make a more direct approach to management or who have a more direct channel to authority. There tend to be people in most organisations who are either braver or perceive less risk and are more prepared to speak up and, therefore, become conduits for employee voice. These individuals tend to be part of an informal voice network.

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Direct informal voice tends to be almost entirely based on trust. This is both trust that the recipient of the information (a person in authority) will both listen and be likely to respond positively in some way, preferably by taking action.

Organisational culture and norms usually predict the use of informal voice channels.

Formal voice

This refers to a more structured approach of sharing ideas and concerns and tends to be significantly more standardised, with protocols. Formal voice channels are usually organisational systems, procedures and structures that are designed to reduce the discretionary powers of managers and leaders. In effect, they are policies and procedures that an organisation has implemented in order to ensure that people's suggestions and complaints are listened to and engaged with at an organisational level. However, making a formal suggestion for a formal complaint, often feels of an entirely different nature to engaging in informal voice. Previous studies show that perceptions of risk inherent in formal voice situations, particularly in complaint scenarios, is significantly heightened. People tend to feel more reticent, depending on organisational norms, to engage in formal voice behaviours.

A study in 2017 found that formal voice mechanisms are usually only engaged in once informal voice behaviours have failed and the issue feels significant enough to move into a more formal procedure. What this study is saying, in effect, is that people usually engage in informal voice behaviours before trying more formal channels. Employees usually perceive greater risk in formal voice mechanisms.

Additionally, studies have found that formal voice procedures and mechanisms send strong signals to employees about an organisation's seriousness and interest in engaging with employees. Studies have found that, where employees perceive that formal direct voice channels are part of the organisation's learning and can be used without detriment, an organisational culture tends to develop, whereby these channels are used. It has been found that, in these cases, voice safety and effectiveness are high.

Other studies have found that institutionalised rights to voice predict greater levels of informal and formal voice behaviours.

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Findings - national cultures and employee voice

The study found there are a number of variables that exist within national cultures that will predict employee voice behaviours within organisations, particularly in multicultural scenarios:

1. **Power distance.** Power distance refers to the degree to which members of an organisation or culture are in agreement that power and authority should reside at the top of the organisation, or with the government. So a high, power distance culture believes that the power and authority should reside solely at the top of the organisation and that it is the employee's job to do their bidding. Low power distance cultures have great belief in individual autonomy. Individuals from high power distance cultures tend to believe that employee voice is not appropriate and usurps management authority. It is considerably more difficult to engage employees from power distance national cultures in employee voice initiatives than employees from low power distance cultures, such as the West.
2. **Uncertainty avoidance.** People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to rely on organisational norms, rules, rituals and bureaucratic practices in order to reduce and lessen the appearance of uncertainty. Previous studies have found that individuals from cultures that engage in uncertainty avoidance tend to consider change to be undesirable. Further, it has been found that the people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures consider uncertainty and ambiguity to be a crisis that needs to be resolved. The status quo is highly valued by people from such cultures. Formal voice channels tend to be seen by individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures as more appropriate and less destabilising than informal employee voice channels. The reason for this is that formal voice channels tend to mediate any challenge to the status quo, whereas informal voice channels tend to be perceived as creating uncertainty and ambiguity. From the perspective of individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures, informal employee voice channels tend to be perceived as too unstructured, chaotic and a free for all.
3. **In-group collectivism.** In-group collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals within a culture tend to express and expect people to have pride, loyalty and be cohesive within that group. This is a form of group identification, whereby the identity of the group is more important than the identity of any one individual. In such cultures, individuals develop a strong sense of duty and obligation to the group to which they belong. Any voice behaviours that challenge the group or organisational interests, or which appear to come from self-interest, are highly likely to be considered as disruptive and threatening to the group cohesiveness and identity. Such cultures tend to severely reduce employee voice behaviours, particularly those that suggest that the group or organisation is not already perfect.
4. **Performance orientation.** Performance orientation refers to the degree to which people expect to be rewarded for performance improvement and good work. Such cultures have been found to value individuals who engage in organisational citizenship behaviours and go above and beyond what is required in their job descriptions. Cultures with high levels of performance orientation tend to value both formal and informal voice channels. Because

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performance is a key criteria, anything which enhances performance is considered to be valuable. Therefore, in such cultures, employee voice can be considered to be valuable. However, there are exceptions where employee voice results in a challenge to other people's perceptions of their own performance. In such cases, employee voice may not be considered to be safe and effective.

5. Assertive orientation. This refers to cultures in which individuals are expected to speak up for themselves, be confrontational and act in their own self-interests, preferences and goals. Such cultures tend to highly value employee voice. Indeed, in high assertiveness cultures, employee voice is considered to be the norm.
6. Cultural tightness. Cultural tightness is the degree to which individuals within a culture feel that they have to conform to the norms of that group and the strength of cultural sanctions for failure to do so. Studies in 2006 discovered that looser cultural tightness tends to promote employee cultural voice. However, the opposite is not always true and depends on the culture involved. So, tighter cultures that value performance and assertiveness tend also to be more likely to feel safe cultures in which to engage in employee voice. Whereas, cultures with higher levels of cultural tightness around group collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and high power distance are going to be considerably less comfortable engaging in employee voice behaviours.

Conclusions

Clearly, in organisations and companies with a high percentage of employees from a largely homogenous national culture, the above findings are likely to predict engagement and comfort with employee voice behaviours. However, in multicultural organisations, it is highly likely that there is going to be a range of levels of engagement with employee voice behaviours. These are important findings, as they explain much of the variance in engagement with employee voice behaviours in organisations.

Given that employee voice has become an important issue within organisations, particularly in the West, and that this characteristic predicts a range of positive organisational outcomes, taking into account an employee's cultural background is also important when trying to increase voice.

This is the first significant research attempt to consider and measure the impact of the role of culture in the development of employee voice. As a result, these should be seen as the first steps and that more research is needed to really tie down the impact of culture on employee voice. The relationships between organisational culture and employee voice are likely to be considerably more complex than this paper suggests. Despite that, this is still an important and useful study.

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Reference

Kwon, B., & Farndale, E. (2018). Employee voice viewed through a cross-cultural lens. *Human Resource Management Review*.

Overview

A new (2018) study looking at employee voice has found that national cultural factors have a significant impact on the adoption of employee voice behaviours. In particular, it was found that:

1. power distance
2. uncertainty avoidance
3. in-group collectivism
4. performance orientation
5. assertiveness and
6. cultural tightness

all have a significant impact on employee voice.