

Employee voice

The phrase 'employee voice' refers to the say employees have in matters of concern to them in their organization. Employee voice processes answer the question posed by Beardwell (1998): 'What is the most important expression of employee perspectives within any organization?' In this chapter the notion of employee voice is first defined, and reference is made to the more traditional but closely associated concepts of participation and involvement. The rest of the chapter is devoted to describing the various employee voice processes that can be developed in organizations.

THE CONCEPT 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* 2000). The concept covers the provision of opportunities for employees to register discontent and modify the power of management. It embraces involvement, and more significantly, participation.

INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Involvement means that management allows employees to discuss with it issues that affect them but that management retains the right to manage. It is primarily a management-driven concept. Participation is about employees playing a greater part in the decision making process. It is therefore much closer to the concept of employee voice systems, that is, arrangements for ensuring that employees are given the opportunity to influence management decisions and to contribute to the improvement of organizational performance.

PURPOSES OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

The purposes of employee voice have been defined by Marchington *et al* (2001) as follows:

- *Articulation of individual dissatisfaction* – to rectify a problem with management or prevent deterioration of relations.
- *Expression of collective organization* – to provide a countervailing source of power to management.
- *Contribution to management decision making* – to seek improvements in work organization, quality and productivity.
- *Demonstration of mutuality and cooperative relations* – to achieve long term viability for the organization and its employees.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR EMPLOYEE VOICE

The framework for employee voice has been modelled by Marchington *et al* (2001) as shown in Figure 53.1. This framework identifies two dimensions of voice: first, individual employees, and second, collective; that is, 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. 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 attitude of management towards unions.

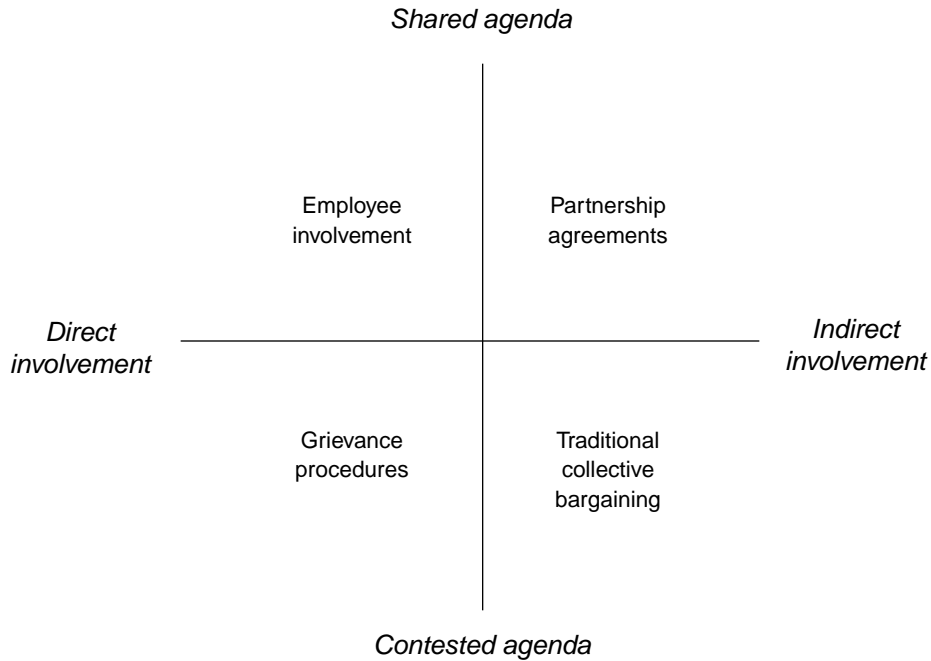


Figure 53.1 A framework for employee voice

(Source: M. Marchington, A. Wilkinson, P Ackers and A. Dandon, *Management Choice and Employee Voice*, CIPD, 2001)

EXPRESSION OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

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

- 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.

FACTORS AFFECTING CHOICE

Research carried out by Marchington *et al* (1992) identified a number of factors that influenced employers to implement employee involvement or voice initiatives:

- *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.

FORMS OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

As defined by Marchington *et al* (2001), the main methods of employee voice fall into two categories: representative participation and upward problem solving.

Representative participation

- *Joint consultation* – a formal mechanism which 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

- *Electronic media* – the intranet.
- *Two way communication* – meetings between managers and their staff, or briefing groups.

- *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 generally failed to survive as a specific method of involvement).

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.

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 better 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 naive 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 which 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 three methods of conducting attitude surveys:

- *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 specially 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. An example of an attitude survey dealing with views on pay is given in the Appendix.
- *By the use of interviews.* These may be 'open ended' or depth interviews in which the discussion is allowed to range quite freely. Alternatively 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' (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.

- *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 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.
- *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 grumbled 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 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 basis of a successful suggestion scheme should be an established procedure for submitting and evaluating ideas, with tangible recognition for those that have merit, and an effective system for explaining to employees without discouraging them that their ideas cannot be accepted.

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 communications, 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, and be able if necessary to 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.

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. Planning should be based on a review of the existing forms of voice, which includes 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, but it is necessary to brief and train those involved in the part they should play.