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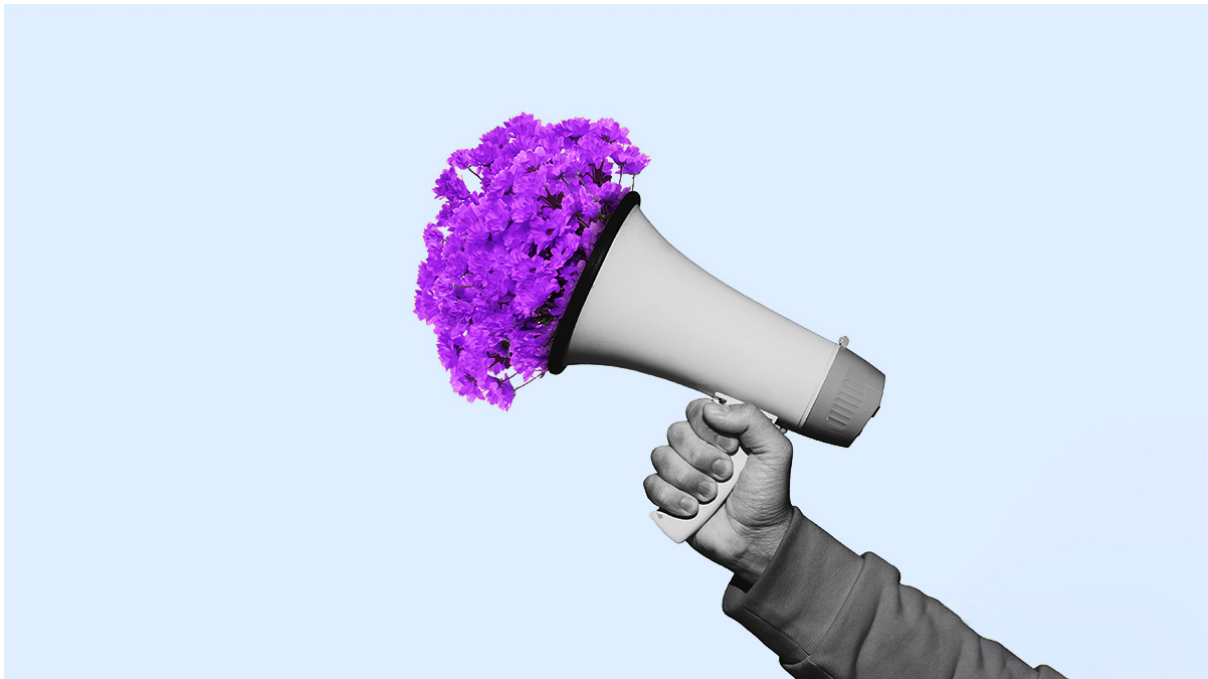
Organizational Culture

Research: What Makes Employees Feel Empowered to Speak Up?

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Summary.   Most managers understand that empowering employees to voice their opinions can help companies innovate and uncover their own shortcomings. However, this understanding does not seem to translate into action. Research shows that over 85% of employees remain silent on crucial matters because they

worry about being viewed negatively. How can managers encourage employees to speak their minds at work? The authors' new research identified a novel method to encourage employees to exercise their voice: creating a company culture that emphasizes the idea of *choice.* They found that employees were more likely to share their ideas and opinions at a company whose culture emphasized the idea that *people always have a choice.* **close**

Richard Branson, the CEO of Virgin Enterprises, famously said, "Choice empowers people and makes for a more content workforce." Virgin Enterprises is also known for listening to employees' ideas and opinions. In 2015, Bethan Patfield, a frontline employee at Virgin Trains, noticed that renowned chef Bryn Williams had become a regular customer traveling to and from London. Patfield suggested that Virgin partner with Williams to revamp the uninspiring onboard menu. In the end, Virgin and Williams developed a fresh new menu that turned out to be a huge hit with customers. Is there a relationship between Virgin's emphasis on choice and its emphasis on employee voice?

Most managers understand that empowering employees to voice their opinions can help companies innovate and uncover their own shortcomings. However, this understanding does not seem to translate into action. Research shows that over 85% of employees remain silent on crucial matters because they worry about being viewed negatively. How can managers encourage employees to speak their minds at work?

Employees' likelihood of exercising their voice is influenced both by their individual personalities and the corporate culture they're immersed in. But, importantly, corporate culture is so powerful that it can override the significant role of personality in shaping employees' voices. In other words, even those who are unlikely to

express their ideas by disposition may perk up and share given the right environment. A key to stimulating employee voice, then, is to create a suitable company culture.

Our research, recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, identified a novel method to encourage employees to exercise their voice: creating a company culture that emphasizes the idea of *choice*. Having choices makes people feel empowered and in control of their environment. Research shows that feeling in control is a key antecedent to greater ownership and belonging at work. We put this proposition to the test across three experiments in the U.S., India, and Singapore. We found that employees were more likely to share their ideas and opinions at a company whose culture emphasized the idea that *people always have a choice*.

In one experiment, we asked American working adults to assume the role of job applicants. We presented them with company brochures that either emphasized the idea of choice in the company's culture or didn't. For example, the company brochure focusing on choice mentioned:

> Here at the [company name], we must remind ourselves that *we always have a choice*. Whether it is about expanding to new markets, launching a new product, or changing the way we do business, we always have a *choice* … In a nutshell, instead of accepting the circumstances as inevitable, our employees make *choices* that help us thrive in the marketplace.

The other company brochure did not mention the idea of choice.

We asked participants how willing they would be to share new ideas about improving the company's processes and communicate their opinion about work issues even if their opinion was different from others'. We also assessed their likelihood of speaking up and encouraging others to get involved in matters that affected the company. We consistently found that participants were more willing to share their opinions, thoughts, and ideas in the company that emphasized the availability of choice as an integral part of its culture.

Additionally, participants were more interested in working for the organization that emphasized choice than the one that did not. Highlighting choice therefore may allow organizations to foster employee engagement and participation and give them an edge in attracting talent.

We next asked the question: What *exactly* is it about choice that leads people to shift their behavior? We found that thinking about choices makes people feel stronger and more powerful, which makes sense because the act of choosing allows people to influence their environment while expressing their preferences, values, and beliefs. For example, through the simple acts of choosing which emails to reply to first, which projects to focus on, and which meetings to attend, choosers not only express their priorities and goals, but they also determine what gets done (and what gets left behind). We thus argue that emphasizing choice makes employees more willing to speak up because choices reinforce their sense of self as strong, independent individuals who shape their own fates and influence the world around them.

Although choice may seem like an unalloyed good, as with many workplace programs and interventions, research shows that there may be a point at which more options are not necessarily better. Too many options can be overwhelming, thus overriding the

sense of empowerment and agency that they seek to foster. However, organizations can work to create a culture that emphasizes the idea of choice without burdening employees with hundreds of options.

Overall, if companies want to encourage their employees to use their voices, they need to create an environment that fosters participation. Our research identifies a simple but effective feature of corporate culture — emphasizing the value of choice — that can help managers and organizations do just that.