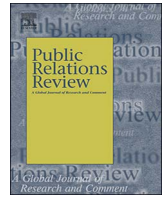




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Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Full Length Article

Employee voice: An antecedent to organisational engagement?

Kevin Ruck^{a,*}, Mary Welch^b, Barbara Menara^c^a PR Academy, Maidstone Studios, Maidstone, Vinters Park, Kent ME14 5NZ, UK^b Faculty of Business and Law, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK^c School of Management, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Fylde Rd, Preston PR1 2HE, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Internal communication
Employee voice
Employee silence
Senior manager communication
Employee engagement
Organisational engagement
Dialogue

ABSTRACT

Employee engagement is recognised as important for organisational effectiveness and a factor in achieving innovation and competitiveness. Despite the importance of engagement, relatively little research has yet been done on communication and engagement. This paper aims to contribute to knowledge in this area by providing insight on internal communication and organisational level employee engagement. The paper reports the results of a study exploring associations between aspects of internal communication and organisational engagement. Taking an employee-centric approach, the paper investigates employee satisfaction with opportunities to exercise their voice, and assesses employee views on the quality of senior management receptiveness to employee voice. The paper aims to address gaps in the literature by exploring potential associations between employee voice and organisational engagement.

A questionnaire was used to gather data from 2066 participants in five UK-based organisations. The questionnaire used in the study was designed to explore satisfaction with upward employee voice and senior management receptiveness. It also enables exploration of the relationship between upward employee voice, senior manager receptiveness and emotional organisational engagement. A significant and positive relationship was found between upward employee voice and emotional organisational engagement; and between senior manager receptiveness and emotional organisational engagement. Regression analysis suggests that the majority of the employee voice variables included in the study predict emotional organisational engagement. While the study involved data collected from a reasonably large number of participants, it was limited to five UK-based organisations.

The paper includes reflection on practical implications of the findings for internal communication management. In particular, it considers implications for senior management communication with employees including building employee voice into internal corporate communication strategies and plans. Suggestions for further research are included. The paper contributes to employee engagement literature by expanding insight on organisational engagement. Since relatively little previous research has considered the interplay between internal communication, organisational engagement and employee voice, the study makes a useful contribution to an under-researched area.

1. Introduction

This paper considers associations between upward employee voice, senior manager receptiveness to voice and employee

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kevin.ruck@pracademy.co.uk (K. Ruck), mwelch2@uclan.ac.uk (M. Welch), BMenara@uclan.ac.uk (B. Menara).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.04.008>

Received 30 November 2016; Received in revised form 5 April 2017; Accepted 15 April 2017

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engagement. In doing so, the paper addresses a research gap identified by Gruman and Saks (2014, p. 459) who observe that ‘relatively little attention has been given to the relationship between voice and engagement’. This paper addresses that gap in knowledge and investigates the associations between employee voice and organisational engagement through a survey involving five UK-based organisations.

Employee voice is already a well-established concern in human relations management literature (Marchington, 2015) which recognises the benefits organisations accrue from robust systems of employee involvement and participation. Satisfaction with employee voice, in terms of having sufficient opportunities for providing upward feedback, has been recognised as a driver of employee engagement (Truss et al., 2006; Ruck & Welch 2012). However, the employee voice concept is as yet under-researched in public relations literature. This is surprising given the potential insights public relations and communication management practitioners and academics could offer to assist leaders to tap into employee views. This viewpoint broadens conceptions of the role of internal communicators as it goes beyond the notion that: ‘An internal public relations practitioner can act as the organisation’s official voice to address internal publics in a cohesive, coordinated fashion; this basic rule of external public relations practice should be applied internally, as well.’ (Seltzer, Gardner, Bichard, & Callison, 2012 p. 135). As well as addressing internal publics, internal communicators can stimulate employee voice contributions. Furthermore, they can play a strategic role by conveying employee views to senior managers and facilitating leadership receptiveness.

As Rees, Alfes, and Gatenby (2013) observe, employee voice was originally equated with trade union membership and collective bargaining, but it is now more frequently seen as a range of ways in which employees have a say about what goes on in their organisation. This is summarised as employees’ ‘speaking up’ with constructive ideas that aim to improve or change the status quo. If employee voice is listened to and acted upon employees may respond with heightened engagement. Employee voice is therefore an aspect of internal communication that may positively affect employee engagement with the organisation. The paper begins with a review of literature on the key concepts for the study. The review sets out the research questions and hypotheses investigated in the research. Next, the methods used to investigate the research questions are outlined followed by analysis and discussion of the findings. Implications for practice, theory and future research are provided in the conclusion.

2. Literature review

Scholars and practitioners are interested in building employee engagement because of its perceived positive impact on organisational effectiveness. Physical employee engagement is manifest in employee actions, one form of which is employee communication behaviour involving the exercise of voice. This review sets out the conceptual framework for the study by considering the concepts of internal communication and dialogue, employee voice and employee silence. Then it goes on to discuss the concept of organisational engagement. A set of research questions and hypotheses are constructed along with a conceptual framework model. The paper extends work in this area by empirically exploring the employee communication–engagement relationship, specifically considering the role of employee voice.

2.1. Internal communication and dialogue

Communication is a key factor for organisational effectiveness (Hargie & Tourish, 1993; Dickson, Rainey & Hargie, 2003; Quinn & Hargie, 2004; Downs & Adrian, 2004; Robson & Tourish, 2005; Verčič, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2012) and occurs formally and informally at all workplace levels. An Internal Communication Matrix has been posited (Welch & Jackson, 2007) to capture some of the complexity of communication inside organisations. The matrix distinguishes dimensions of internal communication relating to team peer, project group, line-manager and senior manager communication. The latter level involves leadership internal corporate communication between senior managers and all employees, and is a key concern of the current study because of the study’s focus on organisational level engagement. Internal corporate communication is defined as: ‘communication between an organisation’s strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designed to promote commitment to the organisation, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims’ (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p.193). Whilst presented as predominately one-way, the internal corporate communication concept calls for senior managers to encourage upward critical communication (Tourish & Robson, 2003) and underpin leadership communication with two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to provide opportunities for dialogue.

Dialogue is a crucial aspect of senior management leadership communication. Johansson, Miller, and Hamrin (2014, p. 154) 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’. According to Neill (2015) millennials also expect more dialogue in internal communication. Illes and Mathews (2015) state that employees want to see their leaders in person and in action. Men (2014, p. 259) 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, this approach is critiqued by Tourish (2013) as it cannot be assumed that goals proposed by leaders are necessarily of mutual benefit to employees. Furthermore, Tourish (2013, p. 28) argues that the transformational leadership model: ‘tends to preclude the possibility of corrective feedback from followers to leaders’.

Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) argue for a 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 Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien conclude that communication is a key element of relationally-oriented leadership. This has parallels with a ‘discursive leadership’ approach (Carroll & Gillen, 1987, p.41) focused on

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