MEANING AND APPLICATION OF EMPLOYEE VOICE

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Abstract

Meaning of employee voice has attracted several definitions without any agreement. Some scholars have suggested that voice is a difficult, non-predictable and elusive concept while to others it is simply participation of employees. The meaning of employee voice remains poorly understood in organizations. Understanding and interpretation of the concept is crucial as this will help policy makers, managers and scholars design effective policies and voice mechanisms that can help institutions achieve their goals. This paper looks at various definitions of employee voice, mechanisms used in organizations and its importance. Its implication is that further research is required in employee voice to help managers design effective voice mechanisms.

Key words: Employee voice, participation and mechanism.

1.1 Meaning of voice

The term “employee voice” elicits different understanding to both scholars and practitioners of human resource management. Some of the existing definitions that have been provided for voice are inconclusive as they reflect its application in organizations. Dundon et al. (2004) observe that employee voice as a concept has competing meanings. Employee voice covers all types of opportunities where employee can have their say and exert some influence over workplace decisions (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). Employee voice is also defined as speaking up on important issues and problems in an organization by employees (Dyne et al., 2003). Dundon et al. (2004) give different definitions of employee voice; first, the expression of individual dissatisfaction raised with line managers or through grievance procedure; secondly, as the expression of collective dissatisfaction raised by trade unions through collective bargaining or industrial action; thirdly, contribution to management decision making process through upward communication, problem solving, suggestion schemes and attitude surveys; and lastly, through mutual partnership agreements, joint consultative committees and work councils.

Attempts to have a more conclusive definition of employee voice is by McCabe and Lewin (1992), they summarized voice as consisting of two elements, the expression of complaints or grievances in a work context by employees to management and the participation of employees in the decision-making processes or communication where there is an opportunity for employees and managers to exchange views about issues on an individual basis and through a collective consultation. Morrison (2011) summarizes employee voice as discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational functioning. While Armstrong (2009) understands voice as a say that employees have at work comprising of involvement, participation, problem solving and communication. These definitions do not have a commonality. Is voice a broad concept whose meaning is better inferred from the context of its usage? Does employee silence also equal voice? With such questions not answered, voice usage may not be practical. Commonality in understanding employee voice is necessary to managers and policy makers for designing effective voice mechanisms in their organizations (Budd et al., 2010). Scholars too need to understand the concept as its usage may not correspond to conceptualizations in research. Further empirical methodologies on voice should be based on concepts. Such a situation may be problematic as theory will not be supporting practice rendering studies on employee voice purposeless. For now, meaning of employee voice remains according to how it is understood differently by different people.

Studies have been carried out to help in the understanding of voice and have shown different meanings. Study on the changing patterns of employee voice in firms in UK and Ireland done by Wilkinson et al. (2004) has shown that there is no particular pattern of employee voice used by organizations. The study revealed five broad ways in which managers spoke about employee voice in general. First, voice as
communication/exchange of views: an opportunity for employees and managers to exchange views about issues, generally on an individual basis but also through a collective consultation process. Second, voice as upward problem-solving: an opportunity for employees to provide feedback on specific topics hence not so much as a dialogue but more as a way of providing ideas to improve organizational performance. Third, voice as collective representation: an opportunity for employee representatives who can use union or non-union to communicate the views of the workforce to managers either through partnership or collective bargaining. Fourth, voice as engagement: a feeling on the part of staff that they are able to express their views to managers in an open environment and that management will provide support to allow this to happen. Lastly, voice as say about issues that is not only workers have opportunity to express but also expectation that their views will be taken by management and will influence how decisions are made. The study revealed that, most managers acknowledged a direct link between voice and organizational performance. About two thirds of the managers revealed change of behavior and attitudes in employees as a result of employee voice. The conclusion of the research indicates that voice promotes employee development, participation, flexibility, performance and reward within a framework of excellent communications.

The study by Dundon et al (2004) on meaning and purpose of employee voice in England, Scotland and Ireland had almost similar findings to that on the meaning of voice. The study was carried out in 18 different organizations through interview of senior managers revealed the following; first that voice is articulation of dissatisfaction expressed by an employee(s) and purpose is to rectify an existing problem within an organization. Secondly is an expression of collective organization whose purpose is to counter some power of management. Thirdly, voice is a contribution to management decision making that is meant to seek improvement in work organization quality and productivity. Lastly, voice is a demonstration of mutuality and cooperation relations that is meant to achieve long term viability for the organization. The study showed that purpose of voice varied substantially among organizations.

Studies on voice recognize that it affects performance in organizations (Sako, 1998; Morrison, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2004). Studies have also linked voice to retention of employees (Spencer, 1986). Dyne et al. (2003) observe that voice is used in the literature to represent the intentional expression of work-related ideas, information, and opinions. However, they also confirm that studies on meaning of voice or predicting voice are elusive. Whether this remains true or false is an area for further research.

1.2 Benefits of employee voice

Employee voice is a way of making employees an integral part the organization and it has a direct bearing on their performance. This is confirmed by Royer, Waterhouse, Brown, and Festing (2008). They argue that treating employees as stakeholders in the organization bears similar outcomes. Employees who have developed significant firm-specific human capital have invested in the organization and have earned voice just as shareholders. Providing voice to these employees provides a rationale for further emotional and human capital investment, with the same sorts of returns as noted by Wilkinson et al. (2004). Furthermore there is perceived linkage between employee voice and job satisfaction (Budd et al., 2010)

Employee voice is a form of interaction and can be viewed as a process of organizational justice theory. Organizational justice theory relates to the perceived fairness of processes, outcomes and interactions within the decision making processes of an organization between management and employees (Tyler, 1987; Greenberg, 1990; Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2002; Nowakowski and Conlon, 2005; Korsgaard et al., 1995). Organizational justice has its roots in the justice theories attached to theories of legal and organizational decision making and is comprised of three forms of justice (Rawls, 1999). First, distributive justice or the satisfaction with the outcome of a decision provides a measure of fairness for how justice is
distributed amongst the disputants. Second, procedural justice, or the satisfaction with the process used to reach a decision refers to the experience of fairness by the disputants (Deutsch, 1985; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman and Taylor, 2000). Third, interactional justice, or the interpersonal treatment of the disputants which is believed to be a sub-component of procedural justice and indicates that the process must not only be experienced as being fair, but must also be accompanied by a sense of being treated with respect and dignity (Bies and Moag, 1986; Tyler, 1991). Organizational Justice Theory suggests that employees will be satisfied if they feel that they are fully involved in the decision making process of the organization.

Voice at workplace may have a beneficial impact on quality and productivity and deflect on problems that might explode (Dundon et al., 2004). The degree to which voice is embedded in an organization is much more important than reporting collective schemes. The extent and the degree of voice is necessary for organization’s success (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Budd et al., 2010; Dundon et al., 2004; McCabe and Lewin, 1992). It is therefore important that the extent and degree of voice of workers within an organization should be known as this is believed to have effect on their performance.

1.3 Voice constructs
Voice mechanisms in organizations differ just as they are captured in definitions of voice. Armstrong (2009) says that employee voice can take the form of joint consultation which involves managers and employee representatives meeting on a regular basis in order to exchange views, make good use of members’ knowledge and expertise and also to deal with matters of common interest. He explains that meaningful consultation takes place when managers tell employees what they want to do and they give employees enough time to respond, considering employees’ views as well as response to views. The entire process should be within the existing systems of negotiation and representation. The common form of representation is trade unions, where employees form an organization to safeguard their interests (Freeman, 1976).

Freeman and Medoff (1984) indicate that trade unions provide workers with a collective voice in order to make their wishes known to the management. Mathis and Jackson (2008) consider four major areas that trade unions handle. First are matters relating to work environment which comprises staffing of employees, overtime and general working condition of the employees. Second are matters relating to pay such as inequitable pay, inadequate benefits and non-competitive pay. Third, unions handle matters to do with employee treatment at the workplace such as unfair discipline, harassment and abusive treatment, job insecurity and lack of response to complaints. Lastly, unions address matters to do with management style such as fear, intimidation of employees, and lack of recognition in decision making process. Trade Unions have two major roles (Armstrong 2009), namely to secure improved terms and conditions for their members and to provide protection, support and advice to their members as individual employees. The other roles include providing legal and financial services to members whenever appropriate (Anyango et al., 2013).

Employees normally find it necessary to form unions based on benefits and services that they offer to them. Bernardin (2008) says that unions achieve better wages for members, benefits and improved working conditions and this would mean that members in a union are more satisfied than non-union members. He says that non-union members experience strict supervision and strict job content which tend to create dissatisfaction. According to him, union members will be comfortable and compelled to stay in the organization because of better wages, health and insurance. According to Bernardin (2008), unions offer a voice to employees which can be used to develop rules that govern employees. However, these ideas have not been confirmed through research. The effectiveness within which unions achieve this will depend on several factors within which an organization operates. Employees’ representatives in collective bargaining are involved in discussing issues of mutual concern with management. Union officials of both management and workers are involved in settling disputes, resolving collective grievances and representing members with
grievances or other disciplinary matters. Meaningful consultation takes place when management tells employees what they intend to do and then give them time to respond to proposed action. Management then gives responses to employees on the issues raised. Armstrong (2009) posits that management must believe and must be seen involving employees. Joint consultations operate only when managers are genuine in giving employees voice and advancing their interests. Marchington (1992) observes that joint consultation is one of the useful forms of employee voice.

Employee voice can also be determined through attitude surveys according to Armstrong (2009). Attitude survey is a way of getting information on preferences of employees and comparing commitment and morale in different parts of the organization. Attitude surveys constitute another form of non-unionized voice used by some organizations. Surveys can be done through interviews, use of structured questionnaires, combination of questionnaires and interviews and also through focus groups (Kelly et al., 2003). A focus group is a representative sample of employees whose attitudes and opinions are sought on issues concerning the organization and their work (Powell and Single, 1996). A focus group is structured, informed, constructive and confidential. The uses of attitude surveys are to provide information on the preferences of employees, give warnings of potential problem areas, and diagnose causes of problems and to compare levels of job satisfaction. Attitude surveys can be appropriate for managers in knowing how employees perceive their performance results and also taking care of their voices in the appraisal process (Taylor et al., 1995). Exploring the employee attitudes at work is important to creating an environment that is conducive for employee motivation (Wiley, 1997).

The third element of voice is the suggestion schemes. Suggestion schemes are the established procedures for employees to submit ideas to management with tangible recognition for those suggestions with merit (Armstrong, 2009; Moneim, 2009). Suggestions schemes are known to reduce feelings of frustration where employees feel they have good ideas that are not recognized in the formed channels of communication. Suggestion boxes or team leaders are used to encourage members of the team to give suggestions. However organizations should have a committee to vet suggestions so as to pick only what is appropriate. Participation is demonstrated when an employee plays a greater role in the decision making process by management giving employees the opportunity to influence management decisions and also to contribute to the improvement of organizational performance (Korsgaard et al., 1995). Involvement, on the other hand is when management allows employees to discuss issues that affect them in order to enhance organizational commitment. Employee voice can also be through communication channels within an organization (Dundon et al., 2004). Upward communication channels within organization provide avenues through which employees can express their views to management.

Marchington and Wilkinson (2005, as cited in Armstrong, 2009) conceptualized a model of participation which particularly identifies all the relevant aspects of voice. The model captures four factors; first is the degree of involvement, which indicates the extent to which workers or their representatives are able to influence management decisions. This can range from merely being provided with information, through two-way communication, co-determination and control. Secondly, the scope of decisions open to influence by workers, relates to the type of subject matter dealt with in the participation arena, ranging from the trivial to the strategic. Thirdly, the level at which workers (or their representatives) are involved in management decisions, can vary quite substantially, ranging from workplace or departmental level through to establishment, division and headquarters. Lastly, is the different forms of voice, it may be direct or face-to-face, as is the case with many of the current employee involvement initiatives or it may be indirect as it occurs when trade unions represent workers on high-level consultation committees, or workers’ councils, or through collective bargaining’. The model captures all important aspects in employee voice.
1.4 Conclusions

Employee voice has remained a difficult concept given different definitions and mechanisms applied by different managers. Studies on meaning or predicting of voice in organizations are also elusive. This calls for further research on the same to help improve its application in organizations.

REFERENCES


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