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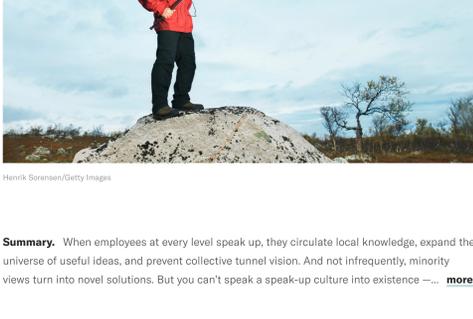


Inclusion And Belonging

Building a Culture Where Employees Feel Free to Speak Up

by Timothy R. Clark

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Summary. When employees at every level speak up, they circulate local knowledge, expand the universe of useful ideas, and prevent collective tunnel vision. And not infrequently, minority views turn into novel solutions. But you can't speak a speak-up culture into existence —... [more](#)

I recently attended an all-hands meeting for a large corporation. The CEO took the stage and began discussing a fresh batch of employee survey data, focusing on the results of one specific survey item: “I feel safe to speak up at work.” More than half of the employees who completed the survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating a culture of pervasive fear.

But that’s not the interesting part. With a distinctly scripted flavor, the CEO then proceeded to say: “It’s very clear that we need to create a speak-up culture. So that’s exactly what we’re going to do. In fact, we’re going to do it right now. Our speak-up culture begins today. We need your voice. We need your opinions. We need your honest feedback.”

I nearly fell off my chair. A leader who approaches an organization this way is either culturally out of touch or managing optics. You can’t speak a speak-up culture into existence. Rhetorical reassurance in the absence of true psychological safety is an abdication of leadership and an admission of failure.

Speaking Up Is Highly Vulnerable Behavior

Let’s put speaking up into perspective. For the average employee, speaking up is risky business because it introduces maximum personal risk. According to our global survey research, which now includes nearly 50,000 data points across 834 organizations, speaking up lives at the intersection of the top six most vulnerable behaviors from the 20 behaviors we measure in our Ladder of Vulnerability survey.

Here are those six behaviors, ranked from most vulnerable to less-vulnerable:

1. Giving an incorrect answer
2. Making a mistake
3. Expressing your emotions
4. Expressing disagreement
5. Pointing out a mistake
6. Challenging the way things are done

In my interviews with employees around the world, I ask them why they hesitate to speak up. The response patterns are always the same: They fear social rejection and repercussions that would damage their reputation, personal standing, and upward mobility. Not least, many say that speaking up amounts to putting their job at risk. They fear being fired.

When an organization says it wants to establish a speak-up culture, it’s implicitly asking employees to engage in these six most vulnerable behaviors. Not surprisingly, if the required psychological safety doesn’t exist, few employees will accept the invitation because the organization is asking them to respond irrationally to their own risk/reward calculation. Instead, fear scares them into silence and superficial collegiality.

Here are four steps leaders can take to create conditions that give all employees a voice — and motivate them to use it:

1. Separate worth from worthiness.

Inclusion is the key that unlocks a team’s cognitive diversity, but that inclusion must be built on a basic acceptance of any individual’s worth — not their worthiness, which implies a performance test to meet a standard or requirement of some kind. If we’re assessing someone’s competency in a particular area like customer service, a worthiness/performance test is valid and appropriate. But when it comes to inclusion, there is no performance test. Simply being human qualifies you for inclusion.

If you want your employees to feel confident to speak up, they must first feel a sense of acceptance based on their fixed, intrinsic worth. If their belongingness needs are not being met, if their acceptance is subject to a worthiness test, why would they risk the sting of further social rejection by speaking up? Speaking up is nothing less than an expression of one’s authentic self. People will retreat from the opportunity to be their authentic selves if doing so is expensive. But if their worth is separate and distinct from the worthiness of their input, opinions, and views, they’ll be more willing to use their voice.

In this social exchange, who has the first-mover obligation? Clearly, the organization. It must prove to the individual that their worth is a non-negotiable constant. How can an organization do that? By treating every employee with equal respect regardless of performance — not as a shield from accountability, but as a guide for fair, equitable, and compassionate accountability. No one has special dispensation from accountability, and yet all are entitled to the same dignity based on intrinsic worth. When people believe they’re included for who they are, without fear of reprisal for speaking up, they speak up.

2. Separate loyalty from agreement.

I once attended an executive meeting in which the CEO would frequently ask, “Are we aligned?” to which everyone in the room would nod their heads and say yes. In this culture, loyalty meant agreement — a stifling agreement that silenced the team into compliance rather than commitment.

When loyalty becomes contingent on agreement, it produces manipulated conformity, which isn’t loyalty at all. True loyalty, which refers to genuine concern for and dedication to the best interests of an institution and its people, must not only allow, but encourage, independent thought. Unless the organization divorces loyalty from agreement, the pressure to conform can produce dangerous groupthink.

At some point, nearly every employee privately wonders whether their job comes with a voice. Then they watch, listen, and observe. If disagreement is considered disloyal, they will likely witness fear-induced intimidation. But if they see rigorous debate and constructive dissent without fear of retaliation, they will feel encouraged to participate and permitted to question any default in the organization. Ultimately, when loyalty and disagreement peacefully coexist, a speak-up culture can flourish.

3. Separate status from opinion.

In human hierarchies, distance from power often prevents people from speaking up. An asymmetrical power relationship between employees typically puts pressure on the lower-status person to agree with the higher-status person.

Unfortunately, many organizations develop a debilitating norm that stigmatizes — and even punishes — contrary opinion, motivating each person to become their own gated community. As long as that norm is in place, fear exacts a tax on open dialogue. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Smart people don’t make a smart team unless they can harness their collective intelligence by networking their minds and engaging in multidisciplinary learning. This depends on their ability to invite and process dissent.

I’ve worked with several CEOs who have successfully decoupled opinion from status. They do it by teaching and modeling the art of disagreement. For example, they explain the differences between an agitator and an innovator based on the intent behind the dissent. Then they ask for thoughtful disagreement delivered in good faith. When leaders reward challenging the status quo from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy in this way, they accelerate the formation of a speak-up culture.

4. Separate permission from adoption.

Most employees understand that a speak-up culture means they have permission to speak their minds and weigh in with suggestions, opinions, and concerns. Unfortunately, some employees mistakenly believe that to be heard is to be heeded. This, of course, is not possible — you can’t say yes to everything.

Which brings us to the fourth step: Removing the misconception that permission to speak up translates into an obligation to adopt the suggestion.

Leaders should not only make this separation between permission and adoption clear to employees, but also make it a point to acknowledge and commend those who speak up, even when you won’t be adopting their suggestion. To speak up, an employee needs some evidence of organizational receptivity. Is someone listening? Does it even matter? Will it make a difference? In the absence of adoption, emphasize recognition. We all need the reassurance that when the answer is no, the very act of speaking up is appreciated and encouraged.



Timothy R. Clark is an organizational anthropologist and founder and CEO of *LeaderFactor*, a global leadership consulting and training firm. He works with CEOs and their teams, helping them achieve data-driven cultural transformation. His most recent book is *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation* (Berrett-Koehler 2020).

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