



A Blueprint for Amplifying Worker Voice

Avenues for increasing engagement and retention while building an inclusive culture.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Amplifying worker voice is good for business. It improves employee engagement and retention, provides company leadership with insights and information they may not easily see, and increases psychological safety in the workplace.

At the most basic level, amplifying worker voice means giving employees throughout the enterprise the freedom and avenues to discuss workplace issues that matter to them and demonstrating that you value those employees for sharing their feedback. Encouraging workers to provide input and contribute to the direction of the organization is a hallmark of good [corporate culture](#) and can enhance your ability to engage in [workforce planning](#). Even U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy has identified worker voice and equity as critical in his framework for [Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#).

The good news is that company leaders don't need to overhaul systems or institute complex structures in order to tap into worker voice. This guide offers three accessible yet effective starting points for creating mechanisms that can amplify worker voice across your business: establishing employee "warmlines," creating an ombuds program, and seeking input from employee resource groups (ERG).



Establish Employee Warmlines

A “warmline” is like a hotline, but it’s not for emergency alerts or reporting illegal or unsafe behaviors; it’s a more informal channel that employees can use to report and share information and input. Many companies have already instituted employee feedback channels to comply with the [Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002](#), which requires all publicly traded companies to have a confidential, anonymous mechanism that employees can use to report accounting practices that they find questionable. But this model can offer much more than an opportunity for whistleblowers to report unethical behavior; it can provide leaders with valuable information to shape better work processes and products. “Warmlines” are effective vehicles for workers at all levels to voice concerns, suggestions, and ideas for improvements.

Intel and Salesforce have both created successful warmlines.

Intel’s Warmline launched in 2016 with the goal of increasing career progression and retention, particularly among employees of color and women of all backgrounds. By pairing employees with case managers from its global diversity and inclusion team, Intel’s Warmline allows employees to raise questions and concerns without having to file a formal human resources (HR) grievance. Having a way for employees to share concerns was an effective retention measure for Intel; in 2020,

it found that [87.5% of the employees](#) who contacted the Warmline chose to stay at the company. Additionally, Intel used the feedback it received via the Warmline to develop a training program for managers directly addressing some of the pain points employees raised.

Similarly, at Salesforce, Senior Director of Employee Advocacy and Belonging [Jacalyn Chapman](#) helped launch the company’s Warmline to connect employees with advocates who help them navigate career transitions, issues of belonging, communication, and conversations. By aggregating data from calls received on the Warmline, Salesforce has identified patterns that provide valuable insight and a better understanding of its business.

Best practices for warmlines:

- Make the purpose of the warmline clear
- Keep lines open 24/7 so workers have the flexibility to call while at work or off the clock
- Clarify whether the warmline is an informal or formal channel of communication
- Utilize ambassadors throughout the company to create awareness of the warmline
- Publicize and actively encourage use of the warmline

How to take action:

Check if there is already a hotline or warmline in use

Explore vendors that offer hotline or warmline services; you may not need to design your own

Decide whether you want the line to be a formal or informal mechanism for feedback

Get buy-in as to why this is a good investment (the proven successes at Intel and Salesforce can serve as impactful examples)



Create an Ombuds Program

Broadly, an ombudsperson is defined as someone who assists individuals and groups with resolving conflicts or concerns. In a corporate setting, an ombuds office is a neutral party providing problem-solving services to employees. Corporate ombuds offices have a high return on investment, saving companies from high costs that can result from escalations of workplace conflicts. Like warmlines, they are a confidential, accessible channel where employees can voice concerns. Further, an ombuds office can help identify trends and organizational problems that surface, and they can bring them to the attention of corporate leadership to address. Ombuds officers are not investigators, nor do they take sides. Rather, they communicate and mediate among multiple people within a company.

Pinterest, Pfizer, and Chevron are among the many companies to establish ombuds offices. [Sana Manjeshwar](#), head of Chevron's global ombuds program, is quick to emphasize that the ombuds office is not an office of compliance but rather a channel through which employees can safely share their concerns. The ombuds program exists to amplify issues to leadership at Chevron so they can make real changes for all employees. Manjeshwar notes that her office was integral in gauging employee sentiment regarding Chevron's return to work policy after COVID, which positively affected the outcome of the policy and related communications.

Best practices for an ombuds program:

- Keep your ombuds office neutral but well connected to offices like HR, operations, and the CEO
- Partner with managers so they can refer their employees to the ombuds office
- Publicize the ombuds office and its services widely
- Find opportunities for visibility, like ERG events

How to take action:

Utilize the resources and events provided by the [International Ombuds Association](#)

Explore success stories of corporate ombuds offices, like the Chevron example above

Find internal champions within your company, especially people who might partner with the ombuds office



Seek Input From ERGs

ERGs are spaces for employees to connect with others who have shared identities, life experiences, or interests. For employees, ERGs provide support, enhance career development, and bolster personal development in the workplace. Over the past few years, ERGs have become a vital part of companies' diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies; they're also integral to employee engagement efforts. ERGs can also be helpful channels for companies to garner employee input. By aggregating ideas, concerns, and feedback to elevate to company management, ERGs offer a powerful way to amplify worker voice.

Gayatri Agnew, the co-chair of the Jobs for the Future [Women in the Workplace Action Collaborative](#), shared a notable example of a policy that emerged from an ERG and was adopted by leadership: parking spots that are set aside specifically for people who are pregnant so that they can access the company's offices more easily. The response has been overwhelmingly positive both from workers and leadership.

Best practices for ERGs:

- Make sure employees know what ERGs are available to join and are aware of the process for establishing new ERGs
- Ensure that all employees can access ERGs (compensating frontline workers for their participation in ERG activities and making it possible for remote workers to attend ERG meetings virtually, for example)
- Compensate ERG leaders and recognize ERG work as part of their roles
- Establish senior leaders as sponsors for each ERG so they can help raise concerns to higher levels of leadership

How to take action:

Create ERGs that meet the needs of your employees

If you already have ERGs, assess whether they are accessible to all employees

Look for senior leaders who can sponsor the ERGs

Where to Start ▶

It's clear that amplifying worker voice takes time, effort, and resources. To decide how best to proceed and what initiatives to prioritize, we suggest you begin by taking these steps:

1. Audit what's already in place and make it better.

You may already have a helpful foundation for amplifying worker voice. For example, if your company has ERGs, explore how these groups can serve as better conduits of information for amplifying voice.

2. Build what you don't have and make it great from the start.

Design new structures and systems with worker voice amplification in mind. Look for ways to engage frontline workers in the creation and building process.



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