



Listening for Action: A Blueprint for Bringing Worker Voice to Decision-Making

Incorporating the voices of workers—frontline workers, in particular—brings a range of benefits for company performance and worker well-being. Here's how to make it happen.

Acknowledgments

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Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all.

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Introduction

Amplifying and incorporating worker voice is quickly emerging as a best practice in the corporate landscape—and workers’ voices can be particularly helpful for company leaders facing decisions. Taking worker voice into account benefits employees and businesses. Leaders can harness workers’ valuable insights to make better decisions, and employees feel included and empowered, which fosters worker well-being and retention.

Our first blueprint outlined three pathways for creating mechanisms to amplify worker voice. But amplification channels are meaningless if companies fail to utilize the feedback they receive and incorporate it into business decisions.

This guide will explore why incorporating worker voice into decision-making matters, offer specific strategies for incorporating worker voice, and share best practices to build a culture of worker voice effectively.



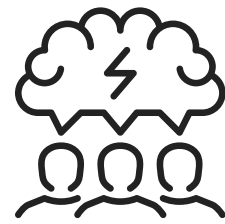
Why Incorporating Worker Voice in Decision-Making Matters

Company success hinges on decisions. Executives spend most of their time weighing tough calls on everything from product strategy to marketing campaigns, but everyone in a company makes some sort of decision every day. For example, a call center employee chooses when to escalate a customer issue; a fast-fresh restaurant manager makes judgments about staffing and scheduling; a regional team decides where to open a new store. Decision-making can be both critical and time-consuming, and that can be a challenge to balance: Just 37% of companies say the majority of their decisions are both high-quality and timely, per a [McKinsey survey](#).

Frontline workers should have the opportunity to be involved in big-picture discussions and high-stakes decisions—and they are eager to contribute. According to an [IBM survey](#) on voice, 83% of workers want to share their opinions on key issues, and feeling free to speak up is associated with benefits from worker well-being to innovation.

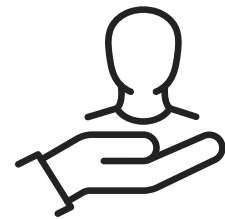
Bringing employees into decision-making is good for workers and good for a company and its leaders.

Some of the benefits include:



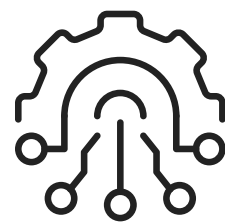
Building an engaged workforce.

Participative leadership is associated with belonging and motivation. It also boosts retention. In a Harvard Business School podcast interview, one leader said nine out of 10 frontline workers are likelier to stay at a company that they feel “encourages and listens to their feedback.”



Fostering worker well-being.

Including workers in decision-making through facilitative leadership can decrease work-related stress levels.



Supporting innovation.

Worker voice is “the frontline advantage” for evolving on key business issues. Frontline managers and workers can bring timely, unfiltered information to leadership. As described in a case study in Harvard Business Review, frontline workers and managers can serve as future-proofers, helping CEOs “detect unanticipated developments and respond to them rapidly.”

Practice

Examples

Include frontline workers in change management teams or during a strategic planning process.

As it approached restructuring and relaunch, Toys “R” Us created a “mirror board” of former workers who received ongoing corporate updates and responded to them honestly to help leaders inform the rebuilding effort.

[Cotopaxi](#) used survey forms to encourage all employees—including part-time ones—to provide input during the strategic planning process.

Include frontline workers in research for operations changes, such as planning for new technology or retooling onboarding or training resources.

Bank of America’s onboarding program for associates, [The Academy](#), regularly asks participants for real-time feedback on topics and tools. This helps Bank of America keep the training relevant and useful while also setting the stage for open communication and continuous improvement ideas from employees as they progress within the company.

[Clorox](#) engaged its now-virtual employee resource groups (ERGs) to test a new video conferencing and collaboration software, increasing effectiveness and adoption.

Practice

Include frontline workers in new product or service discussions or when you face a particular business challenge.

Establish a regular cadence for communication channels (such as surveys or ERGs) and map the input to business decisions.

Examples

[Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield New Jersey](#) wanted to increase the number of Latinx health plan members. It engaged an ERG, the Latin American Cultural Organization, to explore ways to better answer questions and concerns from Latinx consumers and patients, such as launching a toll-free helpline for acquiring health insurance.

After experiencing huge business disruptions due to weather, [JetBlue Airways](#) convened a team including many frontline employees to completely overhaul its process for responding to weather emergencies.

At Hilton, [team member resource groups](#) give feedback on business decisions regularly during meetings. Every ERG has an executive sponsor who hears that feedback directly. To support an ongoing push to become a more equitable and inclusive company, for example, ERGs collected feedback on diversity, equity, and inclusion measures, and executives used the information to inform their efforts.

Practice

Enable employees to influence communications and input, inviting them to raise topics for discussion and set the agenda for town halls or forums.

Encourage and enable employees to interact with one another directly on decision-related topics so that employees at different levels can use frontline worker feedback to inform decisions within their level of responsibility.

Examples

[Zara](#) wanted to find new ways to understand its customers, so executives started asking store employees what they should pay attention to based on customer feedback. Now, the retailer uses [real-time insights from associates](#) to replace canned trend reports, stay in better touch with real-world opportunities, and make decisions about which products to offer and where.

The Toys “R” Us mirror board regularly raises questions for the corporate board to discuss, such as, “Do we have a regular safety audit in addition to a financial audit?”

[Petco](#) changed its employee surveys to ensure managers—not just insights or talent team members—could see survey feedback immediately. This empowers managers to make the right changes for their teams sooner.

Companies such as [Sodexo](#) and [Pershing](#) have robust programs for reverse mentoring, where the cross-level mentor pairs are encouraged to share feedback and suggestions on business challenges as well as career development.

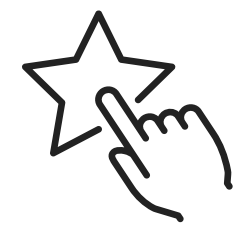
Best Practices for Incorporating Worker Voice

As you prepare to implement the practices above and begin to gather and incorporate employee feedback, we recommend keeping in mind these key principles:



Cross multiple levels—but respect relationships.

Providing opportunities for frontline workers to share feedback with leaders can be enlightening and empowering but can feel threatening to their managers. Be thoughtful with your messaging, and don't punish people with what you learn, or you might find people become hesitant to share information in the future.



Choose areas where you're confident you can follow up.

You could start by asking for feedback in places where you feel safe taking action. We encourage all employers to take on voice efforts that directly affect the day-to-day job experience for frontline employees, but sometimes you want to start in lower-stakes areas. As employees increasingly ask their companies to prioritize community action, for example, corporate social responsibility is emerging as one safe space for employees to have a say. Best Buy and Toyota use ERGs to help set priorities for donations and social impact work—and follow through on their commitments.





Identify the decisions on which you want to gather input.

Be purposeful and transparent about which types of decisions you want to share with employees and how you'll use their recommendations. Prioritize topics where you most need feedback or where employees have the most interest. For example, in highly regulated industries, you might most want input on health and safety issues; in others, innovation and process improvements are more compelling.



Use existing channels where you can.

Particularly when you're just starting to engage worker voice, make it as simple as possible to gather input by tapping into an already-established avenue, such as an affinity group or ERG. It's also crucial to make engagement easy and accessible for employees as well. If you set up a focus group, for example, making space for it on the clock will ensure employees feel motivated and able to attend.



Conclusion

The most important guidelines for incorporating worker voice into decision-making, however, will come from your own unique corporate culture. Build on the norms and expectations your company already has in place and calibrate your goals to the needs of the business.

A culture of employee voice can happen anywhere when you take steps to cultivate it. By encouraging input, making it part of your decision-making routines, and then explaining how you've used it, you'll demonstrate to employees that their insights are valued—and encourage even more insights in the future.



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