# HR^N Paper

# Hidden voices and disengagement: the gift of learning from political earthquakes

## IES Perspectives on HR 2017

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# We didn't see that coming

2016 was a politically astonishing year for many people.

For others, however, it was the first year that they finally made themselves heard. A year when people whose voices had previously been contained and often disregarded, took the opportunities of the UK referendum and the US presidential election to propel their countries, and their astonished leaders, into momentous change.

One of the most striking things unifying the two voting results was the complete failure of many people to see the results coming. We know that the polls almost entirely missed the target, even up to and including the final day of voting. The politically powerful failed, or perhaps refused, to believe that so many people could feel so strongly that they would overturn the status quo and propel the nation into risky, uncharted territory. The news media too, largely failed to predict the result, almost until results were declared, listening mostly only to voices from within existing power structures.

It seems no one in power listened to, or took seriously, the voices of the people who were finally given a chance to be heard through the ballot box. Only long after the horse had bolted was the security of the stable door examined.

# Organisations can learn from politics about listening, without the pain

This is all rich navel-gazing fodder for political and social commentators to ponder and dissect and since the elections there has been much debate about how 'everyone' got it so wrong. But the lessons to be learned extend beyond the political sphere. This potential for surprise of the powerful contains informative parallels within employing organisations. Organisational leaders have been given a unique opportunity to learn from the UK referendum and US election experience, without having to suffer the uncertain but radical change that both those countries now face.

At any one moment, within organisations, as in electorates, there are less powerful and less palatable voices which are probably not being heard. These are the voices which might, if they aren't listened to, do under-the-radar harm to the organisation.

Now is the time to reflect on whether it is possible that the measures being used to listen to employees could be producing management insight as flawed as the political insight that emerged from UK and US polling surveys. Even more concerning however, is the impact of not having an opportunity to express relevant and important opinions and ideas on both the individual and the organisation.

# The impact on the employee: how it feels not to be heard

The emotional experiences of the unheard voter and the unheard employee are similar. People seek control over their lives – in work and beyond. They want to feel valued and involved and to know that they have had a chance to share their perspective with the people who shape their work or life experience and chances.

The emotional reaction to not being listened to includes a range of inevitably negative feelings: disappointment, frustration, blame, resentment, anger, emotional distance, hopelessness and more. Having the opportunity to be heard is a psychological need. People who feel their voices are not heard are not absent of impact. Humans are inventive and resourceful creatures and find an outlet for psychological needs one way or another.

# How unheard voices create problems

People whose voices aren't heard or listened to don't just get used to it: they become disengaged and motivated to seek opportunities for expression in less constructive pro-organisational ways, which may include purposeful silence.

The behavioural manifestations of negative emotions in the workplace include rebellion, withdrawal, sabotage, obstruction, antagonism, lack of cooperation, reduction of effort, disinterest in team or organisational goals and ultimately resignation amongst many other potentially destructive behaviours. This kind of disengagement from work and the organisation is often difficult for leaders to manage, or even identify.

Research on disengagement as a construct is limited. However, using the growing engagement literature as counter-factual evidence, it can be inferred that, amongst other negative impacts, disengaged employees are less likely to promote the organisation's products and services (Scottish Executive Social Research, 2007), are more likely to have plans to leave the organisation (BlessingWhite, 2008), contribute to lower levels of customer loyalty and advocacy (Levinson, 2007), and are less likely to respond positively to their managers or perform as well as their engaged colleagues (Luthans and Peterson, 2002). In contrast to the sudden and startling expression of discontent and disaffection which the democratic processes recently allowed the unheard, the organisational impact of not ensuring that employees feel heard is more likely to be manifested through a quiet but enduring expression of alienation through the quality and quantity of work that employees do for the organisation.

# Getting heard in organisations

The idea of 'employee voice' is often used to refer to the (usually formalised) opportunities employees have to input into decisions affecting their work and to be properly consulted and communicated with over workplace issues. It is widely acknowledged and documented by industry bodies such as CIPD, HSE, Engage for Success and the Fair Work Convention) and has been extensively explored in organisational and academic literature.

Research such as that carried out by Alfes et al (2010), Truss, Soane and Edwards (2006), and West and Dawson (2012) shows that having opportunities to feed views upwards and to input into higher-level decision-making is linked to higher levels of engagement. At a more immediate level, both Lewis, Donaldson-Feilder and Tharani (2011) and Robinson and Hayday (2009) showed that a manager who welcomed ideas and feedback from employees, and provided opportunities for team members to input into decision-making, was able to benefit from higher levels of engagement within their team.

At its earliest conception, Kahn (1990), the first proponent of the distinct idea of employee engagement, described feeling able to express and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences as a key determinant of engagement. Relevantly, Kahn argued that the degree to which people personally engage is based on their perceptions of safety, as determined by the quality of relationships they have with managers and colleagues. He observed that the perception of power and the unconscious roles people play in group dynamics, such as being cast in a supporting rather than a leading role, may inhibit the ability to safely personally engage.

Wherever there are power differentials, conscious or unconscious concerns about personal safety and survival will be present for the less formally powerful. This is a thought-provoking notion for those interested in understanding what might have gone wrong with the political polls and equally so for those who need to understand how and why formal and informal ways of collecting and sharing employee views might nevertheless be concealing the extent or nature of employees' genuine views.

# The transformative power of being heard

Some recent research within a conflict resolution context sheds light on what happens when the powerful listen and the unheard feel heard. Bruneau and Saxe (2012) examined the impact of the opportunity for members of each group in a conflict situation (in this case Israelis and Palestinians and also white Americans and immigrant Mexicans) to share stories about their lives with members of the other group. The perspective-taking partner in each exchange was required to summarise the perspective they had been given by the member of the other group. Bruneau and Saxe found that both parties in the

exchange of views benefited from the chance to share their own perspectives in terms of the nature of their attitudes towards those in the other group. Significantly, they also found that 'Positive changes in attitudes towards the [other group] were greater for [the less powerful groups] after perspective-*giving* and for [more powerful groups] after perspective-*taking*."

Without suggesting that organisational leaders and workers are in any way engaged in a conflict situation as a matter of position, there are elements of this research which make a strong case for organisations to facilitate and encourage upward communication from the less powerful, and ensure active listening and response from leaders and strategists (the more powerful). It is possible that creation of the opportunity to be heard might be most influential in engaging those groups of employees who feel least powerful within the organisation and whose voices may be lost in an organisation-wide annual survey.

## An opportunity to consider who is getting heard

When the consequences of not listening to people are considered, the value of enabling all employees to communicate their views in an open way and to know that they have been attended to is clear. Employee views may be critical, difficult to hear or run counter to what is considered acceptable or informed, but the potential organisational cost of failing to allow expression can't be ignored. Paradoxically, supporting the expression of disengagement can in fact be evidence of strengthening engagement – a desire to effect positive change through making oneself heard.

Knowing our perspective has been heard can help to increase our personal and professional feeling of connection with the people who have asked us what we think and feel, and taken the time to listen. In turn it makes us more interested in hearing their perspective and to feel an increased sense of shared responsibility for the matters in question.

The challenge for leaders in doing this is not insignificant. It takes time, commitment and a genuine desire to remain receptive and non-defensive in the face of upward communication that will inevitably contain criticism along with possible compliments. Leaders have to hold on to the idea that while everyone has a responsibility to communicate with respect, those in power need to have the courage to ask questions that may have answers they don't want to hear, and the resilience to accept the diversity and elements of conflict that truthful answers may reveal, so that opinions and ideas are seen as both safe to express and acceptable in their difference. It may help to view this as an invaluable form of predictive HR analytics.

# Doing it all already?

The seismic political implications of being unaware of the strength and breadth of feelings that was experienced in the political sphere in 2016 might usefully nudge organisations to ensure there are no elements of complacency in their own domains. Even if organisations feel they are doing a good job already, how can we ensure that people feel heard and so build engagement and performance?

It might be useful to examine our measures of employee attitudes to review whether they are good enough to capture any disaffection and disengagement. Are there perhaps groups of people who might not be heard via the channels we use? What about the least powerful, who are they and might they have a perspective we are missing? Are we hearing the voices of introverts, any non-readers, the young, the less dogmatic, those with low self-esteem, remote workers? Are our avenues for employee voice dominated by unionised or representative industrial relations channels and are these channels suitable for and used equally by everyone: the traditionally masculine paradigm underpinning them may not suit everyone or particular issues such as ideas and innovation.

Other worthwhile questions might include: How can line managers make it possible for people to feel heard in their daily roles? Have we asked people if they feel they are being heard? Have we asked people what their priorities for discussion are, as opposed to those set by the organisation? Do we hear the views that are less acceptable or do we close down avenues for discussion of those concerns? How can HR support leaders in hearing the voices of the disengaged without an emotional or invested response that allows them to be disregarded or driven underground?

Addressing these questions will open new perspectives on what we can do in our organisations to encourage employee voice and ensure people feel heard and important to those in power. A recent HBR article by Ron Carucci, quotes Elizabeth Morrison who was speaking at the Ethics by Design Conference 2016, arguing that 'You have to confront the two fundamental challenges preventing employees from speaking up. The first is the natural feeling of futility — feeling like speaking up isn't worth the effort or that no one wants to hear it. The second is the natural fear that speaking up will lead to retribution or harsh reactions.'

This is undoubtedly a challenge for every level of leadership in organisations, from board-level executive to first line managers. These things are much easier said than done, but not ensuring that our people are heard could surprise us, and cost us, more than we think.

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## More on this topic

This chapter adds to IES's extensive research on employee motivation and its role in organisations. To discuss the arguments put forward in this chapter, or to find out more about IES tools, surveys and further work on employee engagement, please contact Amanda Callen, Senior Research Fellow:

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This article is from IES report: Tamkin P (ed) (2017), *Darkening skies? IES Perspectives on HR 2017*, Report 510, Institute for Employment Studies.

The full report is available online at: http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/hr2017

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