

Video – Voice - Adrian Wilkinson
(Duration 2 min 38 sec)

What is Employee Voice?

Employee voice concerns the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say over organisational affairs for matters that affect their interests at work and the interests of the organisation. Employee voice can be expressed through a variety of routes, formal and informal, direct and indirect, union and non-union. They're all concerned with the ways in which employees express their views and trying to get their opinions across in the organisation.

Why is Employee Voice important?

We spend a lot of our time at work under the direction of others. It's important that we're able to express our views and our individual human talents. Much of the time employees are enthusiastic, committed, energetic, but not always when they're at work. This is a tragedy of the modern workplace. It's important that organisations find ways and means through which they set up structures and devices so that employees can put across their views. It's an important from employees from a point of view of human dignity and a democratic right that they're able to express their views as well.

Many well-known organisational disasters, the Columbia space tragedy, Bundaberg Hospital, the collapse of Enron, are related to a failure of employee voice. So it's important that organisations set up those structures to help employees to put forward their ideas.

What does Employee Voice look like at work?

Employee voice at work can be expressed through a variety of different mechanisms. What's clear is that employee's like to have a variety of structures in which to speak up rather than a single structure. Those structures can be varied across the organisation but the key thing is that managers actually listen to employees. It's not enough to set up structures, they have to listen and they also have to take notice and take action depending on what employees say, otherwise these structures are deemed to be inauthentic and workers see them as spitting in the wind.

What challenges does Employee Voice address?

Employee voice proposes challenges for managers. It's much easier to tell people what to do, to operate in models of management we've had from a hundred years ago. Follow the orders, do what you're told. Voice creates new challenges for managers, they need to be better trained, they need to be able to engage with their workforce in a very different way. Social media also imposes challenges for organisations. It's no longer the case that organisations set up structures in a way to control employee voice. Employees have ways of speaking up and sometimes the silence can be a way of speaking up in a very different sort of context. There's a world of work to remake and employee voice is part of that challenge.