

Making Employee Voice Actionable: The SPEAK System for Psychological Safety and Organizational Learning

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Abstract

Organizations often possess more operational knowledge than their formal reports reveal. Employees notice weak procedures, emerging risks, customer frustrations, and possibilities for improvement, yet hierarchy and interpersonal risk can keep those observations unspoken. This conceptual review develops the SPEAK framework to explain how organizations can convert upward communication into a dependable learning process. Drawing on the uploaded Human Behavior in Organizations manuscript as a thematic foundation and integrating established research on psychological safety, employee voice, silence, inclusive leadership, and ethical leadership, the framework specifies five linked practices: Signal access and leader openness; Protect interpersonal safety; Enable promotive and prohibitive voice; Act on issues visibly; and Keep feedback and learning loops. The argument is that invitations to speak are insufficient when employees cannot predict how leaders will receive, evaluate, and respond to their input. A credible voice system therefore requires both a relational climate and an operating process. The article distinguishes psychological safety from comfort, voice from routine communication, and responsiveness from agreement. It also identifies ethical boundaries: anonymity cannot substitute for accountable leadership, confidentiality should be limited and explained, and harmful or unlawful conduct requires protected escalation beyond ordinary team dialogue. The SPEAK framework offers managers a practical architecture for meetings, reporting channels, decision records, and follow-through while providing researchers with propositions that can be tested across hierarchical, professional, and hybrid work settings.

Keywords: employee voice; psychological safety; organizational silence; upward communication; ethical leadership; learning systems

Introduction

Organizational learning begins before a formal review, training session, or strategic retreat. It begins when someone detects a discrepancy between what is expected and what is occurring. A frontline employee may see a recurring service failure, a technician may recognize a safety hazard, or a new team member may notice an assumption that established members no longer question. Whether that observation becomes useful organizational knowledge depends on more than the employee's willingness to communicate. It depends on whether the surrounding system makes speaking consequential, intelligible, and reasonably safe.

The uploaded Human Behavior in Organizations manuscript treats communication, feedback, leadership, teamwork, conflict, and ethics as interconnected features of organizational life. Its discussion of upward communication is especially important: feedback from lower organizational levels can inform policy and practice, but employees may hesitate when power differences are salient or when earlier feedback appeared to be ignored. The same manuscript presents open communication, constructive feedback, and ethical leadership as foundations for cooperation and accountability. Taken together, these themes point to a central design problem. Organizations need not only channels through which employees can speak; they need a social and procedural architecture that allows concerns and ideas to travel without being distorted, punished, or abandoned.

Voice research sharpens this problem. Employee voice is discretionary communication intended to improve a work unit or organization, while silence is the withholding of potentially relevant information (Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Because voice challenges the status quo or exposes a problem, it carries interpersonal and career risk. Managerial openness can reduce that risk, but an open-door statement does not guarantee that the door is experienced as open (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Psychological safety helps explain the gap between formal permission and enacted participation: people are more likely to ask questions, admit errors, and raise concerns when they believe interpersonal risk will not lead to humiliation or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999).

This article develops the SPEAK framework as a conceptual bridge between these literatures and practical organizational design. The framework treats voice as a cycle rather than a single act. Leaders signal that input is wanted, protect the conditions under which it can be offered, enable different kinds of voice, act visibly on what is raised, and keep the learning loop open. The resulting model does not promise harmony or automatic acceptance of every suggestion. Its purpose is narrower and more demanding: to make the treatment of employee input fair, traceable, and useful.

Conceptual Basis and Scope

This article uses a bounded integrative synthesis. The uploaded manuscript supplied the organizing themes-upward communication, feedback, leadership behavior, conflict, organizational change, and ethical responsibility. Peer-reviewed works were then selected to clarify the mechanisms connecting those themes. The synthesis is conceptual rather than systematic: it does not claim exhaustive coverage, estimate effect sizes, or report original data. Its contribution is the arrangement of established ideas into an auditable managerial process.

Three distinctions define the scope. First, voice is not equivalent to communication volume. An organization can generate many messages while suppressing information that questions priorities, identifies misconduct, or exposes implementation failure. Second, psychological safety is not the absence of standards. A psychologically safe team can maintain demanding expectations while allowing members to disclose uncertainty and error. Third, leader responsiveness is not the same as agreement. Employees can accept a decision that does not adopt their proposal when the evaluation criteria, constraints, and reasoning are explained. These distinctions prevent a voice initiative from collapsing into an invitation campaign with no decision discipline.

Voice, Silence, and Interpersonal Risk

Voice and silence are better understood as motivated choices than as fixed personality traits. Van Dyne et al. (2003) conceptualized both as multidimensional constructs shaped by motives such as resignation, self-protection, or concern for others. Milliken et al. (2003) showed why employees may avoid raising issues upward, including fear of negative consequences and beliefs that speaking will not make a difference. These insights imply that silence cannot be diagnosed from quiet behavior alone. A quiet employee may lack relevant information, may prefer reflection, may expect futility, or may be managing a credible risk. The content of voice also matters. Liang et al. (2012) distinguished promotive voice, which proposes better ways of working, from prohibitive voice, which warns about harmful or inefficient practices. Promotive ideas can be welcomed as innovation while prohibitive concerns are treated as disloyalty. Yet the latter often carries the more urgent learning value because it identifies loss, misconduct, or danger. A mature system must therefore make room for both aspiration and warning.

Psychological safety is the relational condition that makes interpersonal risk manageable, not nonexistent. Edmondson's (1999) work linked a shared sense of safety with learning behaviors in teams. Later meta-analytic evidence reinforced the relevance of supportive relationships, leadership, and work design to psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). Leader inclusiveness is especially consequential when status differences are pronounced because invitations and appreciation from higher-status members can legitimate contributions from people whose expertise might otherwise be discounted (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). The managerial task is thus to reduce avoidable social penalties while preserving responsibility for evidence, respectful conduct, and task performance.

The SPEAK Framework

SPEAK converts these ideas into five mutually reinforcing practices. The sequence is deliberately circular. A visible response to one concern becomes the signal that shapes whether the next employee will speak. Conversely, an unanswered suggestion can undo a well-designed channel because employees learn from observed consequences more than from slogans.

S - Signal Access and Leader Openness

Employees first need to know where, when, and how voice is expected. General encouragement is ambiguous; specific invitations lower the cognitive and political cost of participation. A manager might ask, “What could fail in this plan?”, “Which customer consequence have we not considered?”, or “What evidence would change our decision?” Such prompts normalize challenge as part of the work rather than as a personal confrontation.

Signal credibility depends on leader behavior. Detert and Burris (2007) found managerial openness to be an important antecedent of subordinate voice. Openness is enacted when leaders listen without premature rebuttal, ask clarifying questions, acknowledge uncertainty, and separate the messenger's status from the merit of the message. Inclusive words and deeds similarly invite contributions from members who may otherwise defer to professional hierarchy (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Access should also be plural: regular meetings, one-to-one conversations, documented suggestion routes, and protected escalation channels serve different levels of sensitivity and urgency.

P - Protect Interpersonal Safety

Protection means controlling foreseeable retaliation, embarrassment, and exclusion. It starts with meeting conduct: no ridicule, interrupting, motive attribution, or public punishment for a good-faith question. Leaders should thank the contributor before evaluating the content, then test the issue against evidence and standards. The sequence matters because an immediate defensive response teaches observers that the stated invitation was not genuine. Psychological safety does not exempt employees from accuracy, civility, or accountability. It creates permission to raise incomplete observations and reasonable concerns so they can be examined. False allegations, harassment, and reckless disclosure remain subject to policy. The organization should explain these boundaries in advance, together with the protections available for lawful and good-faith reporting. Ethical leadership strengthens this arrangement when leaders model fair treatment, communicate standards, and reinforce conduct through decisions rather than rhetoric alone (Brown et al., 2005).

E - Enable Promotive and Prohibitive Voice

A single generic suggestion box obscures the different handling needs of ideas and warnings. Promotive voice benefits from a short business case: the problem or opportunity, proposed change, expected benefit, required resources, and a reversible first step. Prohibitive voice needs a risk-oriented template: observed condition, people or process exposed, urgency, available evidence, and immediate containment needs. Distinguishing the two increases clarity without ranking one as more desirable.

Enablement also requires skills. Employees can be taught to frame observations without diluting them, connect a concern to shared goals, distinguish facts from inference, and propose an appropriate next action. Managers need complementary skills in inquiry, emotional regulation, and evidence-based response. These practices make voice more usable while avoiding the unfair expectation that employees must present a flawless solution before they are allowed to identify a problem.

A - Act on Issues Visibly

The most credible proof of a voice system is what happens after input is received. Every submission should move to an explicit status: acknowledged, under review, referred, tested, adopted, deferred, or declined. The response should identify the responsible owner, expected decision date, and reasoning standard. Visibility prevents ideas from disappearing into an administrative void and allows the organization to learn from patterns across submissions.

Action need not mean acceptance. Resource limits, legal requirements, strategic trade-offs, or contrary evidence may justify a negative decision. The essential practice is a reasoned close-out. Morrison (2014) emphasizes that voice is shaped by both perceived risk and perceived efficacy. If employees repeatedly observe that input produces no explanation, they may rationally infer that future effort is wasted. A concise decision record therefore has motivational as well as governance value.

K - Keep Feedback and Learning Loops

A completed response should improve the next cycle. Teams can review what types of issues were raised, which channels were used, how long decisions took, and whether particular groups or shifts were absent from participation. These indicators are diagnostic, not performance quotas. A sudden increase in concerns may indicate greater trust rather than deteriorating operations, while a quiet channel may indicate either stability or fear. Interpretation requires contextual inquiry.

Learning loops should connect local voice to organizational memory. Resolved concerns can inform procedure updates, training cases, onboarding materials, risk registers, and after- action reviews. Where confidentiality permits, leaders should report what changed and why. This creates a public link between contribution and learning. It also reduces repetitive reporting because employees can see which issues have already been considered.

Table 1
The SPEAK Operating Architecture

Element	Managerial practice	Observable evidence
S - Signal	Invite input at defined moments and through multiple channels.	Specific prompts; accessible routes; leader inquiry.
P - Protect	Reduce retaliation, ridicule, and status-based dismissal.	Conduct rules; safe escalation; non-retaliation follow-up.
E - Enable	Separate and support promotive and prohibitive voice.	Simple templates; framing skills; evidence guidance.
A - Act	Assign, evaluate, decide, and explain.	Owner; status; deadline; reasoned close-out.
K - Keep	Feed resolved issues into routines and organizational memory.	Trend review; policy updates; lessons communicated.

Note. Developed by the author from the conceptual synthesis presented in this article.

From Climate to Operating System

The five elements address a frequent implementation error: treating psychological safety as a desirable feeling without designing the processes that sustain it. Climate and procedure interact. A respectful leader may still lose credibility if reports are not tracked, while an elegant case-management system may remain unused if employees expect humiliation. SPEAK therefore requires alignment across three levels.

At the interaction level, managers structure conversations, respond to dissent, and regulate status dynamics. At the workflow level, channels classify, route, document, and close issues. At the governance level, senior leaders protect escalation, monitor retaliation, and examine recurrent patterns that local managers cannot solve. The cycle becomes reliable when an employee can anticipate not the decision itself, but the fairness of the process.

This architecture also clarifies the role of anonymity. Anonymous reporting can be necessary where risks are high, especially for misconduct or retaliation concerns. However, it limits follow-up and should not become the only safe route. A healthy system increases the range of issues that can be raised

openly while preserving confidential and anonymous options for cases that require them.

Conceptual Propositions

P1. Specific leader invitations will be more strongly associated with employee voice than general open-door statements because they reduce ambiguity about the relevance and timing of input.

P2. The relationship between voice channels and actual use will depend on observed leader response; channels will have limited value when prior contributors experience dismissal or retaliation.

P3. Separating promotive and prohibitive voice routes will improve the fit between the content raised and the organization's evaluation process.

P4. Visible, reasoned closure will support future voice even when suggestions are declined, provided employees perceive the evaluation as fair and non-retaliatory.

P5. Voice systems that link cases to organizational learning routines will produce more durable improvements than systems that treat each submission as an isolated transaction.

Managerial Application

Implementation can begin without a large technology platform. A team can reserve ten minutes in a weekly meeting for risks and improvements, use a two-field log for owner and decision date, and publish a monthly “heard-considered-changed” summary. Managers should rotate who speaks first, invite written input before meetings, and ask for contrary evidence before closing major decisions. These small design choices reduce the dominance of confidence, tenure, and conversational speed.

Organizations should also audit response quality. Useful questions include: Was the contributor acknowledged promptly? Was the concern restated accurately? Were evidence and assumptions separated? Was the appropriate level of confidentiality maintained? Was a decision owner assigned? Was the outcome communicated? The audit should search for differences across role,

employment status, location, and managerial unit without turning individual participation into a target.

Training should use realistic response practice rather than inspirational messaging alone. Leaders can rehearse receiving an inconvenient warning, responding to an incomplete idea, and explaining a decision not to proceed. Employees can practice converting observations into clear promotive or prohibitive statements. The purpose is not to script every exchange, but to build a shared grammar for responsible challenge.

Ethical Boundaries and Failure Modes

Voice programs can become ethically compromised when they transfer responsibility downward. Employees should not be asked to raise concerns in an open meeting when the organization knows that power holders may retaliate. Nor should psychological safety language be used to pressure people into personal disclosure. Participation must remain voluntary, and sensitive cases need competent, independent handling.

Three failure modes deserve attention. Performative listening occurs when leaders solicit ideas but have no process or authority to consider them. Selective safety occurs when improvement suggestions are welcomed but criticism of leadership is punished. Feedback exhaustion occurs when employees repeatedly provide input without visible closure. Each failure teaches silence. Repair requires an explicit acknowledgment, a change to the handling process, and evidence that the change persists.

Ethical leadership provides the normative anchor. Brown et al. (2005) describe ethical leadership through role modeling, communication, and reinforcement. Applied to voice, leaders must protect good-faith challenge even when it is personally uncomfortable, distinguish dissent from disloyalty, and ensure that confidentiality promises are accurate. A trustworthy process cannot guarantee favorable outcomes, but it can guarantee respectful treatment and principled evaluation.

Limitations and Research Agenda

SPEAK is a conceptual framework and should be tested rather than assumed effective. Future research could examine whether the five practices operate sequentially, whether one weak link constrains the entire cycle, and how effects vary across occupations, national cultures, union environments, and remote work. Longitudinal designs are especially important because employees update risk judgments from repeated observations.

Measurement should avoid treating more reports as an uncomplicated success indicator. Researchers could combine channel-use records with response time, closure quality, retaliation perceptions, issue recurrence, and learning outcomes. Designs should distinguish promotive from prohibitive content and evaluate differences in participation across status groups. Qualitative work could also identify how employees interpret silence, partial responses, and managerial explanations.

The model does not replace legal reporting duties, grievance procedures, safeguarding systems, or professional ethics. Its intended domain is the broader set of operational ideas and concerns that organizations need to learn from while routing high-risk cases to appropriate formal mechanisms.

Conclusion

Employee voice becomes organizational learning only when the system can receive, protect, evaluate, and remember it. The SPEAK framework links relational safety with procedural credibility: signal access, protect interpersonal safety, enable different forms of voice, act visibly, and keep the learning loop open. Its central claim is practical. Employees do not judge a speaking-up culture from invitations alone; they judge it from what happens to people and information after someone speaks. Organizations that make those consequences fair and traceable are better positioned to detect risk, improve work, and sustain ethical accountability.

Source Artifact Note

Source artifact note. The thematic starting point for this article was Human Behavior in Organizations, an uploaded 263-page instructional manuscript. Its sections on upward communication, feedback, group behavior, leadership, conflict, change, and ethics were conceptually synthesized; the present article reports no original participants, intervention, or statistical analysis.

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