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- ▶ The effects of guanxi on employee voice

Chris Murray talks with Tina Davidson

- ▶ How big should a young firm think?

By Giuseppe Criaco

- ▶ Crowdsourced consumer data: how do we make sure it's good?

By Gabriele Paolacci

- ▶ Innovation is a team sport

By Dirk Deichmann

- ▶ The whys and whens of intra-team power struggles

By Lisanne van Bunderen



The effects of guanxi on employee voice

Chris Murray talks with **Tina Davidson**

The perhaps-apocryphal lament by an industrial age leader that ‘They send me the whole man when all I need are his hands,’ reflects a once-prevalent view that leaders “think” and employees “do”. Today, companies know that they benefit the most when their employees are motivated to share their thoughts, ideas, opinions and suggestions.

Companies recognize that innovation, learning, decision-making and even competitive advantage all improve with open, honest, employee-driven, bottom-up communication – what Tina Davidson, assistant professor of cross-cultural management at RSM, calls in her research *upwards constructive voice*, or more simply, *voice*.

According to Davidson, today’s companies also recognize that the key to employee voice is the *relationship* between supervisors and their subordinates – a relationship that can either facilitate or inhibit the subordinate’s desire and ability to speak up.

between supervisors and subordinates looks like this: ‘If I do good work for my supervisor,’ she explains, ‘my supervisor provides me with some work-related reward in return – for example, a nice new project that I get to work on.’ This reciprocal exchange view of workplace relationships tends to be more characteristic of Western cultural contexts than non-Western cultural contexts and is captured in the predominant Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory of leadership, she says.

Davidson believes Western-oriented companies and organisations can benefit if they broaden their mindset. ‘I pro-

actions in vast parts of the non-Western world,’ she explains. ‘We should make our understanding and knowledge of the supervisor-subordinate relationship more global, especially given increasingly multicultural workplaces and teams today.’ For Davidson, a more global perspective can lead to new ideas and solutions about issues such as employee voice as well as a general awareness about cultural diversity in the workplace.

A recent study by Davidson that examines how the Chinese supervisor-subordinate relationship concept of *guanxi* impacts upwards constructive voice demonstrates the power of a broader mindset. The study, conducted in collaboration with Linn Van Dyne of Michigan State University and Bilian Lin of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is based on data from 262 employees of a large Hong Kong-based telecommunications company.

Roots in the family

‘*Guanxi* means relationship,’ says Davidson, ‘but we cannot really translate it so singularly because it has more meanings and more implications than we have for that term. Within the context of supervisor-subordinate interactions, having *guanxi* means that both supervisor and subordinate follow a range of relationship rules and norms to maintain a harmonious, long-term and mutually beneficial relationship. Within the Chinese society these *guanxi* rules are rooted in Confucianism and circumscribe a paternalistic relationship,’ she says, ‘almost a father-son like relationship with a mutual care and appropriate deference.’ ▶

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Unfortunately, Davidson says, many Western-based companies and organisations view all relationships between supervisors and subordinates as “tit-for-tat” reciprocal relationships. From that perspective, a high-quality relationship

pose that we extend our thinking about relationships, because at this point we tend to look at them from quite a Western perspective and do not account for relationship facets, such as affect and deference, which govern work inter-

The effects of guanxi on employee voice *(continued)*

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In China, Davidson explains, 'the family is kind of a blueprint for how we relate to one another in an organisation and in society at large.' On the one hand there is deep affection, she says, but there is also 'even between working colleagues, this kind of reverence for seniority and respect for people who are more senior.' For example, in Chinese companies, Davidson notes, colleagues refer to one another with such terms as "older brother" and "younger sister". This differentiation in and reverence for seniority, she says, 'is totally natural and does not mean you are of lesser value in any way.'

Perhaps reflecting the family dynamic roots described above, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* relationships have two dimensions, Davidson says. One dimension emphasizes the *deference* of the subordinate to the supervisor, 'and is more hierarchical and authoritarian,' she says; the second dimension emphasizes the "affective attachment" between supervisor and subordinate. Although it might seem paradoxical, 'it's possible in East Asian cultures for deference and a strong affective relationship to go together,' she says. 'As a result, you feel very close to your supervisor but there is a certain distance, or an inequality, in this relationship.'

Employee voice

In the study, Davidson and her colleagues found that the multi-dimensional, somewhat paradoxical nature of *guanxi* led to varied implications for employee voice.

First, their research showed that *low job control* spurred subordinates

to use their relationship with their supervisors. As Davidson explains, 'When people don't have personal control, when they don't have a sense that they can personally influence the situation, they rely on their relationships to inform their actions and make changes.' As a result, she says, 'It's only when job control is low that they use their relationships to inform their voice behaviour.'

This reaction, she says, contradicts the general assumption that low job control undermines an employee's initiative. 'We would expect that when people don't have job control, this would really be an inhibitor to productivity,' she says. 'But here we see that it unlocks this relational facet.'

Unlocking this relational facet, however, led to opposite responses, according to the study. Subordinates in relationships that emphasized the deference dimension of *guanxi*, which entails not only respect but also a measure of obedience, were less likely to speak up. In *guanxi* relationships that emphasized affection, employees were *more* likely to speak up.

Intuitively, the results are logical. In deference relationships, nurturing a good relationship with supervisors is best accomplished through deference and obedience; thus, the subordinate stays quiet, in the hopes of being rewarded with influence by an appreciative supervisor. In affective relationships, subordinates don't have the same fear of speaking up, and believe, on the contrary, that low job control is best addressed by communicating their concerns to the supervisor.

Davidson notes that summarizing the results of the study might oversimplify *guanxi* relationships as one or the other dimension. 'Every supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* has a bit of both,' she says. 'It is rather the extent to which one or the other dimension is emphasized more excessively or strongly that informs voice in these opposite ways.'

Open up the repertoire

There are a number of lessons to draw from this research into *guanxi* and voice, Davidson says. Given the opposite reactions to low job control, the first lesson is to tailor employee voice initiatives to the nature of the relationships in the organisation, she says. In deferential relationships, governed more by obedience than affection, the key to increasing the voice of employees is to combat their feelings of low job control, so they don't have to depend on their relationship with their supervisor and overly emphasize deference/obedience.

'I think, for example, one way to give employees more control would be to install more outcome-oriented reward systems,' she says. 'We hold them accountable for the outcome but leave them free in terms of how they are going to achieve that outcome, and provide them with the resources to do that as well. So, they kind of have more control in that sense.'

Davidson also urges managers to 'open up the repertoire' of their employees by 'providing feedback in terms of what they can do more of, what resources they have available, and what kind of behaviours are possible in their situation,' she says. For example, instead



of letting employees assume that the only way to have a good relationship and be valued by their supervisors is to be deferential, companies should launch 'some meta-communication and feedback that there are other possibilities and that those opportunities can be explored,' she says.

Another option to increasing voice is to help de-emphasize the deferential dimension of the relationship and emphasize the affective dimension, she says. 'One possibility is to work on the affective attachment side of the equation, trying to create affective and close ties in the subordinate-supervisor relationships to help subordinates find their voice.'

A path to understanding

One of the challenges for the issue of voice, according to Davidson, is that speaking up is not usually part of the core tasks or responsibilities of an employee. In other words, voice is not an "in-role" function on which performance is rated, she says. 'If a person is not speaking up with change-oriented ideas and suggestions, managers may not feel that something is terribly wrong. But, at the same time, they may not be getting the kind of ideas that help them improve their decision making and foster organisational improvement and innovation,' she says.

For example, if you're an expatriate manager rolling out a marketing plan or launching a new product in China, she says, 'you may be going ahead with your own plans and decisions because you're not getting any other insights. If the reason for this lack of improvement-oriented ideas from employees

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is their deferential view of supervisor-subordinate relationships (versus their approval of your plans and decisions), you may have an issue and your company may be up for a loss.'

A thorough understanding of *guanxi* will undoubtedly help Western managers avoid such problems and better manage their East-Asian employees, Davidson says. Just as importantly, however, her research and other research on Eastern practices help expand the Western mindset on relationships to include the full spectrum of relationship types – which offers managers a more complete and nuanced perspective on workplace relationships.

'We know that reciprocity, deference and affective attachment relationships have been tested, relating to different outcomes such as commitment, in a number of different countries including Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, India, Brazil, and the United Kingdom – and they are relevant,' she says. These kinds of studies, including her own, 'can lead to more global knowledge and understanding about what it means to be in a supervisor-subordinate relationship.'

Since the publication of the study, Davidson continues to explore ways in which indigenous, non-Western perspectives can broaden Western management practices and mindsets. 'I

studied Chinese and I'm very interested in that cultural context, which can really be a catalyst for questioning and enriching our current understanding of organisations,' she says.

For example, Davidson says she is currently exploring how prototypical Eastern and Western communication styles influence the voice process, as well as how to promote creativity in a context where hierarchical structure may constrain it. The ultimate goal, she says, is to conduct research, such as the recent *guanxi* and voice study that helps 'open up the playing field in management and enriches our understanding, theories, and practices.' ■

The paper, *Too attached to speak up? It depends: How supervisor-subordinate guanxi and perceived job control influence upward constructive voice*, written by Tina Davidson, Linn Van Dyne and Bilian Lin, is published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* Volume 143, November 2017, Pages 39-53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2017.07.002>

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