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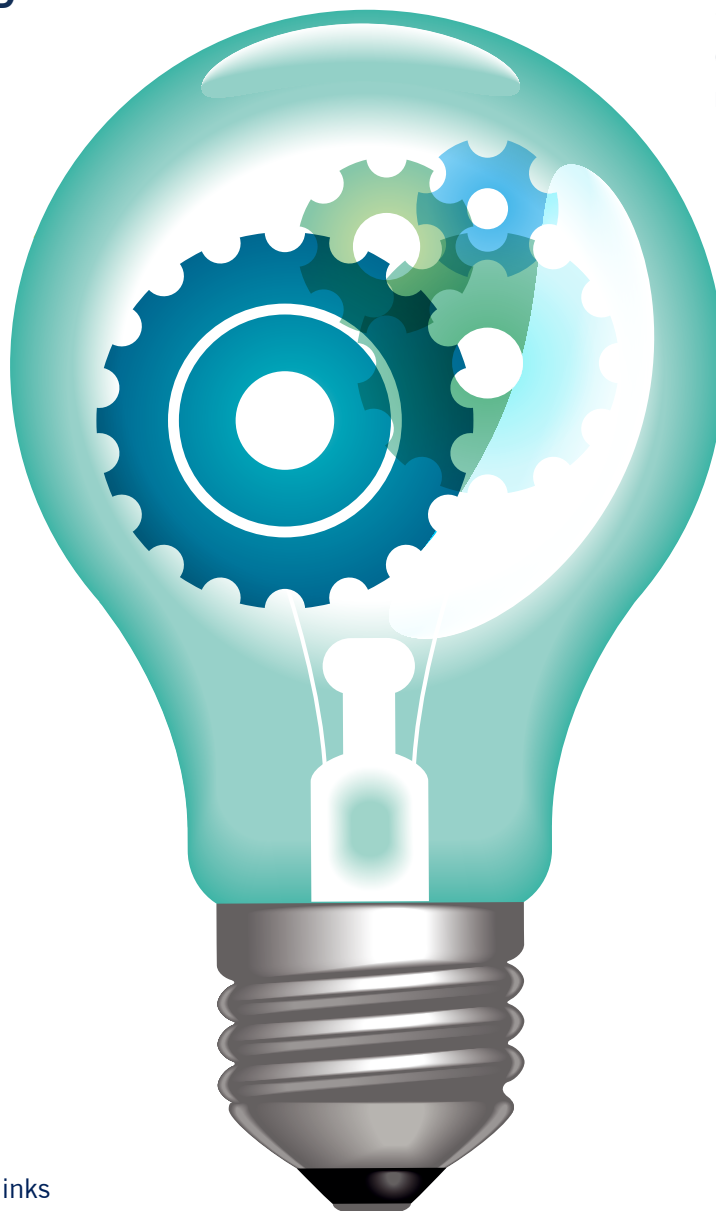
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giving voice to  
employees**

by Niek Hoogervorst



The business school that thinks  
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# Procedural fairness and the power of giving voice to employees

by Niek Hoogervorst

**A perennial question faced by managers is how much they should listen to their employees. Let no employee have a say and you encourage foot-dragging, hurt morale, and develop a reputation as an unfair manager. Listen too much and you may paralyse the organisation, still hurt morale, and earn a reputation as an ineffective leader.**



As my research focuses mostly on questions of ethics and leadership, I thought a project that investigated how managers actually navigate this conundrum might be a good way to understand more about how employees and their managers communicate, and how organisations can build cultures that are both fair and effective.

I asked Marius van Dijke, an associate professor at RSM, and David De Cremer, a professor of

management at the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in China, to work with me on a study that would attempt to understand who managers grant a voice to when making important decisions.

Our study, published in the journal *Human Relations* in June 2013, looked specifically at how managers' perceptions of employee needs for control and need to belong affected the degree to which they paid attention

to their opinions. Our decision to focus on these two needs was fuelled by a robust research stream, which had shown that when managers involve employees in decision-making, employees experience a greater sense of control over outcomes and a deeper sense of being valued.

## Need to belong?

In our first experiment, 98 aspiring managers from a Dutch university were told that they were being placed in one of a number of working groups. They were put alone in soundproof cubicles and told that they would be divided into groups of one leader (manager) and four employees. In reality, all were told that they had been chosen as leaders.

After we explained to them the tasks they would undertake (which would include prioritising emails and memos, distributing tasks, supervising employees, and making decisions), the subjects received short descriptions about members of their group.

Half of the participants read a description of a group member as 'someone who lies awake at night when important decisions have to be made... He is someone who needs to feel part of the decision-making process so that he can influence the outcomes (suggesting a high need for control of this group member).' The other half read a description of

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a worker who had the opposite set of traits indicating a low need for control. Additionally, the participants read that this group member felt that being an included and valued member of the group was of great importance to him (suggesting a high need to belong), or conversely that he didn't care whether he was considered a valued member (suggesting a low need to belong).

We then asked our "leaders" in how many of ten decision-making procedures they wanted to give their employees a say. These procedures included decisions on the distribution of tasks, setting up evaluation criteria, and installing a punishment and reward system.

## Giving voice

Our results revealed that our subjects chose to give the most voice to employees who had both a high need for control and a high need to belong. In other words, they intended to listen most to workers who cared not only about influencing self-relevant outcomes, but also about being part of the team.

To confirm whether actual managers would make the same choice, we surveyed a Dutch research panel that consisted of employees from a variety of organisations. A total of 93 pairs of bosses and employees responded. Each manager was asked

to characterise how they perceived the need for control and the need for belonging of a worker on their team. In turn, we asked these employees to rate how much say their manager gave them in important decisions.

We found that the results coincided with those of the simulation in our student experiment: managers said they tended to listen more to workers who had high control needs and a high need for belonging.

We have two possible explanations for this behaviour. One is that leaders make a strategic choice to listen to employees they believe have both a need for a high degree of control and a high need to belong. They may reason that employees who care only about

second explanation is that leaders are behaving instinctively and extend control as a reciprocal reward for the employee's loyalty or engagement.

As an interesting side note, given the low marks bosses generally get in popular culture, the leaders in our study seemed fairly sensitive in that they perceived their employees' traits in a way that was largely consistent with employees' self-rated traits. While the correlations weren't perfect, they were positive and significant.

## Perceptions of fairness

Our conclusions build on the agreement scholars have had for some time about the importance of giving employees a voice tends to have in giving

*"A perception of fairness usually makes employees feel more connected to the organisation and boosts their motivation and meaningfulness of their job."*

employees a sense of procedural fairness. Nice guys may or may not finish last, but fair guys seem to do pretty well: bosses who don't trust their employees can easily find themselves caught in a downward spiral of mutual suspicion, while leaders who have a ▶

# Procedural fairness and the power of giving voice to employees (continued)

by Niek Hoogervorst

sense of fairness and who show their employees that they are fair tend to be more effective.

A perception of fairness usually makes employees feel more connected to the organisation and boosts their motivation and meaningfulness of their job. This research clarifies when and why bosses actively seek their employees' counsel.

effective (including granting voice to employees), research on antecedents of these behaviours is still in its infant stages. Indeed, as clear as the results of our study were, they also raise some new questions.

For instance, are some leaders more empathic than others? Does more status reduce leaders' ability to empathise, causing them to focus less

show that most supervisors are aware of their employees' desire for fairness, but that they have no problem treating them fairly as long as they feel that their employees are committed to the company. ■

This article is based on the paper *When do leaders grant voice? How leaders' perceptions of followers' control and belongingness needs affect the enactment of fair procedures*, written by Niek Hoogervorst, David De Cremer and Marius van Dijke, and published in the journal *Human Relations*, July 2013: 66 (7); 973-992. doi:10.1177/0018726713482992.

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*“Managers should understand the positive effects of granting employees voice.”*

## Important conclusions

Employees and managers may each draw important conclusions from this study:

- If you want your boss to consider your opinion, let him or her know that you want to have a say. But to get your boss to truly listen, make sure that you also demonstrate that you care about being a part of the company.
- Managers should understand the positive effects of granting employees voice. It increases employee satisfaction, improves compliance, and creates a more meaningful workplace for employees.

Ultimately, although we know a lot about which leadership behaviours are

on the needs of their employees and more on their own personal goals? How do leaders really feel about fairness? Do they listen to workers because they feel it's the right thing to do, or because it's the most expedient thing to do?

One way to test this might be to compare whether leaders are more likely to listen to what their employees have to say about unimportant decisions than important ones. If the employees only get to comment on the trivia, it would suggest that their bosses are listening more out of political savvy than real respect.

Former GE CEO Jack Welch once said about leadership: 'The hardest part is to be fair.' Our research suggests, however, that this may not be quite right. We believe the results

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