Toward a workplace that facilitates civility while encouraging prosocial and remedial voice

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Cortina, Cortina, and Cortina (2019) raise an intriguing conundrum—how to encourage civility without simultaneously inhibiting the exercise of voice, particularly in the academic context. We echo their call to pair such civility/incivility interventions with "efforts to protect and promote voice" (Cortina et al., 2019, p. 373). Encouraging voice is inherently difficult, as employees may be concerned about the consequences of exercising voice, even in academic contexts where freedom of expression is a particularly heralded right. Therein lies the challenge. What can organizations do support, even encourage, voice (both prosocial and remedial) from employees so as to protect free speech rights, as well as learn of and take measures to improve the workplace, yet encourage employees to do so in a constructive (civil) manner? We present a set of recommendations for how these things might be accomplished. Here we primarily focus on prosocial and remedial voice in the context of employment more broadly, recognizing that freedom of expression in academe, including through social media, can also serve both prosocial and remediation goals to the larger community by shedding light on less known points of view or drawing attention to wrongdoing that would otherwise not be identified.

Presuming organizations would want to learn about employees' concerns of potential pitfalls or ideas for improving work processes (prosocial voice), employee voice would be a desirable source of information for employers. Similarly, it would make sense that employers would rather learn about mistreatment from employees themselves (remedial voice) through informal conflict resolution or grievance filing rather than them seeking redress through litigation or exiting the organization, taking the critical information needed to address the situation with them. Indeed, early theory posited employee voice to be a reflection of loyalty, as it offers valuable information to organizations to improve the workplace and operations (Hirschman, 1970). Yet, the empirical research suggests that voice (remedial and prosocial) is not necessarily well received. The labor relations literature indicates employees tend to be punished for voicing, encountering lower performance evaluations and other negative outcomes as a result of their voice behavior (e.g., Klaas & Denisi, 1989; Lewin, 1987; Lewin & Peterson, 1999). Although such punishment effects may in fact be a reflection of experiencing workplace mistreatment (Olson-Buchanan, 1996), particularly for certain kinds of mistreatment (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004), there is some evidence that lower negative outcomes are associated with willingness to voice informally (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2002).

Whether or not remedial voicers are punished, there appears to be the *perception* that voicing is potentially risky. Specifically, research suggests that, in general, employees are hesitant to voice and may choose to remain silent out of concern it may damage their credibility and have tangible consequences to career-related issues (i.e., negative performance evaluations or being terminated; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Morrison, 2011). Also, the perceived potential for retaliation is a consideration for choosing to voice (e.g., Klaas, Olson-Buchanan, & Ward, 2012). Relatedly,

several studies have identified a link between such risk-related variables as psychological safety and perceptions of leaders' ethicality to employee prosocial voice (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007), a type of voice that presumably carries less risk than remedial voice.

As such, the extant literature on the antecedents and consequences of voice serves to underscore the concern raised by Cortina et al. (2019): How do we encourage civility in the workplace, while encouraging the use of remedial voice and prosocial voice? Drawing from the literature on the antecedents and consequences of workplace voice, we offer the following four general recommendations.

Invest in multiple forms of voice mechanisms

Not all voice mechanisms are created equal (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2007, 2009). Empirical research on the antecedents of voice (see Klaas et al., 2012) indicates that several factors may play into whether and how an employee may choose to voice. These factors include the features of the voice mechanism (e.g., anonymity, formality), the type of message to be voiced (e.g., justice-oriented or prosocial; personal or general policy), and the individual characteristics of the voicer and other parties involved, among others. Consider a prosocial form of voice, such as making suggestions about how to change curriculum to align with the field. At first glance, this type of voice seems that it may not be subject to retaliation, and an informal approach such as offering a suggestion in an open meeting may seem reasonable. If the suggestion has implications (or is perceived to have implications) for the future of another person's job (or relevance of their research program), however, an informal approach may not be reasonable. If there is an added concern that making such a suggestion could be perceived as incivility, this mechanism might be considered even more worrisome. As such, providing another form of voice mechanism such as an online suggestion system would enhance the likelihood of capturing voice.

With respect to remedial voice, it is especially desirable to have both informal (e.g., one-on-one discussions) and more formal (e.g., grievance procedures) methods. This is to ensure that voice is captured should the informal methods not resolve the concern or not be viable, such as with claims of a biased tenure review (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2007). Another effective form of voice is the accessibility of third-party neutrals, such as mediators or ombuds. Such approaches can facilitate the resolution of mistreatment without using more formal and often public means (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). This is also useful as a viable alternative for resolving mistreatment concerns for employees who may be uncomfortable or uneasy with using formal methods (e.g., more loyal employees, Klaas et al., 2012). As there is no one-size-fits-all voice mechanism, it is critical that multiple, diverse voice mechanisms are developed to meet the varying desiderata.

Invest in the development and performance management of supervisors/leaders

We argue that investment in leader training is crucial for promoting voice in the workplace. Supervisors need to recognize, identify, and encourage voice as supportive and valuable to the workplace rather than as threatening to themselves or the workplace. This is important because supervisors play a critical role in whether the employee perceives the group as having a voice climate, which then influences the extent to which individuals engage in voice activity (Frazier & Bowler, 2015; Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989; Zohar, 2000; Zohar & Luria, 2005). Careful and thorough training is imperative so that supervisors can identify and modify their own behavior as well as facilitate change in others' behavior that is discouraging employees from speaking up. Not only might a supervisor's behavior serve to work against a voice climate, any change in behavior after voice is exercised could be perceived as retaliation, ultimately possibly contributing to a downward spiral of retaliation (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008, 2009). Relatedly, leader development may

also play an important role, as research suggests that employees are more likely to engage in pro-social and informal voice when they have positive attitudes toward their leader (e.g., Klaas et al., 2012). As important, an employee's views regarding the acceptance of and ultimately a climate for voice in a work unit goes beyond an employee's own experiences; an employee's willingness to voice may also be thwarted by how he/she perceives others are treated by a supervisor (e.g., department chair) following voice.

Informal and formal reward systems may also discourage sharing of information among group members—a proximal antecedent to employee voice behavior. As a result, management should also consider adjusting the incentive and performance evaluation system in ways that encourage active and open discussion among employees as well as recognizing/rewarding supervisors for supporting and encouraging voice within their work units.

Invest in a voice culture, communication, and conflict resolution skills for all employees

Part of the responsibility for creating a voice culture (discussed above) rests with employees as well. That is, the extent to which employees approach voice, from colleagues, students, or supervisors, as a desirable (or at least acceptable) part of the workplace has important implications for how voice is treated in organizations. In a climate supportive of voice, employees will be less reluctant to speak up, as they believe they would not be retaliated against. This is related to higher job satisfaction, which in turn would mitigate their chances of engaging in incivility (Settles, Cortina, Stewart, & Malley, 2007). Although managers' reactions to voice and incentive systems will play an important role in creating this culture, so will how employees are onboarded and evaluated, underscoring the importance of aligning all HR systems with a voice and civility culture.

Training will thus play a critical role with nonmanagerial employees as well. As Cortina et al. (2019) note, civility training and interventions often focus on teaching what employees should or should not do or how to respond when someone engages in incivility; however, these programs may discourage employees from engaging in voice activities. Yet, no workplace would or should be entirely free from conflicting ideas or views. The key is how these conflicts are navigated. When civility training is coupled with other training efforts such as communication and conflict resolution skills, employees could be better prepared to have those inevitable difficult conversations—about conflicting ideas or even perceptions of mistreatment—yet civilly (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). Here the key is to continue to have important discussions about content, but being cognizant about how you communicate the content may be perceived and possibly result in less than desirable responses.

Invest in repair, recovery, and responding to voice

Finally, we argue that in addition to fostering informal and formal voice mechanisms for employees, the organization must view voice as a continuous process and focus on post-voice relationship repair, particularly for remedial voice (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). Often, little to no attention is paid to the relationship of those parties involved in formal, or even informal, voice. Yet, the parties often work alongside one another moving forward. Having follow-up discussions with an ombud or mediator can go a long way toward repairing the relationship. Yet, the effect extends beyond the voicer to also include those that may be privy to the situation. How the organization handles the situation will have implications for subsequent behavior from either the initial voicer or other employees who have witnessed the process. The voicer, or others seeing how the voicer is treated, may engage in subsequent incivility or nonconstructive voice to cope with the negative response from the organization (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). These events could easily lead to a negative spiral for the employees and the organization.

Relatedly, paying attention to how others respond to prosocial voice is critical as well. As instructors learn quickly, treating well-intentioned comments in class with respect and consideration goes a long way toward encouraging participation in the classroom. Similarly, treating suggestions and other forms of prosocial voice with consideration can facilitate the prevalence of prosocial voice, whereas rolling eyes, dismissive reactions, or ignoring (commonly considered examples of incivility) would likely serve to discourage such voice while encouraging other types of behavior.

In conclusion, employee voice is a valuable and necessary element of effective workplace functioning, and voice in academe often serves a larger, societal role by introducing or drawing attention to information that could serve the greater good. Whether it be prosocial voice aimed at making improvements in how work gets done or remedial voice bringing to light workplace mistreatment, employers are well served by supporting and encouraging employee voice. Research suggests key principles including the establishment of multiple and diverse mechanisms for voice, supervisors' as well as employees' roles supported through training and performance management efforts and related interventions, and the continuous process of responding to employees' insights and views to ensure that voice in the workplace is in concert with civility.

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