

CHAPTER 12

Choosing the Right Leadership Voice

Nikhar Nanwani and Khushboo Deepakkumar Bhatt***

ABSTRACT

Leadership voice refers to the characteristic manner in which leaders communicate, listen and create meaning, and through which they shape perceptions, direct action and influence relationships within organisations. What was once regarded as a supporting attribute has become a core managerial capability in settings marked by rapid change, intense competition, diverse workforces and rising ethical expectations. The way leaders speak now plays a decisive part in how employees experience their work, interpret organisational goals and respond to difficulty. This article examines the idea of choosing an appropriate leadership voice and argues that effective leadership is determined not only by the quality of the decisions taken, but also by the manner in which vision is expressed, employees are engaged and complex situations are handled. Drawing on leadership and organisational behaviour perspectives, the article distinguishes five forms of leadership voice — directive, participative, ethical, coaching and transformational — and considers how each influences motivation, trust, psychological safety, engagement and employees' willingness to raise ideas and concerns. It further argues that leadership voice is situational and develops through experience and structured reflection. Successful leaders rarely rely on a single mode of communication; they learn instead to adapt their voice to varying organisational contexts while remaining anchored in ethical responsibility. The article concludes that leaders who consciously cultivate their leadership voice are better placed to foster innovation, build durable workplace relationships and sustain organisational performance.

Keywords: Leadership voice; Leadership styles; Self-awareness; Transformational leadership; Organisational communication.

1.0 Introduction

Leadership has always been a central concern in management studies, yet its nature has changed considerably over time.

**Corresponding author; MBA Student, Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management, Charotar University of Science and Technology (CHARUSAT), Changa, Gujarat, India
(E-mail: 24mba072@charusat.edu.in)*

***Assistant Professor, Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management, Charotar University of Science and Technology (CHARUSAT), Changa, Gujarat, India
(E-mail: khushboobhatt.mba@charusat.ac.in)*

DOI: 10.17492/JPI/CHARUSAT/2612

Earlier approaches emphasised authority, control and formal power, concentrating on how leaders directed tasks and secured compliance. Contemporary organisations, by contrast, operate in environments shaped by globalisation, digital transformation, workforce diversity and heightened social and ethical expectations. In such a context, leadership can no longer be defined by positional authority or strategic decision-making alone. In present-day business settings, employees are not passive recipients of instruction. They are expected to think critically, solve problems, collaborate across boundaries and raise concerns when necessary. This expectation makes leadership voice a strategic capability rather than a matter of personal manner. How leaders speak and listen bears directly on psychological safety, trust, motivation and ethical awareness (Edmondson, 2019). A voice that invites dialogue and conveys respect creates a climate in which employees feel able to express ideas and question ineffective practice. A dismissive or authoritarian voice produces the opposite: silence, disengagement and resistance persist even where formal systems and policies appear supportive. This article accordingly examines what leadership voice is, the principal forms it takes, the organisational consequences of each, and the process through which managers may develop a voice of their own.

2.0 Understanding Leadership Voice: Meaning and Scope

Leadership voice refers to the consistent and recognisable manner in which leaders communicate, listen and create meaning within organisations. It is not confined to speaking skill or presentation ability; it represents how leaders express authority, demonstrate values, frame issues and engage with others. A leadership voice emerges through everyday interaction — meetings, feedback conversations, announcements of decisions and responses to conflict or failure. Over time, these interactions form a pattern that employees come to associate with a particular leader's presence and influence (Northouse, 2021).

Leadership voice also functions as an instrument of sense-making. Organisations are complex social systems in which employees continuously interpret events, changes and expectations, and leaders play a central part in shaping those interpretations. Through narrative, explanation and symbolic communication, a leader connects employees to strategic priorities and helps them understand both the purpose of their work and the response required under uncertainty. A calm and transparent voice during a period of transition lowers resistance and anxiety; an inconsistent or ambiguous one breeds confusion and mistrust.

3.0 Principal Leadership Voices and Their Organisational Impact

Leadership voice is not a single style applied uniformly across an organisation. Effective leaders draw upon several voices according to context, employee need and

strategic demand. Each voice reflects a different mode of exercising influence and produces distinct psychological and organisational outcomes. Understanding the principal forms helps leaders make conscious rather than habitual choices about how they communicate and lead.

3.1 The directive and authoritative voice

The directive voice is marked by clarity, structure and control. Leaders who use it provide explicit instruction, set firm expectations and guide behaviour closely. Communication is largely top-down and concentrates on goals, procedures and performance standards. This voice is most visible in crises, in high-risk environments and where employees are inexperienced and require close supervision. Its strength lies in speed and certainty; its risk is that, used habitually, it suppresses initiative and discourages employees from reporting problems early.

3.2 The participative, collaborative and inclusive voice

The participative voice emphasises dialogue, collaboration and shared decision-making. Leaders who adopt it actively seek employee input, encourage discussion and value diverse perspectives. Communication flows in several directions, and employees are treated as contributors rather than as implementers. Empowering leader behaviours of this kind have been shown to strengthen ownership and improve the quality of decisions (Arnold et al., 2000), although they demand time and may appear indecisive where swift action is required.

3.3 The value-based and ethical voice

Integrity, fairness, accountability and concern for stakeholders lie at the centre of the ethical voice. Leaders use it to communicate moral expectations clearly, to address the ethical implications of decisions and to model principled conduct (Brown et al., 2005). The ethical voice is expressed less in formal statements than in everyday action: in how conflicts are handled, how rewards are allocated and how mistakes are met. Its credibility depends entirely on consistency between what is said and what is done.

3.4 The Coaching and Developmental Voice

The coaching voice is directed towards growth, learning and the development of long-term capability. Leaders using it engage employees in supportive dialogue, offer constructive feedback and encourage reflection. Rather than concentrating on immediate outcomes alone, they invest in building skill, confidence and professional identity. The return on this voice is delayed but durable, since it strengthens the capacity of the team rather than the performance of a single task. Servant and developmental orientations of this

kind are also associated with a greater willingness among employees to speak up for constructive change (Arain et al., 2019).

3.5 The transformational and inspirational voice

The transformational voice inspires, energises and aligns employees around a shared purpose. Leaders communicate a compelling vision, connect daily work to broader goals and express confidence in collective potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Storytelling, symbolic communication and emotional engagement are characteristic of this voice, and it has been linked to higher levels of management innovation across organisational levels (Chang, 2016). It is powerful in periods of change, but it loses force where inspiring language is not matched by practical support.

4.0 Choosing and Combining Leadership Voices

In everyday practice, the most effective leaders do not confine themselves to a single voice. Organisational challenges are complex, dynamic and rapidly changing, and they call at different moments for directive clarity, participative openness, ethical firmness, developmental support and inspirational meaning. Selecting an appropriate voice requires judgement about the situation at hand, the readiness and maturity of the team, and the needs of the organisation. A leader with a defined range of voices commands greater flexibility of influence — a capability closely related to political skill, which has been shown to improve team performance (Ahearn et al., 2004) — and is better able to create conditions in which employees perform well and find satisfaction in their work.

4.1 Leadership voice, power and employee voice

Understanding power within organisations requires attention to the way leaders' voices and employees' voices support and challenge one another. Positional power is expressed through formal authority, but employees experience power chiefly through the manner in which a leader speaks, listens, responds and frames issues. Leadership voice may therefore be used in two broadly different ways: it may concentrate power, centralising judgement and control; or it may distribute power, enabling participation, accountability and shared ownership.

Where leaders listen, respond and protect those who speak from adverse consequences, employees come to regard the raising of concerns as a contribution rather than as a personal risk (Detert & Burris, 2007; Burris, 2012). This relationship between leadership voice and employee voice matters particularly in complex work environments, because frontline employees hold operational knowledge and often detect emerging problems long before those problems become visible at senior levels. Silence in such

settings is rarely a sign of agreement; more often it is evidence that the prevailing leadership voice has made speaking unsafe.

5.0 Developing a Leadership Voice

A leadership voice is not acquired incidentally; it is built through deliberate effort over time. It involves reshaping how ideas are expressed, how others are supported, how responses are made and how the leader continues to grow — related but distinct capabilities. Development of this kind requires the ability to adapt leadership behaviour to the specific demands of the organisation, the individual characteristics of employees and the ethical principles that underpin the leader's conduct.

5.1 Self-awareness

Self-awareness is the starting point for any leader seeking a voice of their own. Leaders need to understand their default patterns of communication, their emotional responses under pressure and their assumptions about the use of authority. Reflection on past experience often reveals patterns that have either strengthened or weakened employee engagement. Greater self-awareness allows a leader to recognise which approach is being used at a given moment and to alter it deliberately rather than by accident.

5.2 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is central to the adaptation of leadership voice. It enables leaders to perceive, understand and regulate their own emotions, and to read the emotional states of others, including early signs of strain. With this capacity, a leader can adjust the tone, timing and content of communication to the emotional and cognitive needs of the people being led. In a crisis, a calm and authoritative tone is generally most effective, whereas a developmental conversation is better served by a supportive and coaching manner.

5.3 Contextual sensitivity

Leadership voice is inherently contextual, and different situations call for different modes of communication. Operational clarity and crisis management require a directive voice; involving a team in a decision requires a participative one; reinforcing value-based choices calls for an ethical voice; supporting the growth of an individual calls for a coaching voice; and mobilising an organisation behind change calls for a transformational voice (Goleman, 2000).

Cultural context matters as well, since norms governing direct and indirect confrontation vary considerably across settings (Brett et al., 2014). Leaders who read a

situation accurately and select accordingly raise both organisational performance and the quality of the employee experience.

5.4 Integrating multiple voices

Successful leaders do not depend on one mode of communication; they move among the several forms of leadership voice as circumstances evolve. A leader may use a directive voice to establish clarity about expected results, a coaching voice to support an employee's development and an ethical voice to address a compliance issue, sometimes within a single week. Integrating these voices produces a balance of control, support, inspiration and ethical direction, and yields a more resilient and flexible approach to leadership. Leaders who commit to this development shape organisational culture, create psychological safety, raise engagement and enable their teams to deliver sustainable performance.

6.0 Conclusion

Leadership voice is among the most consequential aspects of effective management, yet it is frequently valued at less than its worth. It shapes how employees perceive authority and fairness and how they understand the organisation as a whole, and it bears directly on engagement, innovation, ethical conduct and overall performance. Leaders would do well to regard their voice as both an asset, in its capacity to influence outcomes, and a responsibility, in the ethical obligations it carries. Choosing the right leadership voice is not a matter of conforming to a single leadership style; it is a matter of developing the capacity to use one's voice according to what a particular situation and a particular person require, while remaining grounded in ethical expectations. The five voices examined here — directive, participative, ethical, coaching and transformational — are each adaptive in the right circumstances. Effective leaders therefore combine them deliberately, according to the environment in which they work.

References

1. Ahearn, K. K., Ferris, G. R., Hochwarter, W. A., Douglas, C., & Ammeter, A. P. (2004). Leader political skill and team performance. *Journal of Management*, 30(3), 309–327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jm.2003.01.004>
2. Arain, G. A., Hameed, I., & Crawshaw, J. R. (2019). Servant leadership and follower voice: The roles of follower felt responsibility for constructive change and avoidance-approach motivation. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 28(4), 555–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1609946>

3. Arnold, J. A., Arad, S., Rhoades, J. A., & Drasgow, F. (2000). The empowering leadership questionnaire: The construction and validation of a new scale for measuring leader behaviors. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21(3), 249–269.
4. Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
5. Brett, J. M., Behfar, K. J., & Sanchez-Burks, J. (2014). Managing cross-cultural conflicts: A close look at the implication of direct versus indirect confrontation. In N. M. Ashkanasy, O. B. Ayoko, & K. A. Jehn (Eds.), *Handbook of research in conflict management* (pp. 136–154). Edward Elgar.
6. Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002>
7. Burris, E. R. (2012). The risks and rewards of speaking up: Managerial responses to employee voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(4), 851–875. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0562>
8. Chang, Y.-Y. (2016). Multilevel transformational leadership and management innovation: Intermediate linkage evidence. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 37(2), 265–288.
9. Detert, J. R., & Burris, E. R. (2007). Leadership behavior and employee voice: Is the door really open? *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(4), 869–884. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.26279183>
10. Edmondson, A. C. (2019). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.
11. Goleman, D. (2000). Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(2), 78–90.
12. Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage Publications.