



Leadership NOTES

Giving Voice to All Constituents

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Consistently high-performing schools, like high-performing organizations everywhere, enjoy the benefits of robust, timely information flow throughout the entire network of leaders, employees, customers, and stakeholders. This robust information flow, from all constituents, can be termed organizational voice (Morrison, 2014). The absence of this information flow, the absence of voice, can be termed *organizational silence* (Henricksen & Dayton, 2006).

Organizational silence refers to a collective-level phenomenon of saying or doing very little in response to significant problems that face an organization (Morrison, 2014., p. 173).

The benefits of organizational voice and the costs of organizational silence are both substantial and accrue to both the organization as a whole and to the individual constituents and constituent groups. School leaders do well to embrace and develop all constituent voices, not only because of a heightened sense of fairness, obligation and/or social justice, but also because of their deep calling to create and sustain excellent schools where all students succeed.

Voice—benefits to the organization

1. Specific and timely feedback
2. Commitment rather than mere compliance
3. Greater awareness of current reality
4. Early recognition of problems
5. Greater accountability for results
6. Release of discretionary effort
7. Enhanced innovation and creativity
8. Positive climate of inclusion, respect, collaboration, community
9. Greater agility, fast to market solutions
10. Increased tolerance, appreciation of differences
11. Higher performance, greater productivity, improved results

Silence—costs to the organization

1. Diffused accountability
2. “Go along to get along” approach- lack of organizational integrity
3. Procrastination
4. Development of cliques and sub-groups
5. Silo organizational structures- lack of cross-communication
6. Sabotage activities
7. Faux compliance
8. Withholding of information needed for improvement
9. Lower performance, less efficiency, stagnant or declining results

Voice—benefits to the constituent

1. Sense of belonging and ownership
2. More meaningful work
3. Sense of self-efficacy
4. Sense of self-determination
5. Sense of contribution to a worthy cause or mission
6. Increased dignity, respect, self-worth, self-esteem
7. More pride in personal and team performance

Silence—costs to the constituent

1. Sense of isolation
2. Lack of motivation
3. Loss of positive self-image
4. Feelings of resentment
5. Less satisfying relationships
6. Less meaningful work
7. Less integrity to values, goals, and aspirations
8. Poor future outlook

Organizational structures that promote constituent voice can be thought of as belonging to four broad categories.

1. Structures that develop constituent voice. Providing opportunities for all constituents to express themselves may prove ineffective if the constituents don't feel prepared, worthy, or able to effectively claim and share their voice. Opportunities to receive coaching, teaching, and development of one's voice is a necessary prerequisite to claiming and sharing one's voice.

2. Structures that invite constituent voice. Successful schools make it easy for constituents to regularly share their voice without having to give a speech to the student body, faculty, or PTA meeting. Examples include morning meetings, focus groups, input sessions, Likert (5 choices on a continuum) scales, feedback exercises, surveys, homeroom forums, multi-votes, leave a post-it bulletin boards, informal conversations, asking what people think, recording voice notes on a smart phone, email canvassing, lunch with the principal, shadow a student day, and just being observant and curious.

3. Structures that require constituent voice. We know that in effective classrooms, student engagement is not only invited, but is regularly required. Invited can mean optional. Required means mandatory. The teacher who requires students to imagine a synonym for the word angry, write it on a whiteboard, then hold it high is using mandatory engagement, not optional. This approach is significantly more effective than to pose a question to the whole class... "who can name a synonym for the word angry? Jody? Can anyone help Jody?" So it is with constituent engagement. Regularly, school leaders should design constituent voice into the very fabric of school life. At an elementary school in Johnson City, TN, the principal and APs called every Kindergarten parent within 48 hours of the Kindergarten orientation night to ask them if the meeting met their needs, what other questions they had, and how might the school improve its outreach to families with new K students. That sure beats a suggestion box...mandatory, not optional.

Structures that celebrate constituent voice. The best way to grow future constituent voice is to recognize and celebrate current constituent voice. When school leaders display, disseminate, and act upon constituent voice, they expand its value, prestige, and utility. Effective leaders speak often of "what they're learning by listening to constituents." They record it, share it, display it, disseminate it, publish it, tweet it, post it, extract themes from it, make decisions based on it, and take actions informed by it. When constituents contribute their voice and then recognize the effects of that contribution in tangible ways, they are more likely to contribute again, think more deeply about their contributions, and encourage others to contribute. When constituent voice is not acknowledged, processed, and acted upon, it loses its agency and eventually results in cynicism.