Liberating Voice Constraints: A Systemic Process Model of Voice

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ABSTRACT

[This work describes an iterative, process-oriented a faculty voice model developed in a university setting for the encouragement of improvement-oriented voice. It fills a gap in the literature related to voice as a process, not merely a thing and offers a general, iterative process road-map that can be extended to support open exchanges on various topics in other environments.]

Keywords: voice, silence, process, inform, decide, transparent, model

1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of "voice" as a component of organizational exchanges can be traced to the work of Hirschman (1970), who originally described the choices available to dissatisfied individuals within organizations as basically between exit and voice

(that is, open expression of concerns) with the balance of choice between the alternatives mediated by loyalty to various aspects of the organization. Drawing originally on mainly economic and political exchanges, his theory has been expanded to cover many varieties of transactions in organizations in general (Hirschman, 1970). The simple idea of an interplay among the factors of exit, voice, and loyalty has generated considerable theoretical and empirical attention, and serves as the basis for a variety of models that attempt to describe the dynamics of their interaction, particularly the circumstances under which the exit option is chosen. While we draw upon this literature base, our interest may be more generally characterized as determining the relative efficacy of the exercise of voice and the conditions under which it can function most effectively. In the current economic climate, exit is generally a last-ditch least-preferred option; therefore, the effective deployment of voice becomes much more important as a strategy for both individuals and groups.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A 2009 review of the voice related literature by Brinsfield, Edwards, and Greenberg distinguished three chronological "waves" in the evolution of voice-related research, and three features that differentiate various forms of voice and

silence: content, target, and motive. Our review is also organized around these three features, together with the element of context, which we see as equally important in the description of voice phenomena..

2.1 Content

The sensitivity of one's topic affects selection of setting and tactics. Most authors emphasize discontent, whether in a consumer (Hirschman, 1970; Dowding and Johns, 2008) or work (Farrell and Rusbult, 1992; Furaker, 2009; Leck and Saunders, 1992; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998) setting. It can feel and/or be risky to point out "the need for improvement in the program or policy to those who may have devised, be responsible for, or feel personally attached to the status quo" (Detert and Burris, 2007, p. 870). The more sensitive the topic, the more carefully the speaker must choose the setting, mode of presentation and, above all, the target. For example, tactics for selling gender-equity issues vary and are chosen carefully (Piderit and Ashford, 2003). Creed's (2003) study of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ministers describes "tempered radicalism" and provides a compelling portrait of speaker risk. Eide (2009) illustrates whistle-blowers' worst fears through the fate of the protagonist in Ibsen's 1882 play *An Enemy of the People*. Yet, for less sensitive work-related topics, some management-created forums do successfully promote voice (Cusack,

2009).

2.2 Target

Selection of a focal target to whom to voice discontent is tied to expectations of results and personal risk. Burris, Detert, and Chiaburu (2003) emphasize voice to supervisors because of access to resources and ability to enact change (p. 912). Evidence ties increased use of voice with superiors to perceived leader efficacy and ethical behaviors (Detert and Burris, 2007; Saunders, Sheppherd, Knight and Ross, 1992; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Detert and Burris (2007) find encouragement of voice in "subordinates' perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised" (Detert and Burris, 2007, pp. 871, 880). Graham and Keely (1992) note "managers intent on implementing their plans and instructions with a minimum of hassle from others understandably resent intrusions caused by the raised voices of those who see things differently" (p. 195). Milliken and Morrison (2003) encourage immunization of organization members so that they will speak up without fearing reprisal. Yet those planning to leave an organization often discuss problems with coworkers in lieu of authority figures (Furaker, 2009, p. 168). Given the inherent

risk of identifying problems to authority, those who do so expect serious

consideration, amplifying the effects of leadership failures.

Concerns may be shared with individuals or brought up through formal channels,

individually or collectively. An individual target's perceived receptiveness

encourages use of informal mechanisms. Supervisor management of employee

voice is closely watched and subordinates are more likely to approach receptive

leaders (Saunders, Sheppherd, Knight and Roth, 1992). Employees are "more

likely to voice to their supervisors when they "perceive that their supervisor: (a)

makes consistent, accurate, and correctable decisions; (b) encourages participation

by all employees; (c) is fair and unbiased in reaching decisions; (d) is easy to

approach; (e) manages employee voice in a timely manner; and (f) is not

retributive to employees who voice" (Saunders, et. al. 1992, p. 243). Tactics of

risk-sensitive middle managers are influenced by inclusiveness and expected level

of support (Piderit and Ashford, 2003, pp.1482-1483).   Expectations are that

"voice managers will have good communications and interpersonal skills" (Harlos,

2001, p. 333) and consider information presented. Despite common distrust of

open door policies, employee assistance programs, and suggestion boxes, workers

expect them to generate corrective action (Harlos, 2001). Formal program reviews

can enable constructive input, but must manage and meet expectations or risk

discouraging participation in future efforts (De Valenzuela, Copeland, and Blalock, 2005). To reach public service providers, customers speak out individually or collectively through voting, political lobbying or protest (Dowding and John, 2008). Ineffective voice systems, such as open door policies lacking confidentiality, cause frustration, while receptive managers and functional voice systems enhance employees' sense of fairness.

When this sense of fairness is lacking, employees may seek outside help. Harlos' (2001) study of "deaf ear syndrome" identifies consequences of voice system failings, consistent with Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin's (2003) work. Morrison and Milliken (2000) model organizational silence, wherein employees suppress concerns (p. 706). A climate of silence involves "widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous" (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, pp. 707-708). Although targets internal to the organization are the most frequent focus of attention (e.g., Detert and Burris, 2007; Furaker, 2009), some authors include external targets such as regulatory agencies in conceptualizing the scope of voice (e.g., Farrell and Rusbult, 1992; Lee and Jablin, 1992; Rusbult, et. al.,1988).

2.3 Motive

Reasons for speaking out are generally *improvement focused*, whether for individual and/or group benefit. The literature emphasizes such efforts over complaints, often tying in organizational loyalty. Other motivations for voice include resolution of cognitive dissonance (Creed, 2003) and cessation of illegal activities (Brinsfield,et. al., 2009; Eide, 2009; Farrell and Rusbult, 1992, p. 202). The addition of neglect to the EVL model introduces a type of destructive silence, in contrast to constructive, loyalty-based silence (Farrell and Rusbult, 1992; Leck and Saunders, 1992). Yet most considerations of motivation coalesce around the idea of loyalty to the exclusion of other motivations.

Hirschmann's (1970) contention that "loyalty activates voice" is both supported and contradicted in the literature, with some further differentiating loyalty as active or passive. Graham and Keely (1992) characterize loyalty as unconscious, passive, or reformist and distinguish complaining from loyalty-motivated voice (pp. 195-196). Withey and Cooper (1992) associate active and passive loyalty with voice and silence respectively. Some studies show "workers who are interested in the organization's success are likely to actively voice concerns" (Furaker, 2009, p. 158; Leck and Saunders, 1992) while those planning to exit voice less (Burris, et.al., 2008; Dowding and John, 2008, p. 306; Hirschman, 1970). Passive loyalty, encouraged by hierarchical systems (Graham and Keely, 1992), involves "waiting

patiently and hoping any problems will solve themselves... Quietly doing my job and letting higher ups make decisions... Saying nothing to others and assuming things will work out" (Withey and Cooper, 1992, pp.235, 237). Leck and Saunders (1992) suggest "patience" as a better term for this kind of loyalty. Active loyalty is said to generate voice while passive loyalty contributes to silence.

While not explicitly stated in all cases, treatment of voice as a motivated choice, never a compulsion, is consistent throughout. However, this neglects situations in which employees are assigned, either individually or as members of a task force or committee, by management to research aspects of organizational functioning, the results of which may raise concerns regarding managerial effectiveness and a dilemma as to whether and how to voice those concerns.

2.4 Context

Voice is also affected by the interweaving of individual and environmental factors including group size, demographics, and self-esteem. Dowding and John (2008) support Hirschman's (1970) concern that the departure of assertive people drains constructive input from the system (Dowding and John, 2008, pp. 290, 294-295). Farrell and Rusbult (1992) tie job satisfaction, alternatives, and employee investment with responses to dissatisfaction, noting those who have more choices

adopt active approaches, exit and voice, avoiding passive loyalty and neglect. White collar and permanent workers with some authority show more inclination to speak to managers than manual, part time or temporary workers (Furaker, 2009, p. 165; Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 712; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008, p. 1196). Van Dyne and LePine (1998) found "men, whites, and those with at least some college experience engaged in more voice than women, non-whites, and those with no college experience," noting effects of self-esteem and group satisfaction (pp. 856, 860-861). They also found greater use of voice in smaller groups and self-managed teams than in large and/or traditionally managed groups (Van Dyne and Lepine, 1998). High employee performance also increases voice, strengthening the effects of good leadership (Detert and Burris, 2007). The tendency to voice concerns is stronger among those who enjoy some level of familiarity and empowerment.

Cultural norms, both national and organizational, also influence the use of voice. Lee and Jablin (1992) note a stronger propensity to voice concerns among Korean and American workers than among their Japanese counterparts, with Koreans often choosing social settings, outside the formal channels of hierarchical organizations (Lee and Jablin, 1992). Swedish workers prefer speaking to managers, followed by discussion with coworkers, then speaking out in staff meetings, with union

intervention as the least common choice, and multiple avenues employed

frequently (Furaker, 2009). "Organizational cultures and governance systems that

value and provide mechanisms for participatory decision making are likely to

encourage reformist loyalty," including voice (Graham and Keely, 1992, p. 197).

Long-term time horizons tend to encourage voice, while shorter time horizons

stifle it (Graham and Keely, 1992). National and organizational cultural norms

play an important role in creating environments conducive to constructive voice.

2.5 Summary

Definitions of voice vary in precision and emphasis, but consistently center on

primarily individual efforts to make problems (content – most frequently

associated with dissatisfaction) known to those empowered to take corrective

action (target – usually individuals with role authority), with the constructive intent

of improving the situation (motive), presented in a place and manner likely to

achieve results (context). Differences include whether to exclude whistle-blowing,

based on its intent to stop an activity, not improve it (Farrell and Rusbult, 1992;

Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne and Lepine, 1998), and the degree to

which individual and/or collective mechanisms are included in conceptualizing

voice (Dowding and John, 2008; Furaker, 2009). Many works cite both formal and

informal channels and concrete actions denoting the presence of voice, though only a few offer quantifiable measures (see Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

3. VOICE CONSTRAINTS: ISSUES AND LIMITATIONS IN CURRENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Two points are abundantly clear from the preceding review of the literature on voice. First, there is relatively little consensus on the definition or even the construct meaning of the term, although interpretations do tend to coalesce around one or another of two principal viewpoints: voice as a *phenomenon*, or voice as an *action.* Studies employing the construct of voice almost inevitably adopt one perspective or the other, usually without acknowledging the possibility of an alternative formulation. But even within each camp, there is relatively little consistent definition for the term.

Second, analysts of voice, like most practitioners of organizational psychology (if not necessarily organizational sociology), tend to shy away from interpretations of the construct that are confrontational or even really situated in contexts where conflict is possible, let alone likely (with the notable exceptions of Creed, 2003, and Piderit and Ashford, 2003). Emphasis appears to be placed more on voice as a

mechanism of conciliation; of damping down conflicts rather than escalating them, even though there is general agreement in the literature that constructive conflict is integral to the healthy functioning of groups and organizations. Organizational behavior as a field tends to seek conceptual stability, predictable relationships, and models that synthesize multiple divergent approaches into more comprehensive models applicable in multiple environments and over multiple spans of time. The potential stridency of voice exercised in an atmosphere of tension among competing expectations that is inherent in Hirschman's original formulation tends to be increasingly muted in the hands of organizational scholars.

Some of this taming of the construct of voice derives from the tendency of organizational analysts to prefer *structural* or *variance* models over *dynamic* or *process* models (Mohr, 1982). Variance models dominate the organizational behavior literature, partly because they are easier to explain, teach, justify, or estimate in a consistent fashion, and partly because it is vastly easier to obtain data that one can plausibly claim as adequate when one is studying cross-sectional properties of individuals or situations than it is to gather enough data from enough observation points to begin to assess dynamic relationships. Particularly when the incentives for behavioral science research usually emphasize speed and quantity of results rather than deep exploration, variance models win out almost every time.

The ultimate goal of variance modeling is convergence; that is, a model that explains maximal variance in outcome phenomena using as few predictor concepts as possible and a minimal number of linear relationships [As one exception, Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008, model voice as a U-shaped function of personal control]. Such models have a great deal of difficulty incorporating ideas such as feedback, whether positive or negative, or relationships that are highly contingent or chaotic. Certainly there are ways of estimating variance models that can take such phenomena into account, but they are not widely practiced and consequently much less likely to enter the research mainstream.

It is not only that we are not modeling process in most studies of the exercise of voice; we are not even modeling voice as what we know it to be: that is, a *communication process*. In the last 20 years, enormous progress has been made in studying communication through the application of network models that employ as their unit of analysis not the individual participants in the communication but the communication transaction itself (Freeman, 2006). The transaction as a unit embodies both the *sending and receiving* nodes and the content and mechanics of the interaction itself. Networks are defined as a set of transactions among a particular group of nodes. In most cases, however, the nodes themselves are of less interest than are the transactions. Within this transactional framework,

communication is neither a thing nor even really a behavior as such; it exists as a phenomenon embodying things and behaviors, but they acquire meaning only within the context of the transaction itself (Monge and Contractor, 2003). Barad (2007), discussing Bohr's concept of phenomena, expresses it as "reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena" (p. 140).

It is surprising that so little research emphasis has been placed on voice as a communication phenomenon. This may be partly due to the disciplinary orientations of many of the scholars who have attended to voice -- particularly psychology and economics, both of which tend to be individualistic in focus -- and partly to the inherent difficulties of conducting network research particularly in highly political and/or affect-laden communication environments. Obtaining reliable and useful network data is hard enough when the communications to be studied are relatively simple and value-neutral. But as we've seen, exercises of voice are neither of these; they are generally multilayered in meaning and heavily invested with emotional commitment. But simply because empirical data to test such models may be hard to come by is no reason not to formulate the problem correctly in conceptual terms. Understanding voice as a process that connects distinct parties within a generally established context -- a process that is both

directional and closely related to the rest of the transactions within which the parties are embedded -- can allow us to define some features of the kind of research that would be necessary to seriously explore voice as a transactional phenomenon.

Defining voice as a transaction instantly highlights a couple of aspects of the phenomenon that have been generally underemphasized in the research literature to date. The first is the *circularity* of the process. Voice exists as a connection among parties, and without that connection, as reflected in a response, there may be utterance but it would be misleading to say that there is voice in any meaningful sense. The literature overall pays scant attention to what is *done with voiced content* once it has been expressed to a target, and how such response to voice impacts future voice behavior. Exceptions include De Valenzuela, Copeland, and Blalock (2005), who define voice as "encompassing more than an opportunity for self-expression in isolation. Rather, it includes the understandings both that one's voice will be heard and that one will have a say" (p. 2235). More explicitly, Saunders et al. (1992) imply feedback mechanisms when they note the impact on voice behavior of supervisor action in response to content voiced by employees. Overall, the tacit assumption throughout the literature appears to be that voice targets actually *do something constructive* with voiced content, and that their

response is evident to those who voiced that content, if not to the entire group and/or organization, but little theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the dynamics of voice as a systemic network of communication processes. Thus, it seems appropriate to model voice as a part of a dynamic network of communication processes.

4. Voice as a Network of Communication Processes

At its most basic, a voice transaction occurs between a "sender" and "receiver" of the communication. Although De Valenzuela, et al. (2005) and Detert and Burris (2007) recognize the importance of the sender *being heard* and of the receiver *listening,* scant theoretical and/or empirical attention has been paid to this most basic of voice processes. Further, for the sender to *experience* being heard requires more than the receiver's mere empathic listening, but rather *feedback* regarding the impact of the voice transaction on subsequent decisions, actions, and behavior (e.g. Saunders, et al., 1992). Senders need to receive clear and timely feedback as to how and why their input was and/or was not incorporated into the relevant outcomes/results/decisions, as well as clear communications regarding the progress of such matters.

4.1 Voice Process 1: Informing

Our intent here is not to focus at the micro level of effective dyadic communication, but instead to establish a foundation for a more systemic view of organizational voice processes. We model this as a mutually reinforcing voice process of *informing*:

FIGURE 1: VOICE PROCESS 1: INFORMING
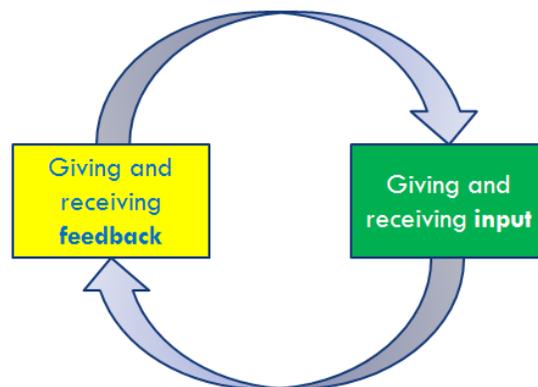
Input succinctly summarizes the dominant focus in the literature on voice as unidirectional upward expression of primarily cognitive, problem focused information that is deemed important for organizational learning and improvement. Giving clear and consistent feedback encourages further input, which ideally leads to further feedback, thus creating a mutually reinforcing process loop. This loop is implicit in Detert and Burris' (2007) observation that voice is encouraged not only

through managerial listening, but also by fair consideration of ideas presented and actions taken to address issues raised. Senders cannot know whether their concerns and ideas were considered and acted upon, and why or why not, unless they receive clear and timely *feedback*.

Taken together, giving and receiving input and feedback constitute a cyclical process of *informing* that focuses on the exchange of information among sending and receiving nodes. In this context, responsibility for voice process effectiveness is a shared phenomenon, and the roles of sender and receiver are fluid, dynamic, and interdependent. Further, giving and receiving may be seen as occurring at the dyad, group, and/or organizational levels, in contrast to the dominant focus in the voice literature on the individual employee or consumer. For example, consistent with conceptions of organizational climate, we would argue that there is an overall aggregate sense of voice in an organization or community, at least regarding some key, systemic issues. There are also smaller, distinct aggregates of voice, for example based upon employee type (e.g. full-time vs. part time, union vs. non-union) and/or unit. The identification of these aggregate voices can help to contextualize, augment, and potentially inform the ways in which expressions of individual voices are heard and responded to, e.g. so that the perspective of a particularly persuasive individual or sub-group is better understood in relation to

the majority views. Thus, voice processes are interdependent across levels of analysis.

Voice processes may differ across levels. For example, although voice processes at aggregate levels may involve input and feedback through dyadic exchanges (e.g. between a union representative and his or her managerial target), they may also occur through intentional collection, aggregation, and sharing of data and feedback regarding collective perceptions, attitudes, and concerns. Ideally, systems and practices should be designed to accommodate the full spectrum of levels at which the informing process occurs within a particular organizational context.

4.2 Voice Process 2: Deciding

At least several researchers suggest a linkage between voice, in the form of input, and decision making (e.g. De Valenzuela, et al., 2005; Graham and Keely, 1992; Saunders, et al., 1992; Withey and Cooper, 1992). For example, De Valenzuela et al. observe that voice entails an expectation that the sender will be heard and "will have a say" (p. 2235), presumably in decisions taken by those with authority to do so. When the voice process of informing is decoupled from organizational decision processes, employees are cast in the role of mere information providers and/or receivers. Certainly having input is better than not having input into decision

processes, but this raises the question of levels of participation and authority in such processes. The relationship between input and authority ranges from "none" to "all", for example: (a) informed of issue or decision only, without input; (b) input is invited, heard, and considered (e.g. De Valenzuela, et al.; Saunders, et al.) by others who make the decision; (c) authority to decide is shared with those who provide input; or (d) primary authority to decide, as well as to provide input (as in self-managed teams, discussed above).

The relationship between input and authority also reflects processes for individual and aggregate voice, which are interdependent and may be seen as anchoring opposite ends of a continuum. Each end of that spectrum has potential strengths and limitations in relation to informing decision making, summarized in Table 1 (note that these also represent the relative strengths and weaknesses of qualitative (individual) vs. quantitative (aggregate) data):

TABLE 1: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND AGGREGATE VOICE

	Potential Strengths	Potential Limitations
Individual	• Identification of individual needs, issues, and	• Assumption that individual reflects aggregate

|		
	• opportunities • Provides nuanced understanding of impact of decisions • Encourages individual initiative, innovation, and ownership • Early identification of issues with broader/systemic implications	• Majority views overshadowed, invisible, and/or unexpressed • Implementation of decisions that adversely impact others
Aggregate	• Identification of aggregate/systemic needs, issues, and opportunities • Better informed decisions • Provides context for response to individual concerns and issues • Better focused resource deployment	• Time consuming • Assumption that aggregate is fully representative • Minority views overshadowed, invisible, and/or unexpressed • Provides little insight into "how" or "why"

	• Buy-in to critical strategic decisions • Speed of implementation	

The ability to identify such aggregates should be enabled through structures for voice. The questions, of course, are "how" and "to what extent". In business, well informed, timely, effective decision making is critical, and any structures and practices to enable identification and expression of individual and/or aggregate voice must be designed to enable rather than constrain such decision making. As Graham and Keely (1992) note, managers may resent the intrusion of voice processes as an impediment to implementing their plans.

The focus thus far has been on the relation between voice processes of informing and deciding; yet decisions themselves are framed within contexts that shape the potential range of questions asked/not asked, input sought/not sought, and decisions called/not called. Therefore, we incorporate *framing issues* as the context-setting work for making decisions in a mutually reinforcing voice process of *deciding:*

FIGURE 2: VOICE PROCESS 2: DECIDING
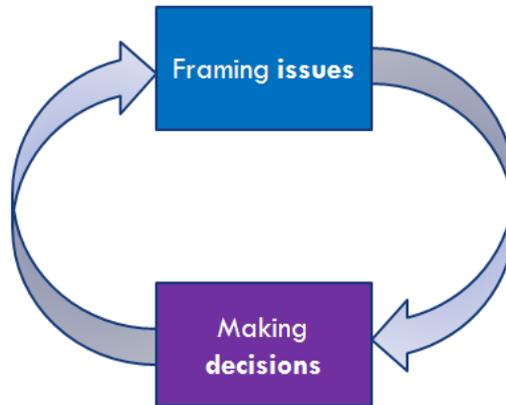
Framing issues and making decisions occur at and among the individual, dyad, group, and/or organizational levels. There is a dynamic interplay between voice processes of deciding and informing, discussed next.

4.3 An Integrative Process Model of Voice

The split between processes of informing and deciding may be seen as a byproduct of structural differentiation, particularly in traditional hierarchical structures (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979). The trend toward flatter, networked structures may partly ameliorate this split: when informing and deciding are fully integrated within an individual or group, there may be little need for formal voice processes. Thus, those with greatest access to information (e.g. via the relative centrality of their position in the network) and decision framing and making authority are less likely to perceive a need for formal voice systems, structures, and processes.

Nevertheless, the classic organizational design challenge of balancing structures for differentiation and integration applies to all complex systems, and it informs our integrative process model of voice:
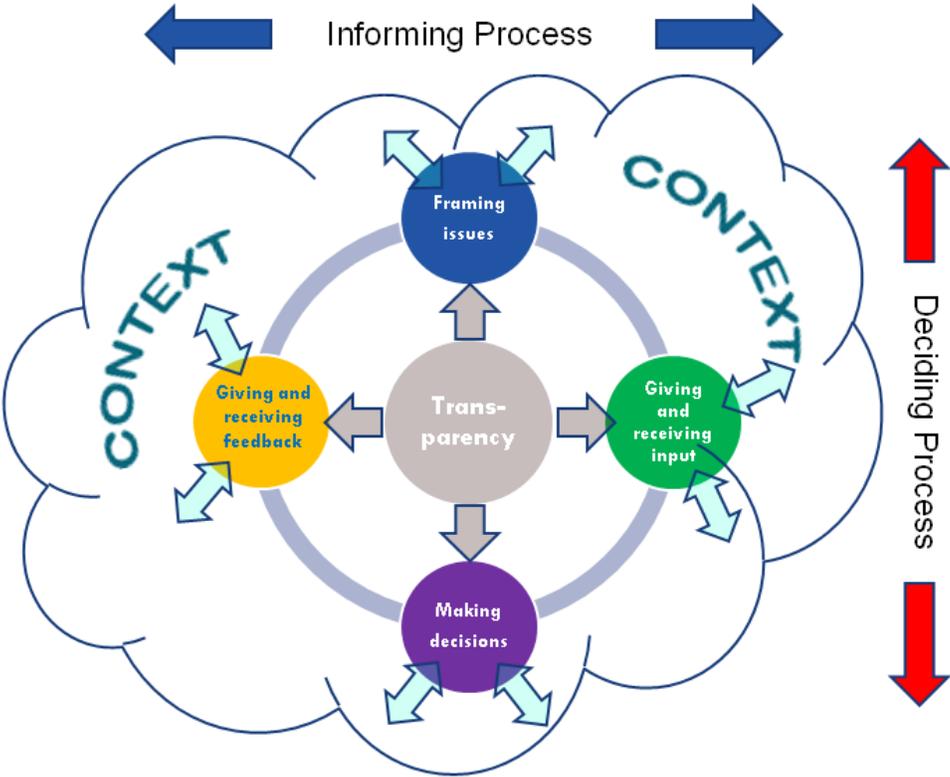
FIGURE 3: AN INTEGRATIVE PROCESS MODEL OF VOICE

Figure 3 represents the informing and deciding processes as reciprocally interlinked components of an overall voice cycle. This cycle operates within an organizational, environmental, social, and political context that interacts with each

phase of the cycle as it receives emphasis (as represented by the small transparent arrows). This conceptual model can be applied at the level of specific projects as well as at the more general level of organizational decision making. The model receives its powering energy from the "transparency" between the different phases which allows each phase to be informed by activities at the other phases. We now turn to why this is necessary, and what happens when it fails.

4.3.1 Transparency

Transparency of information and decision processes is key to facilitating rapid, informed, and effective decision making systemically, and to fostering a learning organization. For example, when voice systems are healthy and balanced, input is well informed and current, making it more relevant, timely, and useful. For input to be well informed and current, voice process participants need to receive clear, timely communications regarding the progress of deliberations on substantive matters that affect them, and that progress needs to be made visible, i.e., transparent.

Transparency, however, ranges from opaque, to translucent, to fully transparent:
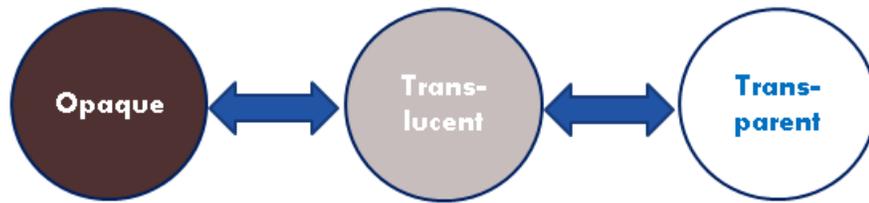
Each degree of transparency plays an important role in ensuring effective voice under various circumstances:

- **Opacity**: Ensures safety and authentic expression of *individual* perceptions and experience by providing anonymity. Safety and freedom from retribution are critical to the effectiveness of voice systems (e.g. Saunders, et. al. 1992; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009).

- **Translucency**: Combines opaqueness with transparency by not publicizing the detail of the substantive deliberations and decisions that occur within aggregate bodies such as leadership teams or committees, while clearly, concisely, and timely conveying the progress and outcomes of such deliberations to relevant stakeholders in voice processes.

- **Transparency**: The design, intended uses, and status of the contents of formal voice processes ideally should be visible, easily accessible, and transparent to all voice stakeholders in real time. For example, well

functioning customer service response and/or IT helpdesk and systems are

designed to enable that.

Input may be invited, heard, and even acted upon, but if those that provided the

input are not then informed via feedback of the role that their input did or did not

play in any relevant issue framing and/or decision making, and why, it is unlikely

that they will experience being *heard,* or having voice. In other words, even when

input is incorporated in decision making, if the process lacks transparency, any

experience of voice will be muted, at best. This reflects one type of imbalance in

voice systems, discussed next.

4.3.2 Imbalance

Ineffective, inadequate attention to the whole of the voice process system may

promote a climate of organizational silence. Organizational silence occurs when

"the dominant choice within many organizations is for employees to withhold their

opinions and concerns about organizational problems" (Morrison & Milliken,

2000, p. 707). In such circumstances, leaders lack sufficient feedback to identify

problems before they escalate. In this context, silence may simply be seen as

another form of voice (e.g. Withey and Cooper, 1992).

A climate of silence reflects an imbalance in systemic voice processes, one in which the option of *input* is critically constrained. However, this view of imbalance is still predicated upon the dominant conceptions of voice in the literature as being a unidirectional upward expression of problem focused information that is deemed (by those with decision authority) important for organizational learning and improvement. This imbalance in the conceptualization of voice and silence in the literature can be illustrated as:

FIGURE 4: IMBALANCE IN SYSTEMIC VOICE PROCESSES
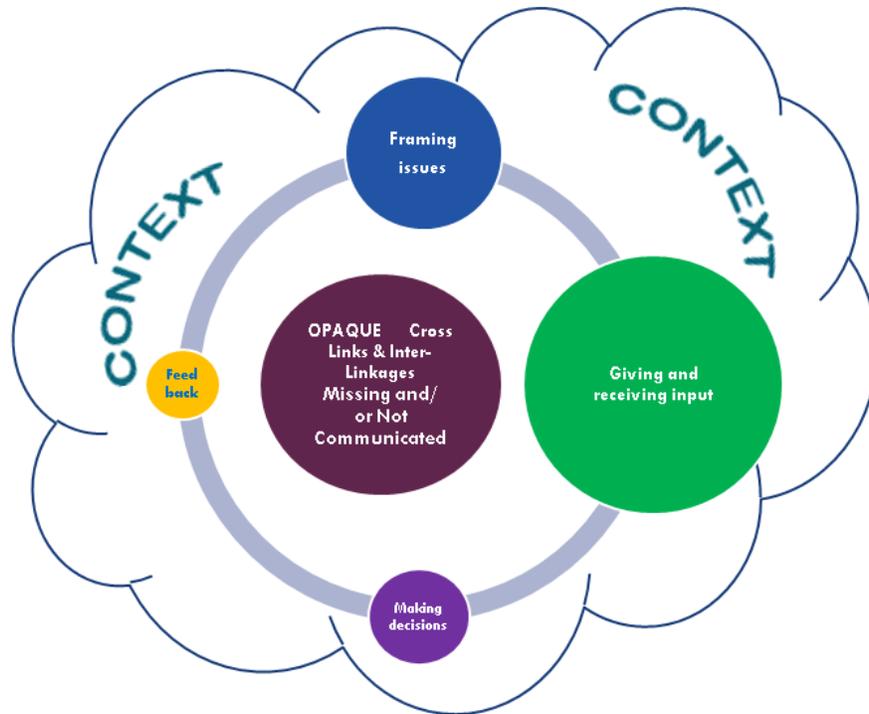
The graphic representation of the integrative voice process model enables visual diagnoses of imbalances in voice systems. For example, Figure 4 shows a particular imbalance that is apparent in both research and practice. Conceptions of voice, constrained to *voicing constructive input,* have neglected process dynamics that we propose are critical to the effectiveness of voice systems. When imbalanced, the linkages between and among the four components are mostly opaque/hidden, which obstructs the transfer of information and the effectiveness and *experience* of voice systemically. Note also that this version of the model limits or constrains the creative interactions between the context and the process; however, the context exists and surrounds the process regardless of whether or not it is attended to. Contexts that are ignored tend to make their effects felt in random or at least largely unexpected ways, and lack of systematic attention to context elements makes it that much harder to cope with these effects creatively.

The imbalance represented in Figure 4 is certainly not the only one possible. The model may be employed as a diagnostic tool in organizations that espouse and strive to practice participatory decision making. For example, an organization may excel at processes for participation in input, decision making, and feedback, yet restrict issue framing to an empowered few. Such restriction may be contextually

appropriate for certain decisions, yet if enacted as an immutable practice, may

provoke cynicism among those who are excluded from such exercises.

In our description of these models, we have thus far largely ignored issues of

empirical measurement and methodology. Clearly, there are a variety of options

open to analysts seeking to operationalize and test such models. We would

endorse application of a variety of approaches to such empirical testing, ranging

from quantitative to qualitative – preferably combined. We would urge, however,

that whatever approaches might be taken, emphasis be placed on the *transactional*

character of voice exchanges. Toward this end, the application of social network

analysis methods would seem potentially fruitful. In any case, we believe that it is

vital that the model reflect the dynamic quality of the processes and the role played

by feedback and "loop-closing" in maintaining creative flow.

5. Conclusion

Several decades of theory and research on voice provide tremendous depth and

breadth of insight into the content, motives, targets, and contexts for voice,

narrowly construed as either a thing or a behavior. Most often, voice is treated as a

behavior whose presence or absence depends on a mixture of antecedents. Yet

there has been little exploration of voice as a dynamic process, much less as a multi-level system of interrelated, interdependent processes.

Stemming from the lack of process conceptualization is a general lack of acknowledgement that voice is often an iterative, dynamic, and multifaceted process, not a simple one-time exchange. Although there is some acknowledgement that multiple paths are often employed (Creed, 2003; Furaker, 2009), more attention is needed to the iterative, means often necessary for successful delivery of needed but unwelcome news. Such explorations need not be limited to socially sensitive topics, but should also extend into the realm of technical disagreements, as experience and intuition tell us that appropriate engineering and technical solutions often fall on deaf ears as well, albeit for different reasons. Additional work is needed to actively explore voice as a dynamic, iterative process that is highly sensitive to content, target, motive, and context.

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IMPROVING INTERPRETABILITY OF REGRESSION RESULTS THROUGH PREDICTOR COMPARISONS

Improving Interpretability Of Regression Results Through Predictor Comparisons