



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants  
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## Issue No 8: Getting an edge in your workplace through finding your voice

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### Getting an edge in your workplace through finding your voice

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One important aspect of leadership is to find your voice and support others to find theirs.

By 'finding your voice' I mean bringing your inner thoughts and feelings to the conversation or meeting in the service of getting the work done. When you can't or won't find your voice you cannot operate to the best of your ability and neither can your team or, therefore, your business. Finding your voice and supporting others to find theirs is an edge in business that all good leaders have.

Hirschhorn in his book, '*Managing in the new team environment*' says, "... the thoughts and feelings people typically suppress are important guides and aids in helping the team accomplish its work."

Many consequences can flow from suppressing voices. At the extreme it can lead to tragic disasters like the space shuttle when an engineer felt it was not his place to speak up when he had reservations about the heat resistance of the tiles. On the other hand, when people are able to find their voice we get creative suggestions, helpful feedback and a real sense that everyone in the team counts. I have seen this improve engagement, motivation and productivity.

I recently had a conversation with John a general manager of a family business who had been asked to step down. There was no forewarning just, "I think it would be better for you to leave as you don't have the team behind you."

I spoke with John to find out more and realised that over a period of years and months he and the managing director had not been having the right conversations to grow and develop themselves and the business. Now we have a business that is stagnating and rudderless. Much repair is needed although sometimes its needs to get to this point for something to change.

In our meeting I pulled out a sheet of paper and drew a line down the middle. On one side I put the heading "What you think and feel" and drew 7 stars down the page to represent his thoughts and feelings. On the other side of the page I put the heading "What I said" and asked John to tell me how many stars I should put on this side of the page to represent how often he said what he thought and felt to his managing director. John could not put more than two stars on that side of the page. So for about 72% of the time John was not saying what he thought and felt. I would not be surprised if his Managing Director scored the same.

No one individual is to blame for this, but each individual has his or her part to play. In many instances managers don't talk to their subordinates, partners don't talk to other partners, staff don't talk to their managers and people sit in meetings thinking things but not wanting to say them for all sorts of reasons. In fact, what often happens is that people tell others their thoughts and feelings hoping that the message might get back to the right person in an indirect way. Or they stew in silence, getting more angry and resentful in their jobs. Or they complain to others, spreading negative energy within the work environment. The point here is that ultimately if the conversation is not with the right person most often it's not worth having. There is a place for getting things off your chest and if you can let it go well and good. Ultimately however, if nothing changes, you will be left with the same frustrations and ill-feelings.

### **Helping them find their voice**

It starts with a paradigm shift that realises that in workplaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, honest, open and truly effective communication is the only way businesses can move forward.

It also means that when someone is having difficulty finding their voice, leaders do what they can to support and encourage an open environment. And this does not mean speaking for people. Facilitating discussion is about making the space for everyone to speak up.

### **Finding "Your Voice" Tools**

So what does "finding your voice" look like and how can you make it happen? Here are a sample of some of the tools I use with my clients:

#### **Tool No 1**

If someone comes to you complaining about Peter in accounts your first question needs to be, "Have you spoken to Peter about this?" If the answer is no, you can coach the person if they need it on how they might effectively approach the issue with Peter and then send them off with the confidence that they can sort it out themselves.

#### **Tool No 2**

If you are in a meeting and suspect that the conversation is getting off track, interrupt the conversation and bring it back on topic. Say something like, "Clearly this issue is important but I think we are getting away from what we are here to discuss. Let's get back to (*issue of focus*) and those who need to be involved in discussing (*issue off track*) can do so outside of this meeting." This approach will make your meetings much more effective.

#### **Tool No 3**

If you are in a meeting and you can see the same patterns emerging you can try a different type of support: "I notice that we started discussing (*issue of focus*) and now we have gone off track again. What seems to be going on here? Are there other issues that are more important that we need to consider diverting this group's attention to?" Then stay silent and allow others to talk. Allowing space for others to reflect on a situation and then speak -

even if there are a few moments of awkward silence - can often be very powerful and an effective way of getting to the crux of the matter. You never know, gems just might surface!

By using these tools, or your own variations, you are role modeling finding your voice and helping others find theirs. You are making a choice to be a leader and allowing space for others to do the same.

### **Getting Started**

Focus on short-term improvements to start with. Set yourself realistic targets for how many times you catch yourself finding your own voice or supporting others to find theirs. If, for example, your target is 5 for the next week, then each time you “find your voice” or help others make a note and check your progress at the end of the week. Reward yourself if you make the target. Don’t despair if you don’t. Try again. Seek support from a mentor or coach if you get stuck.

### **Main takeaways**

- Finding your voice and supporting others to find theirs is an edge that all good leaders have.
- A test as to whether you are finding your voice is how often you are saying what you are thinking and feeling
- A key skill on being an effective manager is to help others find their voice. Don’t do it for them.
- Use some “find your voice” tools to help change the way you do things
- Set some realistic short-term goals to change. Seek help if you get stuck.

\*Hirschhorn L. Managing in the New Team Environment Addison Wesley 2002

**PS** Thank-you to Robyn and Daryl, avid readers of the *be your best* report, who pointed out some spelling and grammar errors in the last edition. In my enthusiasm to get it to you quickly I mistakenly sent out an early version rather than the final. I have now changed my document management system to ensure this does not happen again.

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