

# ENGAGING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE VOICE

A tool for human resources, DEIB  
and operations leaders





## About Talent Rewire

Talent Rewire, an initiative of FSG, envisions a future where every individual in the U.S. can realize their full potential through a humanity- and economy-boosting job that provides equitable economic opportunity, stability, and mobility. Simply put, we envision a world in which the hopes and dreams of frontline employees are seen and achieved –where they feel empowered and listened to, and where their work is fulfilling and purposeful.

We seek to increase the economic mobility of frontline employees – particularly people of color and women –through: 1) innovating new research, programs, and tools to drive employer systems transformation; and 2) scaling our learnings to build the capacity of the broader workforce field. To learn more, please visit [www.talentrewire.org](http://www.talentrewire.org).

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## About FSG

FSG is a global, mission-driven consulting firm that partners with foundations and corporations to create equitable systems change. Through customized consulting services, innovative thought leadership, and learning communities, we’re working to create a world where everyone can realize their full potential. To learn more, please visit [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org).



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What does it mean for your employer to seek out your input, perspective and voice?

“You’re being heard, you aren’t just a resource for the business to use, you have a say and management is willing to work with you. Not just clocking in and out, but having your opinion taken into consideration.”

Frontline employee

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# Why Frontline Employee Voice Matters

We embarked on this research hoping to highlight actionable ways in which employers can engage employee voice. What we found was that a lot has already been written on ways to collect employee voice and that companies already have some type of system in place to collect voice informally or formally. Much has also been written about the importance of employee voice and employee engagement, but mostly for white-collar employees. We found that these principles were not always applied to hourly, low-wage employees who are disproportionately people of color and women.

In speaking with frontline employees, academics, workforce experts, and companies what we found was that what's just as important is ensuring that the conditions are in place for authentic and honest engagement of employees. That's where we will spend most of the time with you.

The main takeaway from our research is that taking steps to build trust and relationships is the most important action employers can take to engage employee voice. In this interactive tool, designed for HR, DEIB, operations and CSR leaders like you, you will find five action steps you and your organization can take to build towards a culture that fosters belonging, built on trust and relationships. What you'll find is that investing in these steps will organically build more trust and deeper relationships.

A note on action and impact. Leaders engaging with this work should consider both the business and moral case for doing so. Our experience working with employers shows us that when leaders consider both aspects of impact they will find the greatest level of success. We want you to take the learnings from this tool and move to action – if you don't see measurable results right away, do not despair! With sustained and intentional effort you will see results.

## Employee Voice

The opportunity for employees to express concerns about policies in the workplace and offer ideas about how to improve conditions in the workplace. Informal employee voice is defined as the ability for employees to provide feedback and discuss concerns on a daily basis. Formal employee voice is defined as structured communication channels provided by the employer, including systems to file grievances and employee surveys.

The enabling conditions in this tool can enable a culture where informal and formal employee voice can thrive.

# The Business Case for Employee Voice

Today's corporate HR, Ops, and CSR leaders know that while signing bonuses and increased pay can help get employees in the door, it won't necessarily keep them there. Prioritizing employee voice, both the mechanisms through which it travels and the cultural conditions that let it thrive, can help you address your talent and business concerns while better supporting your frontline. By enabling and listening to employee voice, you can unlock efficiency, productivity, and innovation across your organization.

## Increased business productivity and efficiency

Employees can provide valuable insights to their employers across a range of business issues, from improvements in products and services to increased efficiencies in business practices, to better of alignment of benefits with employee needs. As one employer shared, "the people who are actually doing the jobs will create the best solutions for the challenges in their roles. Solutions are more real, more relevant, and more meaningful when they come from frontline workers."

## Higher employee retention and satisfaction

HR professionals understand, and research supports, the business value of retaining employees and improving employee satisfaction. The total cost of turnover can reach as high as 90–200% of the employee's annual salary. As one Frontline Advisor explained, "Listening to workers keeps morale and productivity high. If you're not meeting the needs of your employees, you'll get high turnover and low engagement, which waters down your mission as a business."

## Delivering on equity and inclusion commitments

The business case for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is stronger than ever. Despite a huge wave of corporate DEI commitments and public statements in the last two years, employees do not feel as if their employers have fulfilled their promises to address racial inequity. Engaging with the voice of frontline employees gives you an opportunity to understand persistent DEI challenges both within the company and externally in the market, and identify actions to improve the experience of employees of color on the job.

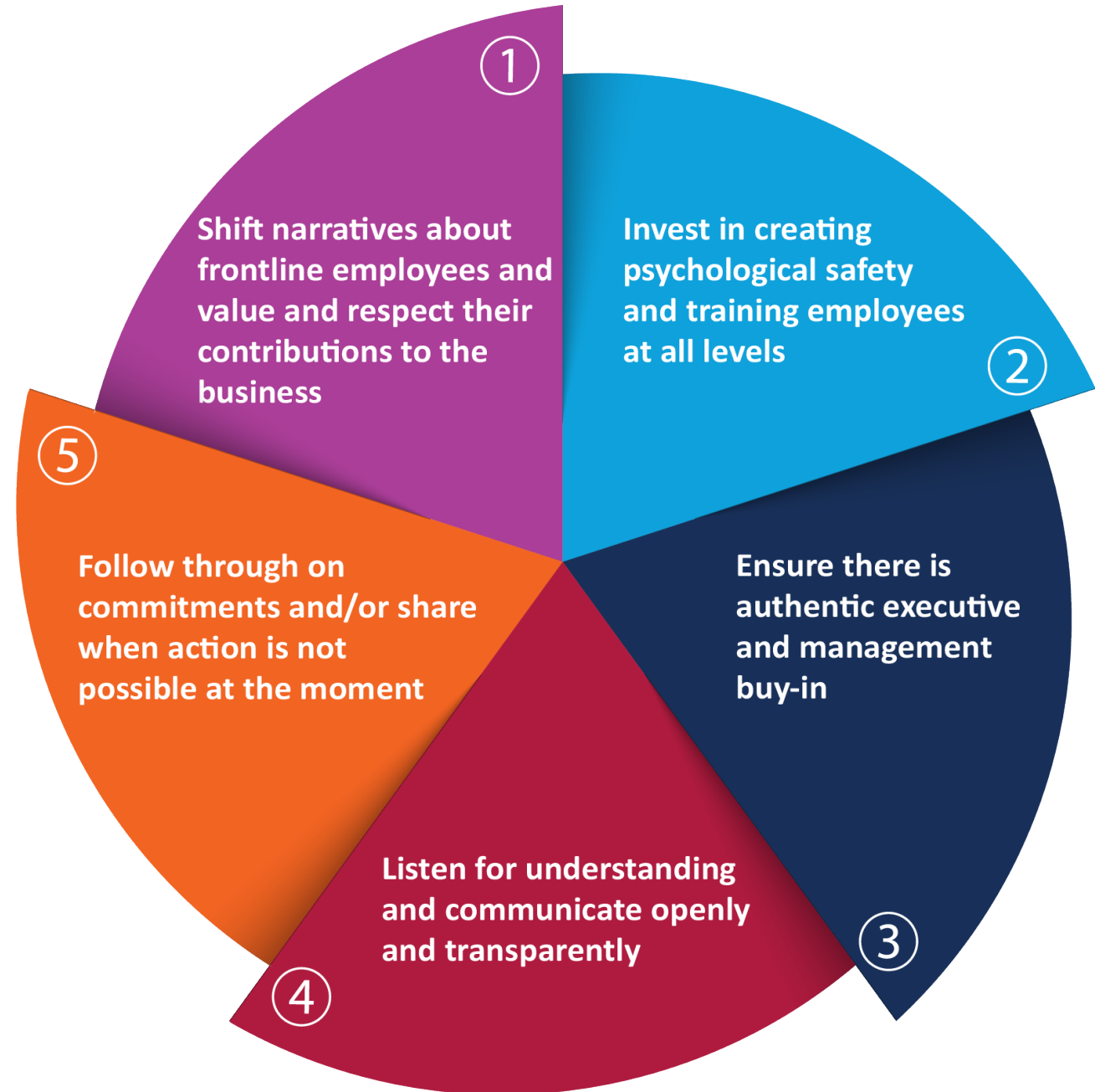
## Improved brand and reputational benefits

Over the last decade we've seen how corporate behavior can shift as a result of public pressure, transparency, and broad campaigning on topics like sustainability and labor. A broad range of stakeholders, including consumers, investors, employees, and policymakers, believe that companies have an important civic and moral duty to support their employees, and thus society. Prominent business leaders are signaling a shift away from shareholder primacy in service of economic and social equity, and public sentiment indicates a demand for companies to play a bigger role in addressing societal problems.

# Enabling Conditions for Change

Engaging and prioritizing employee voice is an important way to address your talent and business concerns while better supporting your frontline employees but doing so authentically and effectively goes beyond regularly hosting town halls or collecting survey data.

Drawing on our research and reflecting on our work with employers and frontline employees, we see five conditions that can enable a culture where employee voice can thrive.





# How to Use This Tool

We designed this to be an interactive tool you can engage with individually or with your team. Transforming systems can be difficult and slow – it can also be lonely work if you are going it alone. We encourage you to engage with team members as you go through the guide – print it out, make notes as you consider the prompts, have discussions, and move to action.

We love sticky notes – whether they're stuck on the wall or they're virtual sticky notes in a program like MURAL or Jamboard. As you move through the tool you'll see that it is designed to simulate a brainstorming session, whether in-person or virtual.



The why behind each enabling condition including some data points and examples to bring the condition to life.



An opportunity for you to think critically as you read through the text - what resonates with you, what do you find challenging and what new ideas does this spark?



Some thought starters to help you have a conversation with colleagues and learn together.



Tips for getting started as you identify and commit to the steps needed to build out these enabling conditions. This list is not exhaustive and may not exactly fit the needs of your company but it's a good place to start.



# Let's Begin Here

We begin this tool the way we begin our in-person sessions: with an integration of mind and body. This may feel odd, but trust us, you will be glad you did it! (But, of course, you can continue to the next slide if you wish).

Before you get started we encourage you to center or ground yourself with a short meditation. We recommend one of these or a favorite of yours if you have one. Scan with your phone or click the picture to access.

**5 Minute Meditation**  
**Anyone Can Do Anywhere**



**10 Minute Grounding**  
**Meditation to Relax & Recharge**



# Now Consider

**Building empathy is a key part of this work and we invite you to first reflect on the following:**

- ④ What are important aspects of your identity?
- ④ What experiences and/or systems helped propel you forward? Or another helpful framing, where have you felt the wind at your back?
- ④ What experiences and/or systems held you back? Or another helpful framing, where have you felt the wind at your face?



Shift narratives about frontline employees while valuing and respecting their contributions to the business



# Learn

Frontline employees are disproportionately people of color and women. There tend to be prevailing narratives in our society about who is in these roles, why they are there, and their value. For instance, deficit based narratives that view frontline employees as “low skilled.”

Valuing the knowledge and expertise of frontline employees is essential to the ongoing success of a company. The most important message we heard from our frontline advisors was a desire to be seen as human and to be treated with dignity. To share their voice at work, employees must feel valued, and employers must value the expertise of their employees and seek out their perspectives.

The companies that do this well value their frontline employees’ contributions to the business as much as those of the senior leaders. They have a sense of humility in knowing their company cannot operate without frontline employees.

For some companies, this may already be the case and for others a fundamental shift in company culture (norms, values, beliefs) may be needed. Awareness of the current perceptions of frontline employees is an important starting point.



# Reflect

As you read, think about:

- \* What resonates with you?
- \* What do you find challenging?
- \* What new ideas does this spark for you?

**Valuing the knowledge and expertise of frontline employees is essential to the ongoing success of a company.**

**Frontline Employees:**

- ✓ Know their job best and as the group closest to on-the-ground operations can quickly identify problems and areas for improvement.
- ✓ Act as the face of the company interacting with customers on a daily basis.
- ✓ Keep the business functioning day in and day out.



# Discuss

When you hear “frontline employee” what image comes to mind?

What narratives about frontline employees exist in your company?

What policies, processes, practices, systems, norms, and beliefs might be reinforcing these narratives?

What data do you track about the frontline? If you disaggregate the data by identity and position, what story does the data tell you about mobility and who is set up for success in your company?

When you consider change in the organization, whose voices might be louder, quieter, missing, or silent? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by changes that are or are not made?



## Act: Tips for getting started How might you...

### Gain a more empathetic understanding of the value of frontline work while getting to know your employees?

- ✓ Consider taking an observational field trip to watch your frontline employees at work; during and afterwards reflect on what you see, notice how the experience impacts you, and share your observations and thoughts with frontline employees and other colleagues.
- ✓ Make space for you and your employees to have open-ended, get-to-know-you conversations, ensuring that no one is missing work or needs to take unpaid time off to do so.
- ✓ Host regularly scheduled “teach up days” where senior leaders join a shift to work alongside their frontline workforce while being taught about how to do the job best from frontline employees.



## Invest in training employees at all levels to create psychological safety



## Learn

Creating a culture of psychological safety is key to enabling employee voice. Employees are less likely to express their perspective if they do not believe it is sought out in good faith, they fear retaliation, and/or they do not believe it is possible for their words and input to have an impact.

At the most local level, the extent psychological safety is felt by employees will depend on team dynamics as well as their identities and lived experiences. Intentional trust and relationship building is an important component of creating a sense of belonging in the company.

Power dynamics related to identity, title, tenure, education level, and employment/union status can influence the extent to which employees feel a level of psychological safety. Empathetic listening and learning can be a powerful tool for HR and ops leaders as they seek to influence team dynamics.



## Reflect

As you read, think about:

- \* What resonates with you?
- \* What do you find challenging?
- \* What new ideas does this spark for you?

**Providing appropriate leadership and feedback training for employees at all levels is an important tool to shift behaviors.**

**Feedback training for leadership, supervisors and frontline employees:**

- ✓ Builds employees' ability to communicate and collaborate with one another to improve their work, and to share their perspectives with supervisors and business leaders.
- ✓ Enables employees to see themselves as leaders within the frontline and the company at large.
- ✓ Encourages employee buy-in to business.

# Discuss

Do we have a culture of psychological safety within our team? What behaviors contribute to this or detract from it?

What happens when we don't hear employee concerns and voice?

What are the potential impacts to our business when we create the culture for frontline employee voice?

To what extent do we provide feedback training for all employees and to what extent is that training culturally responsive?

When you consider change in the organization, whose voices might be louder, quieter, missing, or silent? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by changes that are or are not made?



Act: Tips for getting started  
How might you...

## Create a culture where employees feel it is safe to speak up?

- ✓ Complete [5-min psychological safety audit](#) found on page 30 and ask yourself how you may contribute to building or eroding trust.
- ✓ Recognize and address when language or behavior (explicitly or implicitly - or intentionally or unintentionally), communicates hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults to people from marginalized groups.
- ✓ Make sure frontline employees are able to access and participate in the company-wide groups, conversations, and resources (e.g. ERGs, town halls and company intranet/chat boards) more senior employees have access to.



Ensure there is authentic buy-in at all levels of the company



# Learn

Engagement with frontline employees enables leaders to be in touch with employee perspectives and get their input on how to prioritize decisions and implement changes for the company. In our conversations, companies whose leaders and managers were committed to elevating voice grounded their practices in their company values. Measuring the impacts of employee voice initiatives on key metrics such as retention, engagement, and customer satisfaction can increase leadership buy-in and investment. When executives prioritize employee perspectives, it gives the rest of the organization more latitude to invest time and resources in creating the necessary structures and communication channels.

When engaging with frontline employees, leaders must authentically invest in relationships with frontline employees to build trust over time rather than engaging employees when there is an urgent issue. Demonstrating vulnerability and acknowledging gaps or mistakes is an important part of this process. The payoff for intentional trust and relationship building often comes during challenging situations when decisions need to be made swiftly.

In addition to executive and management level buy-in, it is critical to have buy-in from all levels of supervisory roles. Research shows that frontline supervisors can be an important lever for or barrier to engaging frontline voice.



# Reflect

As you read, think about:

- \* What resonates with you?
- \* What do you find challenging?
- \* What new ideas does this spark for you?

**Frontline supervisors are often in a challenging position when it comes to employee voice and additional training is needed to empower them.**

**Frontline supervisors:**

- ✓ Are expected to both represent the perspectives of the frontline and communicate the policies of the company back to the frontline.
- ✓ May not have the tools to engage with their team's perspectives or the resources to act on their feedback.

Partnership with and in support of frontline supervisors will unlock voice of frontline employees.

# Discuss

What are elements of trust building that are important for our team that we can implement with frontline employees?

What metrics (e.g., retention, engagement) do we collect that we can track over time as we roll out engagement approaches?

To what extent do we connect engagement of voice with performance scorecards?

What resources and supports do we have in place for frontline supervisors so that they can authentically engage voice?

When you consider change in the organization, whose voices might be louder, quieter, missing, or silent? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by changes that are or are not made?



## Act: Tips for getting started

How might you...

### Demonstrate the value and importance of engaging employee voice for executive and management teams?

- ✓ Find opportunities for leaders and managers to interact with frontline employees in environments that reduce power dynamics (e.g., in a meeting led by frontline employees, in a physical space that is inclusive).
- ✓ Share what you've learned from your own engagement with frontline employees, that there is opportunity for mobility and movement within the company and how you believe that engaging frontline voice can lead to better business outcomes.
- ✓ Support and incentivize supervisors to gather and share employees' feedback, including recognition for supervisors who do it well and establishing performance metrics for engaging employee voice. One example of a performance metric would be the number of 1:1 and team meetings a supervisor leads focused on gathering feedback.





Listen for understanding, communicate transparently and remain open to feedback



Learn

Transparent, consistent, and inclusive communication practices give employees the information they need to express their perspectives at work and do their job effectively. Transparent communication also builds trust between employees and their employer. Being upfront about areas of growth individually and as a company helps build a culture of openness and understanding where in which everyone can make mistakes and learn from them. For employees to feel equipped and empowered to give feedback on the company, they need access to information to form their perspective.

Communication should not just be a one-way sharing of information but rather a two-way channel. When engaging with your employees, it is important to listen for understanding first. This will help you understand the problem fully from the perspective of the employee.

Be aware if you find yourself going to problem solving mode or relying on policies or regulations to defend circumstances. We find that using human-centered design principles to listen to employee perspectives leads to better outcomes in the long run.



# Reflect

As you read, think about:

- \* What resonates with you?
- \* What do you find challenging?
- \* What new ideas does this spark for you?

**Building a culture of transparent communication and intentional listening is essential to enabling employee voice.**

**Transparent information and communication:**

- ✓ Informs employees at all levels about key business indicators, not just those in leadership, and contributes to all employees connecting with the company's success and purpose.
- ✓ Enables frontline employees to better understand how their role connects to overall business operations and profitability.
- ✓ Creates a culture of trust that allows for communication to flow from top to bottom and bottom to top.



# Discuss

When have I felt listened to and understood in a workplace? Why did it matter?

Outside of your team, who do you know within your company and how do you engage in conversation?

What communication channels do we have for sharing business information, and how are they used today?

What kinds of information does someone need to develop an informed opinion of our business?

When you consider change in the organization, whose voices might be louder, quieter, missing, or silent? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by changes that are or are not made?



## Act: Tips for getting started How might you...

### Create an environment with meaningful connection, where we listen to understand each other?

- ✓ Provide frontline supervisors with feedback training and make space for them to practice – both giving and getting honest feedback. Practice listening for understanding with a colleague using the exercise on page 31.
- ✓ Set up time to connect with frontline employees where you explore a specific perceived problem (e.g., advancement) identified by the executive team and practice listening for understanding. Be sure to compensate employees for their time.
- ✓ In order for frontline employees to gain understanding of business priorities, consider clearly sharing the organization's key measures of business success and financial information with all employees. Reviewing the principles of Open Book Management on page 32 may be a good starting point.



Follow through on commitments and/or share when action is not possible



# Learn

Engaging employee voice is not only about seeking their perspective, but also about acknowledging and acting on what is shared. Research has shown that gathering feedback and not recognizing it and/or acting on it can have a more negative impact than not gathering feedback at all. Opening up the door for more feedback can be scary, but it doesn't mean you have to act on every suggestion.

Giving frontline employees credit and recognition for speaking up in the first place, and having a clear articulation of what you are not acting on and why helps to build trust over time. If employees speak up and nothing changes and they never hear why, it disrupts psychological safety and discourages feedback.

This may mean that you establish a clear process and dedicated communication channel for employee feedback and leadership/HR responses. It doesn't require individualized responses to every single point of feedback, rather an ongoing dialogue about competing prioritization, business needs, and opportunities for innovation.



# Reflect

As you read, think about:

- \* What resonates with you?
- \* What do you find challenging?
- \* What new ideas does this spark for you?

**It is not enough to ask for input and feedback – there must be systems and mechanisms to respond to those inputs.**

**Responding to and acting on employee feedback:**

- ✓ Builds accountability and trust between senior leadership and a company's frontline workforce.
- ✓ Allows leaders to learn how to more effectively run their company for the benefit of employees and customers.
- ✓ Improves workplace culture and has a positive effect on a unit's effectiveness.
- ✓ Leads to employees feeling more comfortable and willing to share their honest experiences, challenges, and ideas for improvement.



# Discuss

Do you actively engage in giving and receiving feedback?

How transparent are we with all of our employees about who makes what decisions and why?

To what extent do we share information about why we were not able to prioritize resources (e.g., budget and time constraints) ?

Do we gather feedback from frontline employees? If so, how do we typically gather feedback from our frontline employees and what is our process for responding to feedback?

When you consider change in the organization, whose voices might be louder, quieter, missing, or silent? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by changes that are or are not made?



## Act: Tips for getting started

### How might you

#### Build a container for frontline employees to trust that feedback is heard?

- ✓ Look back at your most recent feedback collection process (e.g., survey) and consider how you can follow up with frontline employees to acknowledge that feedback was received (e.g., share a summary of the feedback) and what actions will be prioritized and why.
- ✓ Share your future feedback collection plan and communicate when you will next be collecting input, for what purpose, and how the company will respond to feedback.
- ✓ For an upcoming organizational change (e.g., new policy or practice), proactively communicate with all employees and explain the considerations leadership had to address in decision-making, including input from employees.

# Assessing Your Work

After reflecting on, internalizing and acting on each enabling condition it is important to pause and consider the impact new practices, policies and ways of work have on your frontline employees, frontline managers and supervisors, local and headquarters management, and company leadership.

Success requires being:

- ✓ **Accountable:** Do you have a mechanism in place for accountability?
- ✓ **Responsible:** How do you demonstrate your commitment to following through on feedback?
- ✓ **Truthful:** Are you honest with yourself and your team about the impact of this new way of working has?

# What's Next

Leading employers know that elevating the voices and opinions of frontline employees is critical to business success, and can result in increased employee retention; lower turnover costs; better insights to improve the customer experience; greater employee satisfaction, mobility and loyalty; and better business profits.

And Talent Rewire knows that creating an environment and culture where employees can safely provide input is hard work and we are here to partner with you.

Whether you are an employer or an organization that provides support and training for employers and employees, our program offerings can be tailored to address your specific business needs, your geography, and your diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging goals. You can learn more about upcoming opportunities at [www.talentrewire.org](http://www.talentrewire.org) or by reaching out to us directly.

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# Enabling Conditions in Action





## In Action: Dr. Bronner's

Dr. Bronner's is a California-based soap manufacturer and certified B Corporation that embodies its family-owned origins in how they treat its employees.

One of the company's core values, or "cosmic principles," is to treat employees like family, and that is upheld at every level of the company. Despite significant growth in recent years, the family owners are active in the business and still strive to know every employee by name, greeting them personally on the factory lines.

In our interview with Dr. Bronner's, their team members explained that in difficult times, this family-oriented culture has helped hold the organization together for a common purpose. In this way, Dr. Bronner's embodies the first enabling condition for employee voice by actively **shifting narratives about frontline employees while valuing and respecting their contributions to the business.**

Through participation in Talent Rewire's Accelerator, Dr. Bronner's realized it needed to consult with frontline employees more. The company already had some employee voice approaches in place, such as their "Green Team," a cross-department **task force** that frontline employees can participate in to develop sustainability solutions. Dr. Bronner's realized they could be doing more, especially with upward mobility within the organization. In order to gain honest feedback from employees, leaders were intentional in creating **a safe and inviting environment for employee voice by centering employees' needs, protecting anonymity, and prohibiting retaliation.** Dr. Bronner's engaged with a community-based, third party facilitator to run **focus groups** to understand employees' views on upward mobility and current barriers to upward movement in the company. Leaders also made it clear that employees' responses would not be tied to performance and that leadership welcomed their authenticity. Dr. Bronner's hopes these results will help leadership understand if frontline employees want to move up in the organization and, if so, how the company can best support them in doing so. While the company already has low turnover, this would ensure more of Dr. Bronner's talent stays and grows within the organization.



As you read, think about:

- \* What are the similarities and differences between our company and Dr. Bronner's?
- \* What are the values of our organization that allow us to prioritize employee voice?
- \* How has the current climate impacted our efforts to connect with frontline employees and how might we adjust our efforts?

**"We would be a hypocritical company without worker voice, because we purport that they guide what we do. You don't treat family members like silent bystanders and not care how they're doing. Every member shapes the family in some way – there may be a leader, but everyone has a role."**

Senior Leader, Dr. Bronner's



## In Action: Optimax

Optimax is a private, American precision optics manufacturing company based in Ontario, NY. Its CEO, Rick Plympton, started his career as a frontline employee. He highly values the contributions of his frontline employees at Optimax, embodying the first enabling condition to engage with employee voice: **shifting narratives about frontline employees while valuing and respecting their contributions to the business.**

One way Optimax communicates to employees that they are valued is through their profit sharing program, in which all fully vested (5 years of service) employees receive the same monthly profit share regardless of their title or level. Despite some initial concerns about financial viability, Optimax has continued its profit sharing program through its transition to an **Employee Ownership Trust (EOT)**.

Optimax's EOT model has been successful in creating a highly engaged workforce that is invested in the company. This success is due to the way Optimax effectively **seeks employee voice proactively and authentically**. Before Optimax became an EOT, they sought employee input on which form of ownership would work best for them. The company found out that most employees preferred profit sharing because of the regional history of employees receiving company stock that plummeted in value, leaving many without stable retirements. Therefore, Optimax decided to restructure as an EOT with a Perpetual Purpose Trust that ensures 25% profit sharing with employees forever.

Optimax has always been employee centric and focused on involving employees in all aspects of the business. For example, Optimax hosts its Engineering Day, which usually about a third of its workforce attends. This **company-wide gathering** is a chance for employees to share their ideas for ways to innovate and improve Optimax's products. While not all employees can physically attend because Optimax's factory runs around the clock, the event is live streamed and recorded so that employees can access it later. In addition, Optimax utilizes open book management principles and is constantly finding new channels to communicate with employees. Moving forward, CEO Rick Plympton hopes to improve employee voice channels by **providing training on giving and receiving feedback, and building leadership capacity at all levels**. For more information on Optimax's EOT model, please refer to [this piece](#) from Project Equity.



As you read, think about:

- \* What are the similarities and differences between our company and Optimax?
- \* What are the values of our organization that allow us to prioritize employee voice?
- \* Does our management philosophy center practices and policies that build a culture of feedback and input?

**“When I was 22, I was tapped on the shoulder to show up to a production meeting that department managers attended. I had received no training or coaching on what to do in that meeting and I was completely lost. When I came to Optimax, I was really adamant that we need to have leadership training to give them the framework for how we create value and the perspective of self, team, company and community. We should not give people more responsibility without giving them training.”**

**Rick Plympton, CEO - Optimax**



## In Action: Meliora Cleaning Products

Meliora Cleaning Products is a certified B corporation and cleaning products company based in Chicago, IL. Meliora Cleaning Products' founders value transparency in everything they do, and it is integral to their success as a company. This includes being clear about salaries, cash flow, financials, and other aspects of the business. Meliora Cleaning Products is a great representation of the third enabling condition **listening for understanding, communicating transparently and remaining open to feedback**. For Meliora Cleaning Products, this transparency makes change management easier.

In an interview with Madhura Ramakrishnan, a production manager at Meliora Cleaning Products, we discussed the **one on one check-ins** Ramakrishnan has with her team. She started with monthly check-ins with a third party translator available. This allowed Meliora Cleaning Products' Spanish-speaking employees to adequately express themselves in meetings and is an excellent example of **creating safe and inviting environments for employee voice by centering their needs, protecting anonymity, and prohibiting retaliation**. She noted that at first, employees did not bring much up during check-ins. However, after many months, employees became more comfortable setting the agenda and speaking up about concerns. As Meliora Cleaning Products grows, the team is considering how to maintain employee voice as a central part of the role of managers and the executive team. As Ramakrishnan put it, *"It is easy to get tied up in the numbers, financials, ROI, and profits, but that shouldn't be the leading factor in decision making. It is important to keep your eyes on what's happening on the floor with your people."*



As you read, think about:

- \* What are the similarities and differences between our company and Meliora Cleaning Products?
- \* Are we actively prioritizing and engaging in transparent communications?
- \* How has the current climate impacted our efforts to connect with frontline employees and how might we adjust our efforts?

**"Leaders have to be transparent about priorities, timeline, and factors involved in any change. When employees are informed about the business, everyone knows that if the company cannot give them a raise it's not because leaders do not want to, but because there are competing priorities."**

**Leader, Meliora Cleaning Products**



## In Action: Mascoma Bank

Mascoma Bank is a Certified B Corporation® with locations in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. In recent years, Mascoma Bank focused on employee engagement and voice in the workplace. One way Mascoma Bank does this is through weekly or biweekly videos from senior leaders answering questions that employees submit anonymously. Mascoma Bank also holds quarterly town halls where leaders share information on the business and employees can ask more questions. In this way, Mascoma Bank has implemented the fourth enabling condition where **leadership and supervisors follow through on commitments and/or shares when action is not possible**. Mascoma Bank leaders have provided employees with multiple avenues to engage with leadership and ensure employees' voice always receives a response. In this way, employees can know leaders have processed and reflected on their feedback instead of soliciting voice to check a box.

Mascoma Bank has made significant effort to engage with employee voice and is evidence of how multiple approaches can be used to engage employee voice. The bank has **town halls, regular one on one check-ins**, and conducts **surveys**. These are all ways for Mascoma Bank to **seek employee voice proactively and authentically** which has allowed Mascoma Bank to receive better information on how to allocate resources. For example, Mascoma Bank has used surveys to uncover that employees would appreciate student loan repayment much more than the company's existing tuition reimbursement programs. Mascoma Bank also sets expectations for supervisors to engage with employee voice to ensure more feedback funnels up to leadership. Mascoma Bank embodies the idea that **providing training on giving and receiving feedback and building leadership capacity at all levels** can foster the trust needed to create an environment where employee voice can thrive. At Mascoma Bank, supervisors are encouraged to have proactive, regular conversations with employees and employees are expected to set the agenda for check-ins.



As you read, think about:

- \* What are the similarities and differences between our company and Mascoma Bank?
- \* What mechanisms for collecting employee voice does Mascoma Bank have in place that we might want to try in our organization?
- \* What training does leadership at all levels need to build a culture of trust?



## In Action: MOD Pizza

MOD Pizza is a fast casual pizza chain founded in Seattle with over 500 locations in North America and thousands of employees. MOD was founded on inclusive hiring practices and has an explicit social impact vision, which they have supported with an intentional company culture. MOD Pizza leadership (before the COVID-19 pandemic) regularly visited stores in different markets to understand how they can best support their employees, and new central operations hires would all do a store shift to experience the frontline role. As they expand into new markets, they are intentional about bringing an established manager from another area to carry that culture, and regularly leverage “all-star” employees to train new employees and get them oriented to the company. All of these cultural elements, in addition to their equity-focused hiring practices, have created an inclusive and communicative company culture that **values frontline employees and the perspectives they bring to the table.**



### As you read, think about:

- \* What are the similarities and differences between our company and MOD Pizza?
- \* What enabling conditions does MOD Pizza have in place that we might want to try in our organization?
- \* What practices can we put into place to better elevate the value of frontline employees?

# Appendix

# Critical Vocabulary

## Employee voice

The opportunity for employees to express concerns about policies in the workplace and offer ideas about how to improve conditions in the workplace. Informal employee voice is defined as the ability for employees to provide feedback and discuss concerns on a daily basis. Formal employee voice is defined as structured communication channels provided by the employer, including systems to file grievances and employee surveys.

## Equity

Equity is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. Improving equity involves increasing justice and fairness within the procedures and processes of institutions or systems, as well as in their distribution of resources.<sup>1</sup>

## Frontline employee

Employees who work in close proximity to the public. This can include individuals working in health care, food services, and customer service. Frontline work is performed onsite and requires being close to the public (e.g. one's customers) or co-workers.<sup>2</sup>

## Psychological safety

A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.<sup>3</sup>

## Enabling conditions

Factors that increase the likelihood of an intended change in approach, strategy or practice.

## Power

The ability to control people or things.<sup>4</sup> Power within a company is assumed to be the province of the CEO, the C-suite, possibly the board, or large blocks of shareholders. As such, the idea of power, who holds it and who does not is something that is ever-present but rarely named explicitly in our discussions of the role of business in society. Power is unequally distributed globally and in U.S. society; some individuals or groups wield greater power than others, thereby allowing them greater access and control over resources. Wealth, whiteness, citizenship, patriarchy, heterosexism, and education are a few of the key social mechanisms through which power operates.

## Good job/quality job

Jobs with a fair wage that allow individuals to sustain the health and wellbeing of themselves and their families. When one's work is respected and meaningfully contributes to the goals of the organization. It is having a voice in one's workplace and the opportunity to shape one's work life, as well having accessible opportunities to learn and grown.

Sources:<sup>1</sup>[Independent Sector](#); <sup>2</sup>[The Words of the Workforce](#); <sup>3</sup>[Amy C. Edmondson](#); <sup>4</sup>[Cambridge Dictionary](#)



# Implementation Guidance

In addition to the enabling conditions that create a supportive environment for employee voice, our research has elevated important considerations for how to equitably and effectively implement employee voice approaches. To get quality information from employees, you must ensure that all of their employees are able to share their perspective and feel safe doing so.

Prioritizing this guidance when implementing employee voice engagement approaches will help mitigate common challenges with honesty, transparency, safety, and equity.

**Power Dynamics and Confidentiality:** Special attention should be given to the power dynamics that exist between employers and employees that may not allow employees to feel safe and comfortable sharing their honest opinion. You can consider using a third party facilitator rather than company employees to facilitate sensitive conversations.

**Equity:** It's imperative to consider how you are actively addressing inequities and barriers for frontline employees. Some important equity considerations include offering childcare and/or transportation for requests beyond standard role duties, using concise and clear language, choosing times that work for a variety of shift employees, utilizing translators for multi-lingual groups, and ensuring the venue or technology has necessary accommodations for participants with disabilities.

**Compensation:** Employees must be compensated for their time preparing and participating in formal engagement mechanisms. Employee voice engagement must take place “on the clock” and be built into employees’ schedules for it to be accessible and meaningful.

**Technological accessibility:** New technology allows you to easily implement many of the approaches discussed below, but you must consider if the technology excludes certain employees from participating. This includes understanding the literacy, digital literacy, ability (e.g., vision, hearing), and language needs of your employees.

**Frequency/ timing:** Special considerations should be made for how often to solicit employee voice. This will of course depend on your capacity, other existing touchpoints with employees, and employees’ schedules (in and outside of work). Connect with business leaders to understand how non-HR teams may be using surveys, focus groups, and other approaches so that employees don’t experience confusion or feel overwhelmed.

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/centering-worker-voice-in-employer-engagement-and-program-design-a-guide-for-workforce-organizations/>

# 5-minute Psychological Safety Audit

You can use this audit with your team to evaluate how safe people feel speaking up and taking risks. Ask everyone to contribute their thoughts and make a plan to act on suggestions and ideas that come from the conversation.

- ✓ If you make a mistake in this team, will it be held against you?
- ✓ Are the members of this team able to bring up problems and tough issues?
- ✓ Do people on this team sometimes reject others for being different?
- ✓ Is it safe to take a risk on this team?
- ✓ Is it difficult to ask other members of this team for help?
- ✓ Would anyone on the team deliberately act in a way that undermines efforts?
- ✓ Working with members of this team, are unique skills and talents valued and utilized?

# Listening for Understanding

Listening for understanding, or active listening, helps you have more meaningful and engaged conversations. When you're paying full attention to what the other person is saying—without planning what you want to say or interrupting their conversation—you develop more effective communication skills.

To confirm you understand, you then paraphrase what you heard back to the other person. Depending on the conversation, you can also ask a specific, open-ended question to dig deeper into the topic.

This type of listening helps you build strong relationships, gain a deeper understanding of your colleagues, and even deepens your own sense of empathy.<sup>1</sup>



## Act: Tips for getting started

### Active listeners:

- ✓ Avoid interrupting
- ✓ Listen without judgment
- ✓ Paraphrase and summarize
- ✓ Model positive nonverbal behavior
- ✓ Ask specific, open-ended questions

### Sample Prompts:<sup>2</sup>

- ✓ In other words...
- ✓ What I'm hearing, then is... Is that correct?
- ✓ What I hear you saying is... Am I missing anything?
- ✓ I'm hearing many things... Did I miss anything?
- ✓ As I listen to you, I'm hearing... Is there anything else you feel I should know?

# Open Book Management

Open book management (OBM) is defined as empowering every employee of an organization with required knowledge about the processes, adequate training and powers to make decisions which would help them in running a business. It is all about team work and moving forward collectively.<sup>1</sup>

The benefits of OBM can include:<sup>2</sup>

- ✓ More engaged employees
- ✓ Lower supervisory costs
- ✓ Better front-line relations with customers
- ✓ Faster, more agile response to changing customer needs
- ✓ A built-in competitive advantage
- ✓ More fun
- ✓ Higher company valuation

# Contributors

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The research team interviewed a range of stakeholders from the private sector, the workforce development field and academia. In addition, they engaged a **Frontline Advisory Group** to provide input and feedback at multiple points during the research and writing process. The group represents the national profile of people who work in hourly, low-wage jobs and are disproportionately people of color and women because of enduring systemic barriers. They live and work across the country in both urban and rural settings and represent a range of people who are currently employed, underemployed or unemployed. We thank all of the people who generously shared their expertise, input and feedback with us.

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