

When speaking up at work, talk to someone who can take action, study recommends

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Conventional wisdom says it pays to speak up at work: When an

employee offers a novel idea for workplace improvements, and managers listen and act, both the organization and employee win.

But new research from Texas McCombs finds much depends on whom those employees speak to.

In a recent paper, Ethan Burris, professor of management, has examined the factors that make speaking up productive, by increasing the likelihood that a suggested change will get implemented. He found two characteristics of the listener that enhanced sales for both an employee and a business:

- Hierarchy: Having the authority and resources to make the change happen.
- Competence: Having the know-how to make the change happen

Some employees make the mistake of speaking up to someone who is no higher in the hierarchy, Burris says. "They target people who simply do not have the power or [social standing](#) to initiate effective change."

Instead, he suggests, employees should first consider whether they're speaking to someone who can take the requested action:

- Employees should speak upward, to [managers](#) who have the authority and resources to address an issue. Speaking more frequently to bosses led to a 12%-15% increase in sales performance.
- Employees should avoid speaking sideways, to peers who have no more power than they have to fix underlying challenges. Speaking sideways was associated with a 10% decrease in sales performance.
- If employees must speak sideways, they should target their most competent [peers](#)—those with the most knowledge and influence

to help get ideas carried out.

"Employees should think critically about who they direct their voice to, when they have an idea for change," says Burris. "Both the amount of authority a person has to drive change and their [competence](#) give a greater likelihood of implementing the ideas [employees](#) raise."

The study is published in the journal *Organization Science*.

More information: Ethan R. Burris et al, The Agency to Implement Voice: How Target Hierarchical Position and Competence Changes the Relationship Between Voice and Individual Performance, *Organization Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2022.1640](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2022.1640)

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