

Leadership transparency alone doesn't guarantee employees will speak up in the workplace

April 1 2024, by Ellen Choi, Hannes Leroy and Lieke ten Brummelhuis



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Leaders are often encouraged to be open, authentic and vulnerable at work. Employees are similarly told their voices matter in the workplace

and to speak up when they need to. But, being open and honest at work is not always as straightforward as these messages suggest.

What these invitations for honesty don't fully acknowledge is that speaking up is an act of confidence, bolstered by a steady reserve of self-worth. For many people, speaking one's truth or revealing one's honest thoughts and feelings can be a nerve-wracking experience because it leaves them exposed to judgment, ridicule and rejection.

At work, disclosing dissenting opinions, [reporting errors](#) or disclosing information about one's state of mental health can even lead to repercussions. Unsurprisingly, studies consistently show that [50% of employees prefer to keep quiet at work](#). With this in mind, we set out to examine when and for whom transparent leadership can be beneficial.

Investigating leadership

[In our recent research paper](#), we investigated whether [leaders](#) can encourage their employees to express their opinions by demonstrating open and direct communication themselves.

In two studies involving 484 leaders and almost 3,000 of their employees from organizations in Belgium, we examined whether leaders who communicated more transparently created an environment where employees felt comfortable voicing their opinions.

Surveys were sent to leaders and employees over two time periods. The first time, employees completed measures on their leader's transparency, their own levels of [self-esteem](#) based on others' approval and psychological safety. A month later, they completed a second survey on voice behavior.

Our studies yielded two key insights. The first is that leaders can set an

example. Leaders with a transparent communication style were able to create a climate of psychological safety in their teams. Because followers felt safe to be vulnerable, they were more likely to voice their opinion.

The second is that follower's self-esteem matters. Transparent leaders were only able to make followers feel safe if the follower had secure self-esteem. Self-esteem can be based on [external factors](#), like the approval of others, or on [internal factors](#), like the extent to which an individual loves and accepts themselves.

Followers who based their self-worth on the approval of others did not feel safe when their leader used direct and open communication and hence, did not open up.

Encouraging vulnerability at work

To help employees to speak up at work, our research suggests that organizations consider several factors. First, organizations should prioritize increasing psychological safety.

[Psychological safety](#) refers to the extent to which employees feel like they can voice their concerns or deliver negative feedback at work. When leaders communicate transparently with their employees, their behavior demonstrates that honesty is valued and that it's safe for employees to be open in return.

Second, it's important for organizations to consider their audience when communicating. Direct communication does not make everyone open up. When people base their self-worth on the approval of others, speaking up can be terrifying and keeping quiet or saying the "right" thing, instead of one's honest opinions, may be the preferred route as it helps protect their self-worth.

Encouraging employees to be aware of the source of their self-esteem and offering mindfulness or self-compassion training could help shift their sense of self-worth. [Improving self-compassion](#), for example, can help people be more accepting and kind to themselves.

Lastly, establishing group norms that promote speaking up is essential. As social beings, [humans constantly look to the outside world for cues](#) on how to behave, what is appropriate and what behaviors are safe and acceptable. The more socially acceptable speaking up becomes, the more likely the quality of the conversation will deepen to include richer topics that might otherwise not get broached.

Identifying key team members that are respected and influential and encouraging them to express themselves may help turn the tide so that all team members follow suit.

Fostering trust in the workplace

Our research results suggest that leaders who communicate transparently can encourage their followers to voice their opinions. But the relationship between leadership transparency and follower responsiveness is more nuanced than that.

While transparency can promote [open communication](#), it's crucial for leaders to recognize that individual reactions vary. Our findings demonstrate that not all followers will find comfort in the presence of managerial candor. Employees who base their self-worth on the approval of others do not feel safe when their leader communicates in a direct manner.

This insight is particularly relevant, given [young adults](#) are developing their self-esteem in a backdrop of social networking sites where external validation is the main currency. This is so much so that the next wave of

employees has been called "[generation validation](#)."

We recommend leaders keep their audience in mind when delivering honest messages and suggest they make an effort to gauge whether the recipient is likely to feel confident enough to express their [opinion](#) openly. If their goal is to receive direct communication in return, leaders can empower [employees](#) to voice their opinions not only by fostering an environment of trust and safety, but also by encouraging their followers to love and accept themselves.

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