

# Establish Employee Voice in your Business

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## Establish employee voice in your business

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### Introduction

Establishing an employee voice is about sharing information so that employees are properly informed and listening to feedback and ideas that can help improve your business. Always listen and respond to the views that you receive - however challenging these may be.

This guide looks at best practice to build and embed an effective employee voice within your business. It gives ideas on how to encourage employees at all levels to give their views, ideas and feedback - without any fear of criticism or comeback from managers.

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### Share business information with employees

To build an employee voice it must be informed. You will only gain meaningful input and ideas from your employees if you share information on how to improve your business. How you do this will depend on your business, you could consider:

- providing regular performance updates through the channels you have available - for example - noticeboards, posters, email or TV screens
- holding regular face-to-face business updates where employees can ask questions and you can share information - consider alternative channels for employees who work remotely or cannot make the meeting
- equipping managers with briefing materials and support which helps them put business performance information into context for their

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teams

- communicating your personal views on business progress and performance through the channels you have available - for example - an internal newsletter column, blog, podcast or film for the intranet
- running regular discussions with groups of employees - for example - monthly breakfast or lunch meetings

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### Encourage feedback and ideas from employees

Receiving feedback from employees can help you improve your business. There are options you can consider to encourage ideas from employees including:

- a feedback link in internal newsletters or on the intranet
- inviting employees to complete a postcard with ideas - for example - what they can do to improve their performance, what their team can do to improve performance and what the wider business can do to pursue its strategy
- posing a monthly question to invite views, stimulate discussions and share key themes from the feedback
- giving managers a standing agenda for team briefings inviting questions and feedback from employees
- providing training or guidance to help managers seek and handle feedback
- holding regular focus groups that seek feedback from a cross-section of employees across your business - [download guidance on running employee focus groups \(Word, 184KB\) - Opens in a new window](#)
- creating specific days during which employees can come and talk to senior managers with any views or

issues

- conducting surveys with your employees, using a core set of questions each time so you can track responses and identify trends - [download some sample themes for employee surveys \(Word, 185KB\) - Opens in a new window](#)
- establishing a suggestion scheme for employees - see our page how to [evaluate employee ideas](#)
- creating a spot prize that gives managers freedom to recognise a particularly innovative idea or business improvement
- celebrating all productive ideas that employees have suggested - however small - to show that everyone can help shape the way your business is run
- creating days during which employees can come and talk to senior managers with any views or issues

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### Evaluate employee ideas

When you receive ideas from employees try to evaluate them in a fair way. By setting up an evaluation process you will add transparency for employees and build their confidence to submit ideas.

#### Establishing the evaluation process

The evaluation process you need will depend on the size of your business and the amount of feedback you receive. You might be able to manage the evaluation process personally.

If you have a larger business you may need a scheme administrator, who will manage the evaluation process - including communications - and an evaluation team

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made up of representatives from across your business.

### Creating criteria

Here are some evaluation criteria you could use to help you evaluate employee ideas:

- cost reduction
- generating business income
- increasing market share
- improving customer service or relations
- improving the working environment or work/life balance
- enhancing the reputation of the business
- improving decision making or reducing risk
- improving working practices/processes

It's important that you define what these broad criteria mean to your specific business and that you brief your evaluation team accordingly.

If you ask for ideas on a particular area then you may need more specific evaluation criteria.

It's also important to make sure employees understand that suggestions for small changes are as welcome as big ideas. Sometimes small changes can have a major impact on the way the business works.

### Communicating outputs

Communicate your evaluation of ideas and show the difference the ideas have made to your business. Recognise and reward employees who suggest ideas that you consider.

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### Use technology to improve employee voice

Every business has a range of channels it uses to communicate with employees. These could be internal noticeboards, blogs or networking sites - which can all help employees share views, knowledge and ideas.

When deciding what is right for your business, you could consider:

- asking your employees what would help them in their work
- creating and communicating clear guidelines and policy on the use of technology - including the accessing of networking sites and use of language - and addressing any misuse of them
- using internal systems, external tools, collaboration sites or a combination of these mechanisms depending on your aims, technical capabilities and budget
- demonstrating your own support by participating and encouraging colleagues to do the same
- identifying and supporting early adopters who can start encouraging involvement across the rest of your business
- celebrating ideas, feedback and improvements that come from collaboration through tools and channels

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### Create employee forums

Many businesses use employee forums to seek ideas for improving business performance. Different approaches work for

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different businesses, you could:

- establish an employee board with rotating membership where ideas can be sounded
- set up an employee taskforce to look at a key business challenge or topic
- make sure any initiatives seeking views or ideas from customers are mirrored within your business to give employees the chance to submit ideas

If you create an employee forum try to remember the following key points.

### **Define role and remit**

Have a clear remit for the forum with clear terms of reference understood across the business.

An effective way of creating terms of reference is to involve the forum members in defining them.

### **Create clear responsibilities**

Agree responsibilities for the employees in the forum when creating it - for example:

- proactively seeking views and feedback from employees in their area of the business
- identifying progress and communicating these
- running employee focus groups to seek views and opinions
- presenting and reporting to managers on relevant feedback from their area of the business
- communicating with people in their area of the business about ideas or issues

Creating clear responsibilities shows you are keen to work with the forum and that the employees involved have important responsibilities.

### **Invite participants**

Although the types of employee forum discussed here are informal bodies try to have an open and transparent approach to recruiting members. This will be important to the credibility and trust in the forum. You may want to consider an evaluation or election process.

### **Communicate outputs**

It is important to the credibility of the forum that you communicate outputs and emphasise the difference it has made to the running of the business.

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## Align employee voice and collective voice

The involvement of trade unions and union and non union employee representatives can provide a collective voice for all or part of your workforce.

Information and consultation requirements apply to all organisations with at least 50 employees. For more information see our guide on how to **inform and consult your employees**.

Trust, cooperation and information sharing are essential to the employee voice and the collective voice. Your approach to employee and collective voice should support each other.

A genuinely engaged workplace will be a

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foundation for the more formal process of involvement and consultation.

To align your collective voice with employee voice, you could:

- invite union and non union representatives to presentations on business progress and performance before these briefings are given more widely to your employees
- invite representatives to become involved in meaningful discussions on a broader range of business topics beyond those formally agreed
- ask representatives to canvass their colleagues on ideas for improving your business or responding to a particular challenge
- invite representatives to presentations on the results from employee surveys and ask them to work with you on plans to address any issues

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### Here's how we seek ideas from employees

The management of Manchester-based George Davies solicitors recognised the business benefits of listening to the views of their 85 employees. They wanted to find ways to encourage people at all levels of the business to have their say.

#### Ask for three ideas

Every year employees are asked to suggest three ideas - for example - where the business could save money or improve the firm's efficiency. The best three ideas are selected, trialled and then - if feedback is positive - adopted by the business.

Lisa Pearson, Business Development Manager says "Employees have responded really well to this initiative and great ideas have come from all levels of the business".

#### Act on input

Last year, a secretary suggested that reception should be informed when any clients are coming into the office for a meeting - this enables reception to be prepared and greet the clients by name as they arrive. Lisa continues, "It's a really simple idea but client feedback has been phenomenal. Clients appreciate the small touch and it helps us demonstrate how much we value them".

#### Recognise success

To demonstrate how seriously the business takes this, prizes for the best ideas are presented at the AGM. Lisa comments "Presenting the prizes at such an important forum sends out a strong message to our employees that we not just value their input but we also act on it".

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### Here's how we built a strong connection with employees

First direct has built a strong value-based culture and a philosophy of people matter more. First direct believes in the power of employee voice - employees help to influence the shape of the business.

#### Engage employees face-to-face

Direction Roadshows take place every year for all employees to hear from and challenge senior managers. In 2009 it included a diary room for employees to voice their views and ideas via videos which were played back at the event.

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### **Seek ideas and feedback from employees**

In 2009 the Chief Financial Officer launched a 'tell Colin' programme to solicit hundreds of cost saving ideas to help first direct through the downturn. These ideas resulted in tens of thousands of pounds worth of savings. In addition, a 'Magical Thinking' initiative has been put in place where employees submit ideas via an intranet. Local experts or 'magicians' then help the employees make these ideas happen.

### **Treat employees like adults**

Chris Pilling, Head of Direct Banking at HBSC (first direct's parent company) says "if you want your people to work with you and really buy in to what you are trying to achieve, you need to treat them like adults - give them the information and trust them to help you develop and implement the solution".

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### Here's how we transformed our service through engagement

After an extremely difficult period in the late 1990s, the London Ambulance Service (LAS) transformed its service delivery through engagement and partnership working. The management and employees came together to begin discussions on a critical path to recovery. Both sides accepted that the relationship between the unions and management was dysfunctional and was itself contributing to difficulties at the service.

### **Involve employees**

A new approach was developed which had staff engagement and involvement at the heart - for the first time employees were

involved from the beginning in major decisions.

There is now more regular consultation involving union reps in decision making and the LAS partnership forum which meets every six weeks. A service-wide partnership conference involving union reps and managers takes place annually. At the same time, regular informal meetings are also held to ensure partnership operates on a day to day level.

### **Encourage participation**

LAS will also be delivering facilitation training to enable more focus group work which will assist the organisation in bringing together employees across all areas of the service. The groups will enable staff to participate and make suggestions for ways to enhance employee and patient experience and contribute to service developments.

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### Here's how we involve employees in the business

With 69,000 employees across Waitrose and John Lewis - known as Partners because they own the business - the challenge for the management at John Lewis Partnership (JLP) is to ensure that they all have opportunities to have their say across all levels of the business.

### **Bring partners together**

JLP has a long-established Partnership Council which brings together 80 elected partners four times a year to discuss issues across the business. The Chairman and other Board Directors present to the Council on a regular basis and the Council has the

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ultimate power to remove the Chairman.

### **Create involvement at a local level**

Ensuring employees have a clear say in the running of the business is also seen in individual John Lewis and Waitrose shops through Branch Forums. Partners are elected by their colleagues onto each Forum and work alongside management to influence the running of the shop and to make decisions such as which local charities to support.

### **Give employees a right to response**

JLP's in-house newspaper the Gazette is distributed to 69,000 people each week. Through the Gazette, Partners have the right to put their questions - anonymously if they wish - to the Chairman and senior management. This has been an extremely effective way of promoting employee voice with an average of 14 letters a week received, all of which receive a management response.

[first direct - Opens in a new window](#)

[London Ambulance Service - Opens in a new window](#)

[John Lewis Partnership - Opens in a new window](#)

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