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Employee voice in Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies

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**EMPLOYEE VOICE IN SILICON VALLEY'S
MOST EMPLOYEE-FRIENDLY COMPANIES**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of

Communication Studies

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Dina Medina

December 2006

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ABSTRACT

EMPLOYEE VOICE IN SILICON VALLEY'S MOST EMPLOYEE-FRIENDLY COMPANIES

by Dina Medina

Silicon Valley, high-tech companies that make it onto *Fortune* magazine's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" can serve as prototypical cases of organizations that encourage employee voice (e.g., expressed concerns or complaints). An interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews with managers responsible for designing and implementing employee voice programs and forums yielded a comprehensive inventory of these programs and forums and of management's rationales for sanctioning them. An interpretation of the interview data suggests that management at these employee-friendly companies greatly encourage employee voice by responding to employee questions and concerns, and by fostering a culture where voice can thrive. Additionally, while management believes it benefits from employee voice, they are constrained by the "bottom line." Management finds itself balancing the needs of the employees with the needs of the business and other stakeholders. Best practices are also provided for communication professionals wishing to implement employee voice programs.

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Introduction

With an economic engine fueled by innovation and entrepreneurship, Silicon Valley has engendered a culture that privileges knowledge-sharing, risk-taking, and ownership (Saxian, 1994; Hamel, 1999). Companies that espouse the Silicon Valley ethic eschew traditional bureaucratic practices that can stifle creativity and growth and instead opt for egalitarian structures that foster open communication, collaboration, and inquiry (Saxian, 1994; Hamel, 1999). As a result, employees have a greater say in the workings of these organizations than in traditional command-and-control management systems. Moreover, employees' financial stake in the organization, usually granted in the form of stock options or a bonus plan, offers them further incentive to contribute. Hence, the Silicon Valley drive for innovation begets a culture of participation that impels employees to speak up, ask questions, challenge the status quo—and for management to listen.

Such an ingrained ethos of openness and inquiry not only fosters innovative thinking but it also makes for a happier workforce since employees appreciate being able to speak up in the workplace. Research has found that when employees believe they have a say in their work and in their organization, they are more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to the organization (Gorden & Infante, 1991; Miller & Monge, 1986; Pacanowski, 1998). Consequently, it is no surprise that every year when *Fortune* magazine releases its list of the “100 Best Companies to Work For,” Silicon Valley is well represented—more than any other geographical region. Employees of the Silicon

Valley companies that make the list rate them highly because, among other factors, they believe that leadership welcomes employee input and takes their voice seriously.

Whether it is to increase organizational performance or strengthen employee commitment, scholars have long recognized that organizations can benefit greatly from encouraging employee voice (Hirschman, 1970; Hegstrom, 1990; Redding, 1985). However, the extent to which voice will benefit the organization depends on the manner in which the organization responds to voice, since organizational response affects employees' willingness to speak up (Kassing, 1997; Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988). Organizations send a clear signal that voice is not welcome when they retaliate against or simply ignore employees who ask questions or voice concerns or when they do not provide the mechanisms through which employees can voice their opinions. Moreover, employees are sensitive to their organization's receptivity to voice and will act accordingly. (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Organizational members will engage in constructive voice (e.g., communication intended to improve the organization) when they know that organizational leaders will listen to them and their voice will make a difference. Yet, scholars also strongly agree that organizational leaders are inherently resistant to questioning or criticism from employees (Hirschman, 1970; Hegstrom, 1990; Krefting and Powers, 1998). For that reason, organization leaders will often enact structures and practices that minimize or suppress voice (Hegstrom, 1990). Since organizational response to voice affects how likely employees will be to engage in constructive voice and since organizational leaders can be resistant to voice, it is

important to investigate how and why organizational leaders at companies who welcome voice choose to encourage it through the practices and policies they support.

However, as more companies look to encourage voice on their way to becoming a great place to work, it is important to also inquire into the critical nature of that voice. To what extent does the organization recognize and respond to criticism and dissent? While participation and commitment can be beneficial to organizational performance, without a critical element that same loyalty becomes conformity and blind consent. (Gorden & Infante, 1991). Researchers agree that when organizations do not allow for dissenting ideas the result is lower quality of decision making and mimetic rhetoric – the reiteration of managerial rationale in the organization’s discourse (Hirschman, 1970; Hegstrom, 1990). Moreover, critical scholars warn of the oppressive nature of organizations whose dominant ideology has the potential to overwhelm the needs of its members in its unrelenting quest to succeed (Deetz & Mumby 1990; Mumby, 2001). As organizations seek to increase identification and commitment through the promotion of corporate values, a blending occurs between personal and organizational values that confuses goals; the needs of the organization begin to trump the needs of the individual (Hegstrom, 1990). When an organization is truly open and responsive to criticism from its members, there is a healthier balance between the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual (Hegstrom, 1990; Gorden & Infante, 1991). Hence, as Hegstrom (1995) notes, we can look critically at organizations by investigating how they respond to their “own internal critics” (pg. 84.) Consequently, an investigation of organizational response to

voice in employee-friendly companies requires a particular look at the response to critical voice.

As organizations based in an innovative environment with the added benefit of being certifiably employee-friendly, the six Silicon Valley companies from Fortune's 2005 list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" would certainly stand out as an ideal context within which to investigate employee voice. Considering their desire for innovation and ownership, the leaders at these Silicon Valley organizations most likely recognize the value of voice and sanction policies and practices that encourage employees to speak up. However, in their quest for innovation and commitment in what fashion are Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies handling their own internal critics?

In this study, Silicon Valley companies as innovative cultures and the manner in which they become a Great Place to Work will be described. Secondly, an overview of the theoretical framework of employee voice will be provided and the methodology used to conduct this research will be explained. Finally, the findings will be presented and their implications to the management of voice examined.

Chapter 1

Organizational Context

Silicon Valley: employee participation par excellence

The foundation for Silicon Valley's participatory culture was established by the early tech pioneers. In their quest for innovation, these engineers-turned-entrepreneurs challenged East Coast bureaucratic business mindsets through workplace policies that promoted high-quality, creative thinking (Castilla et al., 2000; Saxenian, 1994; Hamel, 1999). This push is perhaps first attributable to the founders of Hewlett-Packard who built their company with a management philosophy that came later to be known as the "HP Way" (Gibbons, 2000; Saxenian, 1994). In an effort to retain the dynamics of its start-up roots as the company grew during the late 1950's and into the 1960's, the founders instilled a corporate culture based on trust, sharing, and concern for both employee welfare and high-quality products that helped it thrive. (Gibbons, 2000; Packard, 1995; Saxenian, 1994). Two additional companies, Fairchild Semiconductor founded in 1957, and Intel founded subsequently in 1968 by two Fairchild founders Robert Noyce and Gordon Moore, also instituted practices that "explicitly rejected the hierarchical East Coast corporate culture" (Castilla et al., 2000 p. 225). Management shunned reserved parking spaces, executive lunchrooms, and dress codes, instead granting workers high-levels of autonomy, stock-options and recognition based on merit rather than seniority or title (Castilla et al., 2000; Saxenian, 1994). Organizations were designed to facilitate the free flow of ideas in an open, flexible, cooperative environment manifested in the office space itself.

Work spaces were Spartan, set in a big shed-like room. ‘Offices’ were modular particle-board partitions that could easily be rearranged.

Everyone, including the founders, worked from the same secondhand metal desks. Top managers met frequently with front-line employees to discuss ideas and resolve problems (Saxenian, 1994, p. 52).

As these three companies grew and prospered, the Silicon Valley culture spread as employees left to start their own companies (Castilla et al., 2000; Saxenian, 1994).

Today, scholars describe Silicon Valley as a high-velocity labor market (Hyde, 2003) that is “flexible, fast, focused, open, tightly networked, and talent driven” (Nevens, 2000, p. 91). A high-velocity job market is characterized by long hours, tremendous intensity, a mobile workforce that changes employers often, a contingent labor force of temps and contractors, and lack of loyalty to any one single company (Hyde, 2003). These conditions have led to a Silicon Valley that Pfeffer (2001) criticizes for high turnover, little commitment, a “gambling mentality,” and greater occurrences of burnout among employees—factors that undermine long-term organizational success (p. 102). While the drive for innovation can encourage a participatory culture that looks out for employees it can also foment a high-risk/high-reward frenzy that churns through people. To build lasting companies in Silicon Valley, leaders need to treat their employees in a way that increases satisfaction and builds commitment. In an extensive, eight-year study of Silicon Valley start-ups, Baron & Hannan (2002) found that start-ups that embraced a commitment model of organizational structure, as opposed to a talent-driven,

engineering, bureaucratic, or autocratic model, were more likely to succeed in the long-run.

Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For" List

Fortune magazine's annual list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" comprises companies whose employees have rated them highly for instituting employee-friendly policies and practices. Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz first published the list as a book in 1983, with an update published ten years later. In 1998, *Fortune* magazine began to publish the list yearly in collaboration with the independent research firm, the Great Place to Work[®] Institute (GPWI), which was founded by Levering in 1991.

The instrument used to rank the companies is The Great Place to Work[®] Trust Index. It rates each company along five dimensions: credibility, respect, fairness, pride, and camaraderie. The first three criteria are the building blocks for establishing trust in the workplace, which for the GPWI is instrumental to effective communication, cooperation, fair resolution of disagreements, and employee confidence in its leaders (Lyman, 2003).

First, trust grows out of the ability to perceive others (management in particular) as credible—that what they say is true, that their actions are consistent with their words, and that they will be ethical in their business practices. Trust also depends on how much employees experience respect—through support provided for professional growth, the inclusion of employees' ideas in decision-making, and through care, both within the workplace and in life outside work. Finally, trust also grows out of a

sense that one will be treated fairly by others—that regardless of position or personal characteristics, one can expect a certain level of fair and equitable treatment by people within the organization in terms of pay and benefits, career development opportunities, and the just resolution of problems or concerns (Lyman, 2003, p. 25).

The last two criteria, pride and camaraderie, measure respectively the quality of the relationship between employee-employer and among employees (Lyman, 2003). With their emphasis on open communication, collaboration and fairness, these five criteria could also contribute to an environment that fosters voice. While trust has not been used as a independent variable in any voice studies, it could be reasoned that when employees trust organizational leaders they will not fear reprisal, they know they will be listened to and that their opinions will make a difference and that even if the situation is not resolved in their favor that they at least have been treated fairly. Thus employees will most likely be comfortable voicing their disagreements in a corporate environment built on trust.

The GPWI compiles the list from a pool of candidate companies that have applied to GPWI for consideration, have been in business longer than seven years, and have more than 1000 employees. After the initial pre-screening, the GPWI asks each company to randomly select a sample of 350 employees to fill out an employee-opinion survey—the Great Place to Work[®] Trust Index. Employees are also asked to provide written comments with the survey. Additionally, each company is asked to complete a “questionnaire detailing its people policies, practices, and philosophies” (Moskowitz & Levering, 2004, p. 80). The employee responses weigh for two-thirds of each

company's total score (Moskowitz & Levering, 2004). For the 2005 list, there were approximately 1,000 candidate companies and 356 that completed the entire process.

Making the list is not only good for morale and recruitment efforts, it is also good for shareholder value. While researchers have been unable to find a strong connection between job satisfaction and productivity (Kassing, 1997; Miller & Monge, 1986), empirical evidence has found a positive relationship between being on the list and strong financial performance. First, surveys commissioned by the GPWI demonstrate that public companies that have made the list post almost double the stock market annualized return as companies on the S&P 500 (Lyman, 2003). In another survey, academics with no affiliation to the GPWI compared those public companies on the 100 Best list to companies similar in size and industry that were not on the list (Fulmer, Herhart & Scott, 2003). They also found that the financial performance of the 100 Best generally exceeded those of a matched set of companies not on the list as well as the market as a whole (Fulmer, Herhart & Scott, 2003). "At a minimum, these companies are able to create attractive workplaces without hurting the bottom line, and in many cases the 100 Best exhibit superior performance" (Fulmer, Herhart & Scott, 2003, p. 986). While these companies did reap financial rewards, it is important to note that directional causation is not certain. Perhaps the strong financial performance of the 100 Best companies provides these companies with the resources required to participate in the GPWI's survey process.

There were six companies with headquarters in Silicon Valley on *Fortune's* 2005 list of the “100 Best Companies to Work For.” They were Adobe, Cisco, Intuit, Network Appliance, Symantec, and Xilinx.

Table 1

Silicon Valley Companies on <i>Fortune's</i> 2005 list of Great Places to Work			
Company	Location	Rank on list	Number of Employees
Adobe	San Jose	13	3,642 U.S.
Cisco	San Jose	27	33,998 U.S.
Intuit	Mountain View	64	6,633 U.S.
Network Appliance	Sunnyvale	24	2,857 U.S.
Symantec	Cupertino	43	5,416 U.S.
Xilinx	San Jose	5	2,754 U.S.

Source: *Fortune*, January 24, 2005.

Considering Silicon Valley's reputation for open, egalitarian, employee-friendly workplace practices, when Silicon Valley companies make it onto *Fortune's* list of “100 Best Companies to Work For,” it stands to reason that these particular organizations represent the “best-of-the-best” in democratic workplaces in Silicon Valley where voice is welcomed and encouraged. Hence, the combination of Silicon Valley and the “100 Best Companies to Work For” makes for a prototypical case study of the prospect of voice.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Background

Employee voice

The study of employee voice is rooted in Hirschman's (1970) theoretical model of exit, voice and loyalty. Developed by an economist, this theory blends economic and political principles to describe a framework within which organizations become aware of and overcome organizational decline. In explicating his theory, Hirschman first asserts that organizations are subject to myriad random conditions that can negatively affect their performance. Moreover, while these "performance lapses" may be detrimental to short term organizational efficiency, they will usually not have any lasting impact on the organization's long-term survival provided that organizational leaders give the matter some attention. Hence, Hirschman's framework is concerned with the manner by which an organization becomes aware of performance lapses. He argues that organizational decline, which usually manifests itself in a drop in quality of the organization's products or services, will set into motion "counterforces" that will alert management of its failings. The drop in quality will drive the organization's customers or members to signal their dissatisfaction in one of two ways:

- 1) They can choose to *exit* the situation by discontinuing purchase of the organization's product or use of the organization's services (Hirschman, 1970, p 4).
- 4). The resulting decrease in revenue or membership will alert the organization that there is a problem. This is the economic recuperation mechanism (Hirschman, 1970, pp 15-20).

- 2) Or they can choose to stay with the organization and *voice* their dissatisfaction in hopes of changing the situation (Hirschman, 1970, p 4). These complaints will alert the organization that a problem exists. This is the political recuperation mechanism (Hirschman, 1970, pp 15-20).

While exit and voice serve as counterforces to decline, loyalty is the mediating factor that regulates whether the consumers/members will choose exit or voice, or perhaps both. Consumers/members who are loyal to the organization will hold off exiting and opt instead for voice. In this case, there is a conscious decision to “stick with” the organization because they feel that initiating organizational change is worthwhile and that there is some chance of success. Without these conditions the consumer/member will simply choose to exit.

Hirschman’s straightforward, yet groundbreaking, theory immediately attracted management, labor, organizational behavior, and communication scholars who applied the model to the employment context; when faced with an undesirable situation in the workplace, dissatisfied employees can choose to either *exit* the situation by transferring to another job within the organization or quitting the organization outright, or they can choose to *voice* their dissatisfaction to their supervisors, colleagues, or outside parties in an effort to change organizational policies, procedures, or practices (Farrell, 1983).

The employee voice literature using Hirschman’s model is broad and diverse, but can be split into two groups. In the first, labor and management researchers use Hirschman’s model to categorize, explain and predict employees’ behavioral responses to job dissatisfaction (e.g., Farrell, 1983; Farrell, Rogers, Mainous, 1988; Rusbult &

Lowrey, 1985; Withey and Cooper, 1989). The goal within this group is to manage and, thus, reduce employee dissatisfaction because of its detrimental effects on the organization. In the second group, communication and organizational behavior scholars have focused on the exit-voice model's ability to affect change within an organization and serve as a means of organizational self-improvement (e.g., Gorden, Infante, Graham, 1988; Graham 1986; Hegstrom, 1990; Hunton, Hall & Price, 1998; Kassing, 1997; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003). This stream of research is predicated on Hirschman's argument that a political mechanism, such as voice, is as viable a means of recuperation as an economic one such as exit. While political scientists have long recognized voice as an essential part of any political system, Hirschman (1970) was the first to conceptualize it as a response to decline in organizations,

Yes, in this age of protest, it has become quite apparent that dissatisfied consumers (or members of an organization), rather than just go over to the competition, can 'kick up a fuss' and thereby force improved quality or service upon delinquent management. (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30).

Hirschman underscores the important role protest plays as a means of driving organizational improvement and performance. Organizational communication scholars have taken a particular interest in protest (e.g., critical voice) and its connection to the ideal of workplace democracy (Cheney, G., 1995; Cheney, G. et al., 1998; Hegstrom, T. G., 1990; Kassing, J. W., 1997).

Within the second group of studies, academics, and especially those in the communication discipline, have conceptualized two analogous constructs: employee

voice and employee dissent. However, over the years, scholars have used these terms so interchangeably that, while they are in essence conceptualized to address the same issue of “desire to create change,” these constructs are plagued by imprecision. Voice and dissent have been conceptualized as everything from open disagreement to helpful suggestions to formal grievance procedures (Gorden, 1988; Graham, 1986; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2002). In fact the conceptualizations are so disparate that, on the one hand, Kassing (1998) maintains that dissent, voice and whistle-blowing are just degrees of a similar kind of behavior, while, on the other hand, LePine and Van Dyne (1998) argue that voice, dissent and whistle-blowing are each distinct behaviors, “Whistle-blowing is critical and meant to stop some activity as opposed to being constructive and meant to change (improve) some activity.” (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998, p. 854). While each use of voice or dissent is valid within the context of each study, this imprecision has created a very large tableau upon which further investigation continues.

To a large subset of management, labor and industrial relations scholars, employee voice is manifested in unions through collective bargaining or formal grievance procedures (Cheney et al., 1998; Lewin & Mitchell, 1992; McCabe, 1997; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2002). For these scholars, these formalized systems are the only mechanisms that guarantee employee voice will be effective in protecting the rights of workers. Through unions, workers are able to express their dissatisfaction to management without fear of retaliation, are able to demand changes from management; and able to have the matter resolved fairly through procedural justice (Cheney et al.,

1998, Olson-Buchanan, 1996). Work in this area tends to differentiate between union and non-union organizations and formal and informal grievance procedures (e.g., Boroff & Lewin, 1997; McCabe, 1997; Olson-Buchanan, 1996; Haynes, 2005; Dundon et al., 2005).

To another subset of management and organizational behavior scholars, voice as its study has progressed over the years, has become less about critical objections and more about simply speaking up in the workplace and proactively making constructive suggestions (e.g., Hunton, Hall & Price, 1998; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003;) For example, Van Dyne & LePine (1998) define voice as,

...nonrequired behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge with an intent to improve rather than merely criticize. Voice is making innovative suggestions for change and recommending modifications to standard procedures even when others disagree (p. 109).

While voice in this instance involves challenging the status quo, it is not, however, predicated on any “violation of standards” such as those that drive whistle-blowing (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998, p. 109). Moreover, Van Dyne, Ang & Botero (2003) describe numerous broader conceptualizations of voice-like behaviors that include:

verbal expressions of ideas, information, and opinions with the positive motive of making cooperative contributions to the organization, thus they are proactive, positive, and other-oriented (p. 1370).

While employees will resort to whistle-blowing to expose illegal or unethical behavior in an organization, when employees use voice they are expressing dissatisfaction for or

disagreeing with a process or decision that could be illegal, unethical or simply just not well thought out (Redding, 1985). As Van Dyne & LePine (1998) put it, voice is less dramatic than whistle-blowing (p. 109).

Similarly, employee dissent, which has largely been explored by communication scholars, is the active expression of dissatisfaction with or even criticism of the organizational status quo with the intent of initiating change of organizational policies and practices. (Gorden et al., 1988; Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1990; Kassing, 1997; Redding, 1985). In this case, dissent is predicated on a strong feeling of disappointment or dissatisfaction with something that has occurred within the organization (Kassing, 1997). The employee must feel pretty strongly about the dissent-triggering event in order to speak out about it (Kassing, 2002). Dissent can occur internally, which Redding (1985) calls boat-rocking, or externally, which is more commonly known as whistle-blowing. Kassing (1998) attempts to clarify the relationship between voice and dissent. Voice, he asserts, encompasses a larger set of behaviors that includes dissent which in turn includes behaviors such as whistle-blowing (Kassing, 1998). To further elaborate, he proposes,

a continuum of openness that ranges from voice (a broad behavior) to whistle-blowing (a very specific behavior). Dissent occupies the middle territory on the continuum but often is considered interchangeable with voice and whistle-blowing (Kassing, 1998, p. 184).

Kassing (1997) proposes a multi-step model of employee dissent that applies a “communicative lens” to Hirschman’s theory (p. 320). He argues that dissent is more

complex than simply the expression of voice. Instead, employees when dissatisfied “will enact combinations of voice, exit, and neglect behaviors concurrently at times”(Kassing, 1997, p. 320). Hence, when employees decide to express their disagreement he posits they will choose one of three strategies: 1) articulated dissent (similar to voice) where the dissent is expressed to an internal audience that can make a difference, 2) latent dissent (similar to voice/neglect) where the dissent is expressed to an internal audience that cannot make a difference 3) displaced dissent (similar to neglect/exit) where the dissent is expressed to private or confidential audiences outside of the organization (Kassing, 1997). In summary, employee voice and employee dissent are complex and multidimensional constructs that have been defined in ways that make them similar yet distinct.

For the purposes of this study, Hirschman’s (1970) original definition of voice will serve as the baseline,

any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion (p. 30).

According to this definition, there are a few elements essential to voice: 1) a conscious decision that change is necessary, 2) disagreement or dissatisfaction with something the organization is doing, 3) active communication expressed through a variety of means, 4)

the involvement of one person or a group of people and 5) forcing change upon organizational leaders if they are unresponsive.

There are three reasons for choosing this definition. First, for this study, the concern is not with which communicative strategy employees select to express their dissatisfaction to management as simply that they choose to do it at all. Hirschman's (1970) voice provides for a wider variety of communication behaviors ranging from complaining to suggestion making to criticism and dissent. However, Hirschman's voice includes the underlying assumption that those behaviors are impelled by employee disagreement. As Hegstrom (1999b) puts it, "any expression of dissatisfaction counts as voice"(p. 63). Second, since I am concerned in this study with organizational responses to voice, I am interested in voice that is directed at organizational leaders and occurs within the organization, especially since it occurs within a culture that encourages voice. While employees may communicate or act-out their dissatisfaction in a variety of ways (Gorden, 1998; Kassing, 1997, 1998), only dissatisfaction when articulated (as opposed to exit or unexpressed dissent) is the most beneficial for both the organization and the employee (Hirschman, 1970; Hegstrom, 2002). Moreover, for employees to opt for voice, organizations need to respond in a way that encourages voice as Gorden (1988) explains, "Employee constructive voice obviously is related to corporate openness to it. Where the corporate culture encourages and protects candor, voice will be constructive"(p. 297). Finally, my decision to employ the term *voice* rather than *dissent* lies in the suggestive nature of each word. Cheney at al. (1998) note that when certain words are chosen over others in conceptualizing human behavior there can be

“terminological shifts” that can affect the outcome of the research. The choice in terminology, “can make enormous practical differences in terms of highlighting certain types of social phenomena and excluding others” (Cheney et al., 1998, p. 39 citing Eisenberg). The term *voice* has a connotation of participation and open communication (i.e. the right to express one’s opinions) that dissent does not. *Dissent* implies adversarial and contentious communication. Cooperrider, Whitney & Stravos (2003) suggest that the direction of inquiry determines what a scholar may find. Thus, for my purpose it is important to investigate those things that inspire collaboration within the organization rather than competition.

Employee voice benefits organizations

Considering its constructive nature, from a purely functionalist viewpoint employee voice benefits organizations in some very practical ways. “Employee voice is conducive to qualitative improvements in the organization” (Hegstrom, 1999, p. 193). First, employee voice serves as an important feedback mechanism for alerting organizational leaders of issues or situations that could potentially harm the organization’s ability to operate efficiently or profitably (Hirschman, 1970; Graham, 1986). While feedback systems in organizations are not new, hierarchical, bureaucratic, command and control systems did not provide for employee input. With the increase in employee participation efforts, organizations have begun to recognize that employees are rich sources of valuable information, sometimes even possessing higher quality information than managers and organizational leaders (Cheney et al., 1998; Pfeffer, 1995). However, even with the rise in consultative management practices, employee

voice is typically ignored since organizations have always tended to resist criticism or expressions of dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970; Hegstrom, 1990). In a case study of one organization's corporate intranet, Bishop and Levine (1999) found that it enhanced organizational efficiency by streamlining communication between workers and management, as well as by allowing employee criticism of certain organizational policy implementations that in turn led to modifications that improved their implementation. In a study of employee silence, Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin (2003) found that employees would very often choose not to report bad news up the chain of command, thus leaving management unaware or with an inaccurate picture of the true status of potential problems. Hegstrom (1999a) in a qualitative study of dissent-incident accounts cites numerous examples where employees alerted management of a problem that was then resolved to the company's benefit (e.g., halting of an illegal kick-back scheme, prevention of false advertising, bidding for new business). Hegstrom (1999a) also found that even when employees complained about issues where they stood to gain personally (i.e. personal-advantage dissent), the mere inquiry indicated something was amiss. "Even the appeals that are the most patently self-serving may have merit, and they may have application beyond a single case"(Hegstrom, 1999a, p. 191). The recommendation here is that when organizations listen carefully to what employees have to say they will usually find that there is something in the message that will help improve the organization (Hegstrom, 1999a).

Employee voice also improves decision making, prompts learning, and leads to greater innovation. In a study of boat-rocking behavior, Sprague and Ruud (1989) found

that employees will voice criticism because they believe that it improves the decision-making process through the introduction of alternate views. According to Barrett (1995), innovative learning cultures need to constantly be questioning the status quo in a double-loop feedback process. “High-performing organizations ... seek to deliberately create access to decision-making forums by fostering norms that legitimize members’ rights to question and provoke at all levels of organizational activity ”(Barrett, 1995, p. 46). As organization members question the status quo they are not looking just to fix problems, but reexamine the structures, mechanisms and assumptions that led to the problem in the first place and thus create new ways of doing things (Barrett, 1995). De Dreu and his colleagues (2000, 2001) argue for the utility of voice in work groups since it improves the decision making process and leads to team creativity, innovation and effectiveness. De Dreu (2001) found that teams that are creative and innovative to begin with take dissenting views more seriously and are more apt to use the critical feedback to improve the quality of their decisions.

Finally, organizations benefit from employee voice since it makes for a “happier” workforce (e.g., Gorden & Infante, 19991; Gorden et al., 1988; Haskins, 1996; Kassing, 2000; Miller & Monge, 1986). Research has found that the more involved employees feel they are at work the more satisfied they are with their job and the more committed they are to their employer (Miller & Monge, 1986; Pacanowski, 1998). As has been suggested, the key to employee involvement rests with the extent to which employees feel they have the freedom to voice their opinions (Kassing, 1997; Haskins, 1996). Further research strongly supports a positive relationship between perceived freedom of

speech and increased employee commitment, job and career satisfaction, and organizational identification (Gorden et al. 1988; Gorden and Infante, 1991, Kassing, 2000). In one study, Kassing (2000) found that when organizations “emphasize workplace freedom of speech issues” employees are more likely to use voice to express their disagreement. (p. 393). In other words, when employees believe they can voice their opinions, critical or not, openly and without retribution they feel more empowered and committed to the organization. Moreover, employees are happier when they believe that their involvement is genuine and that their opinions matter (Bishop & Levine, 1999; Hegstrom, 1999; Miller & Monge, 1986). Sprague and Ruud (1988) found that employees are acutely aware of whether their employers tolerate dissent and whether expressing voice makes a difference. Bishop & Levine (1999) assert that when organizations provide employees the means by which to express voice but do not act on complaints, employees become disillusioned and experience greater disappointment than if they hadn’t had a chance to express voice in the first place. Finally, true to Hirschman’s (1970) model, voice is in fact an alternative to exit. When employees have opportunities to express voice, whether through union or non-union mechanisms, retention increases (Spencer, 1986; Batt, Colvin & Keefe, 2002). Moreover, Spencer (1986) found that the greater the quantity of voice mechanisms available in an organization, the higher the retention rates. Finally, Luchak (2003) found strong support for Hirschman’s claim that loyal employees will prefer voice over exit.

In sum, employee voice provides valuable information to organizational leaders, improves decision making, leads to innovative learning cultures, and makes for a more

satisfied workforce, thus increasing retention rates, which are all strong business reasons for encouraging employee voice.

Employee voice prevents organizations from co-opting employees

Employee voice not only provides organizations with numerous functional benefits, but, from a critical perspective, employee voice also acts as a “possible corrective for some of the more aversive effects of the modern organization” (Hegstrom, 1995, p. 84). According to Hegstrom (1990) voice is central to the problem of organizational integration—the alignment of organizational and individual values and needs. While critical theorists believe integration is impossible (Mumby, 2001) since the “organization’s requirements overwhelm those of individuals” (Hegstrom, 1990, p. 143), Hegstrom (1990, 2002) asserts that an organizational culture that allows for employee voice can prevent organizations from co-opting their workers in the quest for profits and efficiency.

Critical organizational communication scholars have turned to democratic ideals in an effort to neutralize oppressive managerial ideology. In a democratic workplace organizational leaders balance the organization’s objectives with the individual worker’s desire to be treated fairly and with respect, and to be provided a satisfying, rewarding work environment (Cheney, 1995). They also ensure that organizational members feel free to contribute at any level of the organization through an open expression of ideas both critical or constructive. In a democratic workplace, the individual worker is integral to the organization, not just for the sake of the organization, but for the combined improvement of both the organization and the organizational member. In other words,

democratic organizations are more employee-friendly. Cheney (1995) defines workplace democracy as:

A system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings (e.g., equitable remuneration, the pursuit of enriching work and the right to express oneself) as well as typically organizational objectives (e.g., effectiveness and efficiency, reflectively conceived), which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices, and which allows for the ongoing modification of the organization's activities and policies by the group (p. 170-171).

Organizations that have adopted democratic structures tend to have a flat hierarchy, open communication systems, information sharing (e.g., technical and financial) across all levels, influence based on knowledge and technical expertise rather than on formal positions, and, most importantly, "widespread, meaningful, and sustained employee participation in decision making" (Seibold & Shea, 2001, p. 690).

Finally, workplace democracy stresses the importance of reflexivity within the organization (Cheney, 1995). "[T]he values of the organization and their pursuit must be available to both members and outside observers for critique and debate" (Cheney, 1995, p. 178). Continual reflection on organizational policies and practices is essential to democracy, since it mitigates complacency and regulates control, for without any questioning of the status quo there is no chance for growth, innovation or change. Voice is the manifestation of democratic reflexivity in the workplace. In fact, voice is "central

to a principled vision of true organizational democracy” (Cheney, 1995. p. 186).

Democracy ensures that workers have voice, that they feel safe expressing it, and that by expressing it they can make a difference in how their organization operates (Cheney, 1995). While workplace democracy ensures that there is voice and that all employees have a say in organizational policies and decisions (Cheney, 1995), the existence of a democratic structure does not always guarantee voice (Kassing, 1997, 1998). Kassing (1997, 1998) suggests that in the pursuit of consensus in some democratic workplaces voice is often suppressed.

Some scholars have noted that introducing democratic structures is not enough to ensure full participation in the workplace; in order for workplace democracy to work it is essential that the organization’s communication patterns change as well (Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1998). “[D]emocratic discourse in organizations is as crucial or more crucial than democratic structures to the creation and recreation of democratic workplaces” (Kassing, 2000 citing Cheney, 1995, p. 393). Hegstrom (1990), describes two rhetorical conditions present in organizations that can help or hinder the adoption of democratic ideals: the mimetic condition and the dissent condition. The mimetic condition exists when the need to conform to organizational values results in managerial communication that unquestionably reflects the organization’s ideology (Hegstrom, 1990). Tolerance of employee voice through democratic forums that ensure that critical voices have a place in the organization’s rhetoric helps organizations escape the trap of the mimetic condition (Hegstrom, 1990). “It may be said that the acid test of an organization’s communication system is its reaction to those who disagree ... Each organization can be criticized from

the viewpoint of how it deals with its own internal critics” (Hegstrom, 1995, p. 84).

When management affords employees the opportunity to voice their opinions both complimentary and critical, there will be greater commitment, since the “key to commitment is the criticalness of its members” (Gorden, 1991).

Organizational response to voice

While much of the organizational communication research on employee voice has focused on trait characteristics or antecedents that explain or predict individual voice behavior (e.g., Gordon, 1988; Kassing, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003; Kassing & Armstrong 2002; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Hegstrom, 1998, 1999; Sprague & Ruud, 1989), a key factor affecting whether voice can flourish in the workplace is the manner in which organizations respond when employees speak up, “Corporate receptivity to employee voice, reason dictates, is a necessary condition to its expression” (Gorden et al., 1988, p. 104). Research has shown that employees are extremely attuned to how their organization responds to voice, and will manage their voice behavior accordingly (Sprague & Ruud, 1989; Hegstrom, 1999a, 1999b) Through survey data, Saunders, Sheppard, Knight and Roth (1992) found that employees’ perception of how approachable and receptive their direct supervisor was to voice determined how likely the employee would communicate upward to that supervisor.

While recognizing the need for organizations to be receptive to voice, scholars, particularly critical theorists, also point out that organizational leaders are inherently resistant to employee voice, especially when the voice is critical in nature (Deetz & Mumby 1990; Hegstrom, 1990; Hirschman, 1970; Graham, 1986). Additionally,

Hirschman argues that it is possible for organizational leaders to encourage loyalty to discourage voice so they can continue their work unfettered by opposition (Hirschman, 1970, p. 92).

It is possible for loyalty to overshoot the mark and thus to produce an exit-voice mix in which the exit option is unduly neglected. Secondly, it must be realized that loyalty-promoting institutions and devices are not only uninterested in stimulating voice at the expense of exit: indeed they are often meant to *repress* voice alongside exit. While feedback through exit or voice is in the long-run interest of organization managers, their short-run interest is to entrench themselves and to enhance their freedom to act as they wish, unmolested as far as possible by either desertions *or* complaints of members (Hirschman, 1970, p. 92; emphasis in original).

Hegstrom (1990, 2002) describes how organizational rhetoric helps to maintain management's position and interests. The mimetic condition exists when organizational members use persuasive arguments that yield to the organization's ideology in an effort to secure agreement and approval (e.g., saying what they believe organization leaders want to hear). Mimetic rhetoric imitates and thus reifies that which is important to management. "The oligarchic nature of almost all organizations discourage messages that do not bow reverentially to the organizational hierarchy" (Hegstrom, 1990, p. 150). Organizational members engage in mimetic rhetoric in an effort to "look good" and move up the ladder; they are careful not to rock the boat. Krefting and Powers (1998) explain management's resistance to voice through the theory of "willing consent" where

organization leaders secure cooperation from employees through an implicit understanding. When employees exercise voice, it “demonstrates publicly” that management has failed to secure willing consent from the organizational members and thus failed as managers (Krefting and Powers, 1998, p. 264). “The self-interest of managers, individually and collectively, opposes such disclosure” (Krefting and Powers, 1998 p. 264). In their effort to gain willing compliance organization leaders will promote voice from an organizational perspective, while at the same time resisting its exercise from a personal standpoint,

Despite eloquent arguments about the constructive benefits derived from including employee concerns and dangers from excluding them, managers concerned with their own organizational success are primed to respond to employee initiatives as potentially threatening. Such responses are often swift, emotional and personalized; they are not as likely to be premised in the dispassionate, academic discussions of the critical value of voice and its protection (Krefting and Powers, 1998, p. 272).

Similarly, critical theorists hold that the power structures that protect management’s self-interests, make it difficult for management to be open to questions, inquiries or outright challenges since the organization’s values and interests will always trump those of the employee (Mumby & Deetz, 1989). In short, organizational leaders are resistant to voice because of their position of power within the organizational hierarchy. While management may say they back employee voice, they may not always welcome it and find ways to suppress it to protect their own interests.

Managerial power structures notwithstanding, researchers have provided numerous cases studies and accounts of both negative and positive organizational responses to voice (e.g., Harlos, Bishop & Levine, 1999; Hegstrom, 1999a; Pacanowsky, 1988; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). From these examples one can imagine a continuum along which organizational response to employee voice can be placed with encouraging voice at one end and discouraging voice at the other. On one end we would find innovative learning organizations where employees are encouraged to continually question the status quo and on the other end we would find power-hungry oligarchies, rigid bureaucratic hierarchies or even consensus-seeking democracies that do not allow for any expressions of dissent. While there are certainly a number of organizations that may reside on either pole, most organizations would fall somewhere along the middle.

Organizations can respond to employees in a variety of ways and the manner in which they choose to respond affects how employees will perceive them as tolerant (Gorden & Infante, 1991; Sprague & Ruud, 1989). First, organizations can choose to ignore or listen to employees, then they can respond by retaliating, providing an answer, making changes, or providing a rationale when they do not. When organizations ignore employees' questions, comments, or concerns, they quickly dissuade employees from expressing voice. Organizations also show employees that they do not want employees to speak up when they do nothing to correct the situation nor explain their actions to the dissenting employee (Bishop and Levin, 1999; Hegstrom, 1990, 1999a). This is especially damaging to organizations that may encourage employees to speak up, but do nothing with the information they receive; Bishop and Levin (1999) argue that employees

are easily disillusioned in these cases. In fact a “deaf-ear” can lead to even greater frustration among employees than if they had not been asked in the first place (Harlos, 2001). Hirschman (1970) theorized that employees who chose to voice their dissatisfaction would do so because they believed that their efforts were important and that they had some chance of success. In serious cases such as illegal or unethical corporate behavior, ignoring employees’ concerns or comments can result in whistle blowing (Graham, 1986).

In many cases organizations will punish employees who speak up, especially when the employees are challenging the status quo or managerial authority, by retaliating against them. Organizations will sometimes manufacture a reason to fire the employee outright or force them to quit through subtle but intimidating means such as poor performance reviews, diminishing of responsibility and/or ostracization from the social network within the organization (Hegstrom, 1999a; Klass & DeNisi, 1989; Olson-Buchanan, 1996). Stories of retaliation abound in the public press. Hegstrom (1990, 1999a) recounts the experiences of individuals who, after voicing criticism of management or fellow employees, were pressured into quitting. In union organizations, where formal grievance procedures are often the sole guarantee of voice, research has found that employees that file formal complaints will often be retaliated against by the organization through biased job-performance evaluations (Klass & DeNisi, 1989; Olson-Buchanan, 1996).

Organizations that are more open to employee voice will follow-through on an employee’s complaint by either correcting the situation or providing the employee with a

response to the question or complaint (Bishop and Levin, 1999; Perry et al., 1994; Hegstrom, 1999a, Sprague & Ruud, 1989). In sum, organizations that are open to voice will not reprimand employees for their questions and comments and listen to them by acting on or responding to their complaints, consequently, these employees will be more apt to engage in voice.

Researchers have also identified factors that figure into an organization's receptivity to voice. Organizations that tolerate voice do not retaliate against their employees since they emphasize freedom of speech issues, openness to employee disagreement and critical opinions, open communication networks, a high-value for employees' welfare and rights, high-value for quality products and business processes, flat hierarchical structures, democratic ideology, dialogic communication style and trust. (Cheney, 1995; Gorden et al., 1988; Gorden & Infante, 1991; Kassing, 2000; Hegstrom, 2002; Lyman, 2003). These factors are enacted and supported through the corporate culture at both the micro and macro levels and with formal structures such as human resource and corporate communication programs and superior-subordinate communication practices (Gorden et al., 1988; Hegstrom, 2002). At the macro level, new employees are socialized through cultural norms that the expression of voice is encouraged and even expected within the organization (Graham, 1986; Kassing, 2000).

Since management exerts tremendous influence on the manner in which organizations respond to voice, it would be important to investigate employee voice from their point of view. If we can gain further insight into management's understanding of voice, we can better design research that investigates those perceptions and provide

recommendations that address their needs. Yet, few studies have engaged managers as subjects. In one study, Infante and Gorden (1988) surveyed managers on their perception of their employees' voice abilities. They found that supervisors that were satisfied with their employees' job performance believed that those employees also had constructive disagreement styles. In another study, Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, and Ackers (2004, 2005) interviewed managers at 18 union and non-union organizations in the U.K. on the meanings and purpose of voice. They found that among the executives they interviewed voice is perceived as a complex construct with overlapping purposes and outcomes (Dundon et al., 2004, 2005). Even so, managers predominantly aligned voice with improving organizational performance, rather than according rights or addressing dissatisfaction. The "most popular interpretation" of the purpose of voice is "contributing to managerial decision-making" (Dundon et al., 2004, p. 1159). In the subset of non-union organizations within the sample, executives associated voice primarily with business objectives,

...respondents rationalized voice not so much as dialogue or two-way exchange of information, but rather as the transmission of ideas to managers in order to improve organizational performance. Employees were seen as valuable receptacles of knowledge and voice was about the generation of ideas that could help improve performance. (Dundon et al., 2005, p. 312).

This point is further supported by findings from a case study of non-union hotels in New Zealand, that found that management's "primary driver" for implementing non-union

voice channels was to improve customer service (Haynes, 2005, p. 268.) Managers recognize that employees play a role in improving organizational performance; to have voice meant that there was the potential to make an impact (Dundon et al., 2004). They also found that managers realize that more employees expect to have a say in their workplace and want to accommodate for that (Dundon et al., 2004). Finally, voice lead to a “more open and constructive employment relations climate” (Dundon et al., 2004, p. 1163). By involving employees in the managerial decision making process, employees become more aware of important business issues and thus work more closely with management to address those issues in a cooperative manner.

Voice mechanisms

Voice mechanisms are the means by which organizations enable employees to communicate their questions, concerns and comments within the organization. Having varied and plenty of mechanisms in place reduces turnover rates – employees want them and will use them (Spencer, 1986). In their absence, employees will find their own ways to be heard inside and outside the organization usually in unconstructive ways (Ferr & Yankalovich, 1972). In extreme cases of corporate mismanagement the lack of internal voice mechanisms opens the door to whistle blowing (Graham, 1986).

The kinds of mechanisms that organizations have implemented are wide ranging; A survey of the literature shows that mechanisms can be formal and informal, mandated and unmandated, collective and individualistic. Some are for the purpose of addressing worker dissatisfaction and grievances while others are clearly for encouraging upward communication with the intent of improving organizational performance. It is interesting

to note that in Europe mandated mechanisms are intended to protect worker's rights through collective/participative voice mechanisms such as with work councils, while in the US mandated systems are for the sake of keeping organizations honest through the use of anonymous reporting channels. A review of the literature provides an extensive, although probably not exhaustive, list of employee voice programs and forums in Table 2 (Spencer, 1986; Graham, 1986; Dundon et al., 2004; Fenn & Yankelovic, 1972; Lewin & Mitchell, 1992; Hegstrom, 2002).

Table 2

Employee Voice Programs and Forums

- grievance filing procedures	- employee assistance/counseling services
- mediation/arbitration	- ombudsman
- internal tribunals/peer review boards	- employee attitude surveys
- work councils/joint consultative committees	- ethics appeal board
- co-determination (worker inclusion on mgmt boards)	- "hot-line"
- collective bargaining	- anonymous-tip lines or mailboxes
- non-management task forces	- open-door policy
- employee-management meetings (weekly, quarterly, yearly)	- problem escalation policy
- suggestion boxes (physical or email)	- skip-level interviews
- bulletin boards	- 360° performance appraisals
- email discussion groups	- speak-up program
- question-and-answer systems	- corporate town hall meetings
	- corporate intranets and electronic newsletter that includes employee contributions
-

Factors that can increase the effectiveness of these programs include 1) ensuring the program is made available to everyone; 2) providing for and guaranteeing anonymity in cases where the employee feels the situation is sensitive, and 3) achieving consistent follow-through (Perry, Hegstrom & Stull, 1994; Hegstrom, 1999). In a study of

complaint systems in non-union organizations Rowe and Baker (1984) suggest three criteria for an effective system: accessibility, safety and credibility. Accessibility means having many channels available for employees so that they can use the channel most appropriate for the situation. Safety means providing for and guaranteeing anonymity as well as prohibiting retaliation against the employee that speaks up. Credibility means that employees know their concerns will be taken seriously and without bias. In a case study of one company's town meetings, Perry et al., (1994) found that a key element of success was the follow-through that occurred on each issue raised during the event (Perry et al., 1994). If possible the question or concern would be answered live if the responsible manager was present. Nonetheless, management ensured that all employee inquiries raised as a result of the meetings achieved some kind of resolution in as timely a manner as possible and subsequently communicated back to the originating employee. As a result the town meetings would draw steady attendance since employees knew their participation would make an impact (Perry et al., 1994).

Instituting voice mechanisms raises expectations among employees that they will be listened to and their perspective taken into account (Harlos, 2001). When voice mechanisms are not managed well, the resulting frustration is greater than if no program was made available at all (Harlos, 2001; Bishop and Levine, 1999). Employees will quickly become disillusioned when they voice their concerns, especially at leadership's urging, but nothing happens as a result (Bishop and Levine, 1999).

Whether it is to protect rights (Rowe and Baker, 1984) or to encourage democratic interaction (Hegstrom, 1990, 2002), voice mechanisms are important instruments for

neutralizing the oligarchic tendency of organizations. Ideally, voice mechanisms create spaces within the organization that allow for the free exchange of ideas among all organizational stakeholders and stimulate debate; they serve as the corrective to the mimetic nature of organizational communication by encouraging dissenting opinions (Hegstrom, 1990, 2002). Yet, regardless of how noble the intentions, in practice their implementation is problematic. “Like other humanistic proposals, voice mechanisms aren't unproblematically emancipatory and complete implementation within organizations with other objectives, profit and efficiency for example, may not be possible.” (Krefting and Powers, 1998, p. 273.) Harlos (2001) suggests a duality in voice systems that promotes both emancipation (e.g., in implementing them) and constraint (e.g., when they are implemented poorly). Some implementations of voice mechanisms only give the appearance of voice rather than true voice (Harlos, 2001; Bishop and Levine, 1999). Perhaps because at the end of the day, it is once again management (the oligarchy) that sanctions and legitimizes the mechanisms that will be used and the issues that get raised through them. (Haynes 2005; Dundon, 2004)

Research questions

Employee voice is an integral component of an employee-friendly organizational culture. As more and more organizations adopt employee-friendly policies and practices in their quest to be “great places to work,” then it is important to continue to critically evaluate the status of voice within these employee-friendly organizations. Silicon Valley presents a unique case study since it is recognizably employee-friendly and has a long tradition of fostering a culture of innovation and commitment. These companies can

provide great insight into organizational response to voice since management appears tolerant of voice and has sanctioned many policies and practices for encouraging voice at their organizations. The questions, therefore, being addressed in this study, are:

1. What kinds of policies, programs, and forums to encourage voice exist at Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies?
2. What rationales does management give for sanctioning and supporting such practices?
3. To what extent does management encourage voice at these companies?
4. What are the implications of these practices for the management of voice?

Chapter 3

Methodology

To explore the research questions, an interpretive approach was adopted for the investigation of organizational response to employee voice. From this perspective, Baxter and Babbie (2004) explain that the intent of the researcher is to describe phenomenon by uncovering the meaning behind action and interaction (p. 59). The goal was to uncover and describe management's experience of employee voice to better understand why they respond to it the way that they do. The research paradigm within which the research was conducted guided the choice of data collection and analysis methodology: in-depth interviews and grounded theory development.

Research participants

For the study, managers within each company responsible for planning and implementing employee voice programs were specifically targeted. These individuals held positions at the manager, director or even vice-president level and were typically part of the organization's corporate communications or human resource department. As the people responsible for employee feedback programs, they were in a unique position to articulate the organization's response towards employee voice, since they acted as intermediaries between employees who exercise voice and top management. On the one hand they are responsible for implementing top management's directives, and on the other hand they are on the receiving end of mechanisms through which employees voice their complaints. Hence, as informants they provided insight into top management's

support of, or resistance to, feedback programs, as well as organizational responses to employee voice.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) acknowledge that whom one chooses to interview is as crucial a decision as what to ask. They describe three requirements for choosing interviewees: 1) knowledgeable of the phenomena under examination; 2) willingness to be interviewed; 3) representative of a range of viewpoints. The interviewees provided an adequate range of viewpoints, since interviews were conducted with organizational members as high up the chain of command as possible in several different companies.

They were the six companies from Fortune's 2005 list of Great Places to Work who had headquarters in Silicon Valley. They were: Adobe, Cisco, Intuit, Network Appliance, Symantec, and Xilinx. All but one of the companies on the list agreed to participate. I conducted 13 interviews with employee communication, training and development, and human resource executives at the director and vice president level. As a follow-up, I also interviewed one CEO. Interviews were all conducted face to face and on site at the interviewees' offices.

Data gathering

To gather the data for this study, I relied exclusively on the in-depth interview, a qualitative methodology used in cases where it is important to "understand the informant's point of view on some phenomenon or experience in as richly detailed a manner as possible" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 339). The in-depth interview is also extremely reflexive in nature. "The researcher elicits talk about their experiences and invites ongoing revisions of the ideas and questions guiding the interview. This reflexive

method enables us to understand the sensemaking that animates communicative performance” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 172). This ability to elicit rich descriptions of organizational responses to voice and the ability to probe deeply for additional information are the two key reasons for choosing this methodology.

In this case, interviews were a better alternative to self-report surveys. First, to investigate the status of voice, Hegstrom (1995) recommends assessing the quality of feedback programs that are available to employees rather than simply surveying the number or kinds of programs that exist. Also, considering the “mimetic” tendency of management (Hegstrom, 1990), eliciting responses via a self-report questionnaire would perhaps provide a narrow view of organizational responses to voice. In-depth interviews allow one to probe more deeply into organizational practices and policies, and through rapport building during the interview, at times reach beyond the “company line” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Moreover, it was not practical to observe organizational responses to employee disagreements as they happened. Hence, in-depth interviews provided an effective means of finding out how and why organizations respond to employee voice. This would be consistent with Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) assertion that interviews are an efficient method of gathering “information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (p. 174).

The interviews also revealed the language that organizational leaders use in describing their rationales for encouraging employee voice and sanctioning mechanisms. Interviews are speech events in and of themselves (Baxter & Babbie, 2003; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), the words used during the interview to describe organizational response to

voice provided insight into how the organization approaches employee voice. It is generally held that organizational discourse helps drive organizational behavior. Sprague & Ruud (1988) found that employees were well aware of how their organization responded to voice through what supervisors and fellow colleagues said and did after someone expressed disagreement. Moreover, Kassing (2000) suggests that employees become aware of organizational responses to voice through their socialization into organizational norms which are created and recreated through the organization's discourse.

I conducted the interviews using questions from the attached interview guide (see appendix A) to find out (1) what kinds of voice mechanisms were available at these companies for employees to speak up, (2) management's rationales for providing these mechanisms, and (3) management's response to employee voice. The first three questions were designed to elicit from the respondents a considerable amount of detailed information about the voice mechanisms. I devoted a large portion of the interview guide to questions about the mechanisms, to ensure the respondents were being as comprehensive as possible about the policies, practices, and forums available to encourage voice. With the fourth question, I was exploring the limits to the range of issues that employees could raise to management. What topics were appropriate, inappropriate or taboo within the context of an employee-friendly company in Silicon Valley? The fifth question was designed to gather descriptive examples of the organization's response to voice. The last two questions would provide insight into management's rationale for encouraging voice and supporting these programs. By

inquiring into other managers' reaction to the mechanisms, I wanted to gather further examples of organizational response to voice. These questions were open-ended and designed to provide considerable latitude in the interviewee's responses so that they yielded the rich detail Baxter and Babbie (2004) assert is possible with this qualitative methodology. The goal was to collect as much information as possible on management's "system of meaning" regarding employee voice and how they respond to it (Baxter and Babbie, 2004, p. 59). As the interview progressed, I used follow-up probes as necessary for clarification. During the interview I tape recorded the conversation, given the interviewee's permission, and took field notes. The field notes served as a guide to the interview, while the tape provided a record of the conversation. I transcribed the interviews for all those who agreed to be recorded. Two respondents declined to be tape recorded and the tape recorder malfunctioned during one of the interviews. Hence, from the 13 interviews I had 10 transcripts, and three sets of fieldnotes from which to conduct my analysis.

Data analysis

I analyzed the data using grounded theory development, a qualitative data analysis approach that employs inductive reasoning. Through a systematic and thought provoking analysis of the interview texts and fieldnotes, the researcher is able to achieve a deep understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Baxter & Babbie, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers use grounded theory to develop theory from data rather than test data against a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Hence, the theory that emerges as a result of the researcher's analysis is a true picture of "what is going on" (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Because the theory is grounded in the data, this approach helps researchers create a theory that is consistent with the specific context and can be validated by the participants of the study (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). Additionally, through the categorization process the theory becomes abstract enough to be generalizable to larger contexts (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). By constantly comparing the data and the theory to the data, ensures reliable control that the theory is an accurate reflection of the phenomenon. Baxter & Babbie (2003) note that generalizability and control differentiate grounded theory development from other qualitative data analysis approaches. Strauss and Corbin (1998) succinctly summarize the goals of grounded theory (p. 13):

- 1) “build rather than test theory”
- 2) “provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses or raw data”
- 3) “help analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena”
- 4) “be systematic and creative simultaneously”
- 5) “identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory”

In grounded theory there are three levels of coding that progressively increase the complexity and depth of the theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). At the crux of grounded theory is the researcher’s use of the constant comparison analytic method during the coding process. Constantly comparing each piece of data—either to other pieces of data or to opposite concepts—stimulates creative, analytical thinking, develops richer, more precise analysis and ensures that the researcher’s interpretations are valid and grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constant comparison helps researchers think so that the interpretations "emerge to a sensitive mind rather than a blocked mind (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 97).

For this research project, I used grounded theory to analyze at a thematic level the data gathered during the in-depth interviews. Consequently, my unit of analysis was a textual segment (whether a phrase, a sentence, group of sentences, a paragraph or group of paragraphs) that clearly described a particular concept. Baxter & Babbie (2004) explain that each unit of data, regardless of length, must meet two criteria: it is heuristic (e.g., answers a question) and it is as small as it can get while still standing on its own within a broader context. Consequently, Baxter and Babbie (2004) assert that there is no standard size for a qualitative unit of analysis. Instead the unit consists of all the words necessary for the respondent to capture one specific concept (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Some interviewees may be more concise than others.

To analyze research questions one and two, I interpreted the data using open coding. With open coding, the researcher identifies the concepts that will serve as the "building blocks" for the emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is called open coding because researchers essentially "(o)pen up the text and expose the thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained therein" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). To achieve the open coding process, I read the transcripts and field notes and excerpted textual segments (e.g., my unit of analysis) that were relevant to each research question. For RQ1 I excerpted mention of any kind of employee voice mechanism. For RQ2 I selected passages that indicated a reason or rationale management would have for encouraging employee voice. After identifying the textual segment, I electronically copied and pasted the selection

from the transcript into a new document. Subsequently, I took the excerpted text for each of the questions and coded them using the constant comparison process foundational to grounded theory development to identify the categories that best described responses to questions one and two. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe open coding as the point where the researcher breaks the data down into “discrete parts” and closely compares them to one another for “similarities and differences” (p. 102). While reviewing the data, the researcher is looking for “repeated patterns of happenings events or actions/interactions that represent what people do or say, alone, or together, in response to the problems or situations in which they find themselves” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 130). From this analysis, the researcher defines categories and their related properties and dimensions in order to answer a larger question about the phenomenon under investigation, “What is going on here?” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 114). Since RQ1 and RQ2, required a purely descriptive interpretation of the data, I compiled a list of employee voice policies, programs and forums and of management rationales through open coding of the interview notes. This lay the groundwork for my analysis of the data for research question number three.

The third research question required a more in-depth analysis to understand the extent to which management at these companies encourage voice. To answer RQ3, I used open, axial, and selective coding of the data to facilitate my interpretation of management’s response to voice. First, using the same open coding process as RQ1 and RQ2, I scanned the transcripts and excerpted textual segments that showed the kind of reactions that the respondents had to employee voice. I chose this focus since it would

best identify the response that management had to employees questions, comments and concerns. Then, I combined the categories from questions one, two and three and conducted axial and selective coding to find the most cogent interconnections between the categories. For the second level of analysis, axial coding, the researcher compares categories and subcategories along their properties and dimensions “to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). By analyzing the categories and subcategories the researcher “uncover(s) relationships among categories.” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127). It is during axial coding that the researcher begins to connect structure with process. Structure explains why the phenomena occurs the way it does and process explains how it occurs. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stress the importance of analyzing for both conditions in order to “capture the dynamic and evolving nature of events” (p. 127). During axial coding I revisited the categories to understand the structure (how) and process (why) of the phenomenon using Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) “paradigm model” (p. 127). This model is a tool available to assist researchers in identifying relationships among categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pp. 127-135.) It entails analyzing the data for conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences of phenomenon as we seek out explanation of it. Once I placed my coded categories within this model, I saw an explanation that described the extent to which management at Silicon Valley’s most employee friendly companies encourage voice. Through the final level of coding, selective coding, I integrated the main categories and subcategories developed during the open and axial coding phases to develop a “storyline” of sorts. I tied together categories and subcategories through relational statements to

explain why and how people act in a given situation. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This interpretation of the data follows in the results section. Using the constant comparative method, I validated my findings against the excerpted text and the transcripts and fieldnotes.

Finally, for the fourth question, which inquired into the implications of the findings on the management of voice, I did not engage in any coding. To answer RQ4, I highlighted key findings in the form of “best practices” that would guide practitioners in establishing and managing voice programs at their organizations.

Grounded theory development provides the best method by which to draw from the in-depth interviews a rich, complex, and precise view of organizational response to employee voice. Moreover, grounded theory offers the tools and processes that will spur creative analysis of a large body of data as well as the control necessary to ensure the theory’s validity and generalizability. The concepts, some of which were consistent with those derived from the literature review, that I titled through the constant comparative method ensured that the theory is a complete description of employee-voice in Silicon Valley’s most employee-friendly companies.

Chapter 4

Results

The interviews with managers responsible for developing and running employee voice programs yielded rich descriptions about organizational response to employee voice. In this chapter, I answer each of the four research questions with my interpretive analysis of the interviews. I provide a comprehensive inventory of the policies, programs and forums these companies have available for employees to speak up, and a listing of the rationales these managers give for sanctioning such mechanisms. I then give an explanation about the extent to which management at these employee-friendly companies encourage voice. Finally, I offer best practices from these Silicon Valley companies that managers who wish to implement programs for encouraging voice can take into consideration.

Research Question #1

What kinds of policies, programs and forums to encourage voice exist at Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies?

The companies in this study offer a wide variety of policies, programs and forums to encourage voice, thus providing employees many options for communicating their questions, comments and concerns. By using a layered, multi-channel approach these organizations ensure that employees have ample opportunity to speak up and can choose the option that best meets their particular needs. The policies, programs and forums available at these companies serve one of two functions. First, they are guidelines for behavior that encourages voice, and second, they are mechanisms that employees utilize

to speak up. In this section, I list and describe each of the guidelines and voice mechanisms.

Table 3

Guidelines and Voice Mechanisms and Forums

<u>Guidelines</u>	<u>Voice Mechanisms and Forums</u>
Code of conduct	Corporate governance reporting mechanism
Issue resolution policy	The “Ask a question” box
Open communication policy	Employee surveys
Organizational values	Employee Q&A during all-hands meetings
Training and development	Open forum chats with CEO or other executives
Influencing Without Authority	Skip-level meetings
Difficult or courageous conversations	Employee/manager meetings
Difficult conversations book club	Employee focus groups to pretest HR programs
	Town hall meetings
	Venture Days
	Leadership Retreats/Summits
	Intranet

Guidelines

In addition to the voice mechanisms, several organizational practices at the companies in this study provide guidelines to employees for speaking up and providing feedback. Artifacts such as the code of conduct, formal policies on open communication and issue resolution, and, most importantly, the defined set of organizational values, provide guidelines to employees that it is acceptable for them to speak up. The modeled behavior of leaders and managers, and other employees in the organization, also reinforces the belief that asking questions and raising issues is acceptable. As a result,

employee voice becomes part of the culture through these guidelines. Even the training and development programs provide employees with the guidelines by which employee voice is acceptable and even encouraged in the organization. One respondent notes that,

The culture in itself has always been where you can bring up things and you can discuss problems openly, and that's fine. That's always been a part of our culture. Not the don't bring it up because you'll lose your job because it's a dumb idea.

Code of conduct.

The code of conduct includes formal guidelines for appropriate business behavior. While all companies are required to have codes that guide behavior around business practices, many of the companies in our study have expanded their codes to include workplace issues such as protection against discrimination and harassment. The code of conduct of one company includes a section entitled, "Respect for People" that includes statements on safety, harassment and discrimination.

Codes of conduct set the baseline for appropriate behavior at organizations, the rules by which everyone should play. The codes also send a message to employees that certain behavior will not be tolerated. Finally, the code of conduct also provides instructions for raising concerns and reporting unethical or illegal behavior. This also sends a clear message to employees that speaking up is expected.

Issue resolution policy.

The issue resolution policy provides direction on how to voice a complaint about issues not covered under the code of conduct. Similar to the code of conduct, the issue resolution policy provides clear direction to employees for speaking up with concerns.

Open communication policy.

An open communication policy gives employees permission to talk to anyone along the chain of command about their questions or concerns. Although these policies encourage employees to first talk to their managers, they provide employees the opportunity to seek counsel from others about their questions or concerns, including the CEO. The open communication policy, as one respondent put it, means that you can “bring up anything to anybody at anytime.”

The idea of open communication is inherent to the high-tech Silicon Valley culture of innovation and entrepreneurship (Castilla et al., 2000; Saxenian, 1994; Hamel, 1999). Many of the respondents noted that the engineers who comprise a large majority of the Silicon Valley workforce, are a vocal group and they will speak up when so compelled. And even though they may have difficulty standing up in front of large crowds unlike someone in sales or marketing, they are extremely comfortable using electronic media to make their opinions known, reported the respondent.

The open communication policy is intended to open the lines of communication, to increase information gathering, and promote knowledge exchange. Moreover, it helps create a culture where information is freely shared among members of the organization. In such a culture, people have the permission to seek out information about

organizational processes, decisions, or initiatives from anyone in the organization in order to answer their questions or even address their concerns. With such open access to information and people, one respondent argued that, “You don’t need a grievance procedure when you say that the employee can talk to anyone in the company.” One of the companies in the study, in fact, has published a statement on open communication in the recruitment section of their website:

At XXX, we believe strongly that honest, open communication is the best approach to keeping employees inspired and motivated. Accordingly, CEO XXX XXXX and the rest of XXX's executive team provide employees as much information as possible in a timely and frank manner. Respect for confidentiality is critical in such an environment, and we expect all managers and employees to share the responsibility for maintaining that trust. We rely on quarterly company meetings, regular team meetings, the [corporate] intranet site, e-mail, and voice mail to share updates and disseminate information throughout the company.

Such a strong statement displayed to the general public, provides an indication of the value these companies place on open communication.

Organizational values.

Organizational values are guiding principles designed to be shared by all members of the organization to influence their behavior and decision making. They are often conceived and always approved by management to define the organizational culture. Many of the respondents in the study evoked their organization’s values when

describing their employee voice programs. There was general consensus among the respondents that the values play a large role in encouraging employee voice since they form the foundation for a culture where speaking up can exist. When a management team says it values trust, innovation, open communication, candor, integrity, then it also supports and encourages behaviors, such as speaking up, that reinforces those values. For example⁴, in one of our participating company's codes of conduct, the values guide ethical behavior, "The [Company] code of conduct is designed to help you understand what we mean by good judgment and ethical behavior and outlines how you can align your actions with [Company's] values." The corporate values for the companies studied are in Table 4.

Table 4

Corporate Values of Companies in this Study

<u>Company 1</u>	<u>Company 4</u>
trust	customer focus
innovation	respect
action	excellence
customer-driven	accountability
	teamwork
<u>Company 2</u>	integrity
quality team	very open communication
continuous improvement	enjoying our work
no technology religion ¹	
frugality	<u>Company 5</u>
giving back/ trust/fair/	integrity
integrity	customer focus
teamwork	innovation
market transitions	operational excellence
fun	leadership
drive change	teamwork
empowerment	dynamic environment
open communication	stockholder value
customer success	community
	impact
<u>Company 3</u>	
trust & integrity	
leadership	
simplicity	
teamwork and synergy	
go beyond	
get things done	

Training and development.

Training and development is another way that organizations instill guidelines that encourage employee voice. Through communication training programs, employees both front-line and those in leadership roles learn skills and approaches that enable them to ask

¹ Engineers are flexible in their choice of technology for projects; instead of sticking to a preferred technology, all technological options are evaluated for their effectiveness and contribution to a project.

questions and voice their opinions and concerns in a way that will make them more likely to be heard. Additionally, managers learn how to listen to their employees and to be open to new ideas. Management training was mentioned by many of the respondents as one way of promoting employee voice. The consensus was that managers that are better trained are going to be better prepared to listen and respond to employees' questions, comments and concerns which in turn encourages employees to continue to speak-up.

There are two specific areas within the curriculum that particularly address how these organizations encourage voice.

Influencing without authority.

As innovative Silicon Valley companies, the organizations investigated in this study appear to reject bureaucratic, command and control management models, embracing instead organizational models that rely on collaborative team efforts. As a result, these companies offer employees training modules that introduce them to a team-based environment that depends on "influence and participation rather than command and control," as one of the respondents put it. Another describes what influencing without authority looks like in the team dynamic,

If you're the acknowledged expert then you have some position of power, some stronger influence than someone that's not an expert. If the expert is going to drown out everyone else, then no one is going to do the work for you. So the expert only gets listened to to certain degree. Some of it is through a position of power, through expertise, but a

lot of it is through recognition, credibility, professionalism, and respect. And that's where influence comes from, because the group allows that person to take that position of authority.

According to a training and development manager at one company, in the "Influencing without Authority" training, employees learn how to ask questions, raise concerns and argue their case in a way that others will listen, especially considering that expertise will only get them so far.

Difficult or courageous conversations.

Many of the companies also had curriculum that teaches employees how to engage in difficult conversations or as one company calls it, "courageous" conversations. This training prepares employees, and managers especially, to have an open, honest, effective discussion about a difficult subject such as poor performance or difference of opinion on the management of a project. Employees learn about the principles of advocacy and inquiry and skills for managing conflict. Additionally, they learn the importance of listening and being open to other's viewpoints; this training is especially important for managers leading employees in an idea-intensive environment explains the training and development director of one of our companies,

Managers, who have a little greater perspective [on the big picture], may have heard five great ideas that morning. They're all great ideas. You just can't do everything. Invariably you're going to prioritize and pick one idea for

everybody to group around to go get that stuff done. But the four people whose ideas weren't chosen will feel bent out of shape. Unless they're dealt with appropriately and they get to see the big picture, they can feel their ideas were dismissed. So managers are taught to give people the airtime they need, to listen to them, to explain the big picture, to advocate between different ideas.

At another company, a respondent responsible for leadership development programs explained why new leaders would need to learn the concept of "courageous conversations" to be effective.

How do you take a stand? How do you give open honest feedback to your employees? How do you influence up around important issues of the company when you're not necessarily expecting a sympathetic hearing?

An important element of our leadership program is courage. And courage involves speaking up and speaking your mind.

Difficult conversations book club.

Another company used an innovative approach to teach employees about having difficult conversations that, at the same time, made it comfortable and acceptable to speak up and disagree. This company found that its emphasis on teamwork and camaraderie had led to an aversion by employees to engage in frank conversations with one another. Rather than say anything negative or contradict another employee, the

employees would simply not say anything when it came to disagreeing with a colleague, boss or direct report. Essentially, the organization had become conflict avoidant.

As a result, the HR team instituted a company-wide book club program to teach employees how to constructively state contrary opinions during meetings or with their manager, for example. They distributed copies of the book, *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project to all employees and asked them to read it. They then brought employees together in book-club meetings to discuss the book chapter by chapter. They also held workshops for employees to practice the skills. More than providing guidelines and teaching skills, they were creating a shared meaning among all employees on what it meant to have difficult conversations in that company, in order to change the culture to better manage conflict and differences.

Voice Mechanisms and Forums

Corporate governance reporting mechanism.

As part of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2002, all U.S. public companies are required to have mechanisms in place for employees to report unethical or illegal activity. Since it is required by law, all the companies in this study had this reporting mechanism.

Employees can report cases through e-mail, using a web-based form, over the phone, or by hard-copy to a post office box. Employees can choose to identify themselves or they can submit the report anonymously. Sarbanes-Oxley requires that organizations provide an anonymous reporting mechanism (e.g., whistleblower tip-lines.)

All these companies also cite policies prohibiting retaliation against anyone who raises questions or concerns about illegal activities or unethical behavior. All but one of the companies outsource management of this mechanism to a third-party that fields and investigates questions and cases. These vendors provide an 800-telephone number, an e-mail address or a web site through which employees can submit their questions or report suspicious behavior. The companies provide clear directions on reporting violations at the end of their codes of conduct with sections with titles like, “How to Raise a Concern” and “Seeking Help and Reporting Violations.”

Instead of using an outside vendor to handle ethics complaints, one of the companies in the study instituted its own Ethics Office to field and investigate complaints from employees as well as from customers, vendors, and shareholders worldwide. As an internal resource, the ethics office staff is available to consult with managers on ethical issues relating to their direct reports, answer questions from anyone on investing or accepting board of director appointments, and provide ethics training to employees. This company provides several e-mail addresses, such as “codeofconduct@company.com” or “ethics@company.com,” as well as a web form for employees to report concerns anonymously or not. Employees can also report concerns directly to the corporate audit committee through an e-mail address or in hard-copy to a physical mailbox address. The ethics office reports all fraud and issues of an ethical nature to the audit committee and the board of directors. After an employee reports a concern, and if he or she has identified him/herself, the ethics office staff will respond back to the employees that their concern or complaint is being investigated, and depending on the case, will inform them

of the outcome. The ethics office encourages employees to provide their name and contact information to facilitate the investigation. However, they do not require it, and they equally encourage employees to use the anonymous channels. The response time depends on the nature of the case and can range from one day to many months. When the ethics office receives questions and concerns that are not ethics related, the staff forwards them to the appropriate person or department. The Ethics Office ensures that all employees are familiar with the company's code of conduct and aware of their responsibility to report unethical and illegal behavior. Periodically the ethics office distributes short training clips that highlights particular ethical issues. These video clips are e-mailed to employees and posted on the internal web site. The ethics office also reinforces the policy prohibiting retaliation against anyone who raises a concern or complaint. In addition to protecting an employee's anonymity, they always remind those being investigated of the policy against retaliation.

These companies leave little doubt in employees' minds whether to speak up against unethical or illegal activities. In fact, they place the burden on the employees themselves. One respondent explained,

It's the ethics office's job to educate employees to report ethics violations regardless of the particular situation. Employees have a responsibility to report anything that is against our policies. So the office is always educating them on the policies and how to report violations or concerns.

And this statement in another company's code of conduct booklet exhorts,

The obligation to raise a concern about a possible violation of the Code of Conduct, [Company] policy, or the law is one of the most important responsibilities each of us has as a [Company] employee. Failure to raise a concern can cause significant harm to the health and safety of yourself, your fellow employees, the Company, customers, and the communities in which we operate. Failure to raise a concern could also result in the loss of confidence in [the Company] by our customers and shareholders.

These are just some of the reasons [Company] requires that employees immediately raise a concern.

These companies greatly encourage employees to speak up against unethical and illegal behavior, and allocate significant resources to ensure employees are aware of the means by which to do that.

The “Ask a question” box.

Another mechanism available at all the companies in this study was the modern equivalent of the old “suggestion box.” Rather than collecting suggestions, however, this mechanism provides employees a way to ask questions or make comments about anything regarding the organization. Moreover, these boxes have also been updated to provide employees direct access to company executives. With monikers such as “Ask the E-Staff,” “Ask Jane” the CEO or “Ask Jack” the Sr. VP of Sales for example, the “Ask a question” box connects employees with the organization’s executive leadership team.

Employees submit their questions or comments via e-mail or through a web form. The latter allows for anonymity since the employee can choose to identify themselves or

not. The e-mail boxes are usually monitored by a person or team within employee communications. Once employees send in a question, comment or concern, someone on the communications team will investigate the answer with the appropriate person and draft a response. This is sent to the executive to whom the question was posed who reviews the response, makes changes to the answer if need be, and then finally responds to the employee. While this process is generally followed, depending on the nature of the question or comment, there are instances where the content expert rather than the executive will respond directly to the employee, or the executive will contact the employee by phone, or, if it is a request the employee communication staff can answer, they will do so directly. Through this process, the executive becomes aware of the employee's question or concern and sees the response. All the organizations try to respond to employee questions and comments as quickly as possible citing turn-around times of a week to ten days depending on the complexity of the question. Once a response is approved, and the response is sent to the employee if that person has given his or her name, the questions and answers that are not personal in nature are posted on the corporate intranet for everyone to read. However, one of the companies in our study did not post questions and answers because of liability issues, such as shareholder law suits.

Due to the culture of open communication at these companies and easy availability of e-mail addresses, employees also contact executives directly without using the "Ask a Question" mechanism. In these cases, the executive will respond directly or will forward the question to the content expert who has the answer or to the communications team to investigate and draft a response.

In addition to general e-mailboxes for sending comments and questions on any topic to company leadership, these organizations also have specific e-mailboxes for departments such as payroll or IT, or for specific organizational change initiatives such as acquisitions. For example, one company had instituted an e-mail box called “Straight Talk” after a larger merger where employees could send in comments about integrating the two companies and improving organizational processes. This plethora of e-mail boxes send a clear signal to employees to speak up, and to ask questions so that they can get the information they need to get their job done and are clear on the overall corporate goals and strategies. Whether the communication is addressed to the executives or simply to the employee communications team, employees use this mechanism the most widely. In fact, one respondent noted that an employee at her company sent in 17 questions alone.

Employee surveys.

To capture employee perceptions and attitudes, all the organizations utilize surveys to measure organizational effectiveness, employment satisfaction, and satisfaction with or effectiveness of corporate programs or events. While the topics are driven by the needs of the organization, this is an upward communication mechanism through which employees can provide feedback and voice their approval or disapproval.

As great places to work, all the companies conduct at least one yearly survey to measure organizational effectiveness – the GPWI Trust Index[®]. In addition, some of the companies, but not all, routinely conduct a second organizational effectiveness or employment satisfaction survey. For example, one company has refined a 53-question

survey that it offers to functional groups twice a year to measure employee satisfaction with, and confidence in, their direct managers, corporate strategy, and execution of that strategy. In addition to the 53 questions, this survey also includes a write-in space for comments within each category that are compiled, sorted by topic and shared with the managers along with the quantitative metrics. Another of the companies, which had just completed a large merger, was preparing to conduct a survey of the combined companies to understand the success of the integration up to that point in time and to gauge whether employees were receiving sufficient communication. Areas that would be covered included whether the employees knew the corporate values, understood the scope of their job, had the tools they needed to do their job, and were receiving enough communication. A third company surveys its population of middle-managers (e.g., director and vice president level) yearly, to measure their confidence in the executive leadership's ability to make effective decisions, move quickly enough to adapt to market conditions, and on the organization's ability to achieve its written objectives and initiatives over the year. This survey sends feedback up to leadership from a specific subset of employees and acts as a "report card" of sorts according to the respondent who manages the survey. Surveys are also used to gather data to guide programs or initiatives under development. They are an opportunity for employees to have a say in programs that affect them. For example, one company conducted a survey of 4000 randomly-selected employees investigating their opinions on saving for the future. The data were used to make changes to the organization's salary and bonus structure. This same company also surveys employees in

Bangalore, India, to better understand the effectiveness of their recruiting practices in this high-growth region.

Almost all these organizations share results from employee satisfaction or organizational effectiveness surveys with their employees. Companies will first share topline results with all employees through a written communication or at a company meeting. They then share segmented raw data with teams in an effort to increase transparency and show specific results. Finally these organizations will involve employees in discussing the issues and making improvements. All the respondents emphasized the importance of reporting the results to employees and using the results to affect change or impel some kind of action to address the issue and improve the organization. The prevailing attitude among the respondents was to avoid surveying employees if the management had no intention of reporting results back or making any changes based on the feedback. This point was made clear by one respondent commenting on the responsibility companies bear when soliciting feedback from employees.

The true test comes in when you've got organizations that do the soft things around climate surveys, going out there acting like we're taking the temperature but not really concerned with what the temperature is. Or putting mechanisms like a *Straight Talk* out there, that says tell me about the processes and don't even respond or don't do anything about it.

In fact, one organization was going to discontinue its survey program since it did not report results back to employees. One respondent described how her team was

developing better ways to report survey results back to managers, so that the group can address issues more quickly and effectively.

Employee Q&A during all-hands meetings.

In addition to sending in questions at any time through the “Ask a Question” box, employees can ask questions and raise concerns during the Q&A (question and answer) portions of company-wide, departmental, or team meetings that occur quarterly if not more often.

The organizations in this study regularly schedule all-employee meetings (e.g., quarterly financial results, organizational announcements such as mergers, quarterly functional, departmental, or site-specific business updates) to share information downward with employees. To accommodate employees who cannot attend in person the meeting organizers will include a live broadcast of the meeting over the web or via phone. Video and/or audio recordings of the meetings are often posted on the intranet for employees who could not attend to access at their convenience. Some companies will skip the in-person meeting altogether and instead opt for all-employee conference calls to allow for greater participation. These meetings will include a presentation of the information, and then a period of time at the end of the meeting for employees to ask questions, thus giving leadership an opportunity to clarify information and/or address concerns.

For some meetings, such as the quarterly financial results or business updates, which are usually hosted by the CEO or another executive, the communications team will solicit questions prior to the meeting for the presenter to answer. When meetings are

broadcast over the intranet, there is a mechanism where employees can type in questions during the meeting for the Q&A portion. During the Q&A portion, the communications person will read the questions to the meeting presenter. At one company, questions that are submitted beforehand are researched and answered prior to the meeting.

Presubmitted questions can be sent in anonymously through the web form.

Employees can also simply stand-up and ask their question live during the Q&A portion of the meeting. However, large group forums, due to their size, can actually hinder employees from asking questions or making comments, since some employees are simply apprehensive about standing up to speak before a crowd of hundreds or even thousands. The organizations will usually provide about 15-30 minutes for the Q&A portion of an hour long meeting. Presubmitted questions that are not answered during the meeting are investigated and answered afterwards. A response is sent to the employee and posted on the corporate intranet for others to see. Employees are also encouraged to submit questions via e-mail if employees still have questions after the meeting.

In line with the open communication cultures of these organizations, questions are always encouraged at all meetings, regardless of the number of participants. Meeting leaders will leave room for questions, and employees are encouraged to speak up.

Open forum chats with CEO or other executives.

Open discussion forums or “chats” between employees and top leadership, are informal upward communication vehicles. Unlike the all-hands meetings, however, which are primarily used for downward communication with a chance for Q&A at the end, these gatherings are less structured and utilized primarily for Q&A. These meetings

are generally open-forum meetings where employees can ask questions about anything that is on their minds, while some meetings can have a specific topic. These gatherings also vary in size; some include hundreds of people and others are limited to small groups of 15 to 30 employees.

One of the companies holds monthly birthday breakfasts with the CEO. All employees celebrating their birth date that month are invited to a breakfast with the CEO for 90-minutes of Q&A. The breakfast attracts hundreds of employees every month to the on-site gathering at the corporate headquarters broadcast live over the Internet for employees at regional sites. Recordings of the event are posted and archived on the corporate intranet. At these gatherings, the CEO will say a few words about the state of the business, and then open the floor to questions about anything that is on employees' minds. The questions range widely in topic from the stock price, to whether the CEO has any political aspirations, to clarification on strategic rationale for acquisitions or other major business decisions. Employees will also provide feedback about specific employee programs. The CEO responds to the questions on the spot. If he knows the answer he will answer the question; if he does not know the answer he will refer the question to the appropriate person for a response. If the employee is raising a concern about a program or policy, the CEO agrees to look into the issue or will provide a rationale for why the program or policy is the way it is. At times, the CEO will also clearly state that the program or policy in question is not going to change and provide an explanation. Occasionally, the CEO will informally poll employees during the forums on particular topics by asking for a show of hands.

Another company will have the CEO or other executive hold smaller informal chats, sometimes over lunch, with groups of 15 to 30 employees chosen at random. This company makes an effort to invite a cross-section of employees from different parts of the organization, and includes more front-line employees than managers. At these chats, participants will sit around a table and introduce themselves. After a brief overview on the state of the business, the chat is opened up for questions and discussion between the employees and the executive leading the meeting. A member of the communications team is present to take notes and capture the questions and answers. After the meeting, the answers are posted on the corporate intranet for the rest of the organization to read. The CEO will schedule these luncheons periodically over the year at company headquarters and whenever he visits other offices. At this company, the CEO will also bring together a small group of a dozen employees from locations all over the world for a conference call about a specific topic. “They all had different voices and styles. It was pretty inspiring to hear different questions and points of view from different parts of the organization,” remarked the respondent who arranges the meetings.

Skip-level meetings.

To encourage voice within functional groups or departments, these organizations will schedule skip-level meetings between front-line employees and their boss’s boss. In these open forum discussions similar to the ones with the CEO, front-line employees chosen at random are invited to a meeting where they can ask questions or voice concerns upward without their boss being present.

Employee/manager meetings.

Open communication is also encouraged between employees and their direct supervisors. Managers are expected to hold weekly or monthly one-on-one meetings with their direct reports. The one-on-ones are the employee's opportunity to ask questions or bring up anything that is on his or her mind. The employee is expected to drive the conversation. The review process has been retailored from a top-down approach to a collaborative effort between the employee and manager. At the start of the performance review process, managers ask employees to evaluate themselves. Employees provide all the details on their accomplishments over the past year as well as names of other employees, vendors, or customers from whom the manager can also get feedback about the employee's performance. Managers are expected to coach employees on areas of improvement. Another company was developing a program in which managers have specific, guided conversations with their teams to gather feedback and report it back to upper management. The communications team plans to distribute packets with tools and presentation materials to help the managers gather feedback from employees.

Employee focus groups to pretest HR programs.

One of the companies in the study has a standard practice of pre-testing human resource programs with employee focus groups prior to company wide roll-outs. In these focus groups, the vice president of human resources presents a comprehensive plan of the program to groups of employees to test the idea and its implementation, then listens to the feedback. He or she will make adjustments to the program accordingly. HR initiatives

that have been pre-tested this way include a profit-sharing program, changes in vacation benefits, and a company-wide cost-saving proposal that weighed pay-cuts against layoffs.

According to the human resource vice president, the focus groups are not time consuming. Once a process is set up, they can call the groups together and easily conduct the focus groups quickly. This organization is able to hold seven focus groups in one day. Sharing plans early with employees does not result in the leaking of information since participants of the focus groups are asked to maintain confidentiality. The HR team at this company believes that this mechanism is critical to the success of the program and to meeting the needs of employees. “If the program is so repulsive to employees, maybe you have to take another look at and talk about it and find out what the best thing to do for employees is,” said a respondent responsible for managing the program.

Town hall meetings.

Town hall meetings usually bring a group of employees together for Q&A or open discussion on a specific topic such as layoffs, offshoring or other significant organizational announcements. This format is used less for getting feedback to inform decision making or improve organizational effectiveness, but rather to give employees a chance to have their say, understand the rationale behind decisions, and to create a shared meaning around an issue. True town hall-style meetings are used only rarely, with most companies relying on the presentation/Q&A meeting format to communicate information downward.

At one company, leaders used town hall meetings to broach the topic of offshoring once they had made a decision to open a facility in Bangalore, India. Instead

of simply announcing the decision, the leaders decided to open a company-wide discussion on the topic. First they e-mailed information about their plans to employees so that they could read and start thinking about the issue. Then they invited employees to town hall meetings to engage in a discussion about the topic. The meetings were led by a senior person from the initiative task-force who presented the rationale behind the decision and then lead an open discussion on the issues. Employees were free to ask questions, make statements or challenge the decisions. Through the open exchange of viewpoints from everyone at the meeting, regardless of position within the company, a shared meaning about offshoring emerged from the discussion.

I think the whole shape of the plan was put together from all of those views,” explained the respondent. “It’s not that we came to the table with ‘a’ view and that’s the view we defended. We had ideas about what we were going to do and had good rationale behind it and then we put it together with all of those views. And the views come together from the town hall meetings, the functional groups, and from the employees themselves. We had more of a discussion amongst all the people in the room at the town hall meeting rather than the managers defending a point of view.

Venture days.

In light of its reliance on innovation, one of the companies in our survey regularly holds Venture Days forums. At this forum, employees have the opportunity to present

new product ideas or business models to a committee of senior engineers and executives in the hopes of earning funding with which to develop their ideas into real products or businesses. In addition to providing funding, the company will coach employees on how to develop ideas into a viable product proposal or new business plan.

Leadership retreats/summits.

Although not traditionally considered a mechanism for employee voice, leadership retreats and summits were cited as a forum at which leaders both formal and informal could raise and discuss organizational issues and concerns. While most of these retreats brought together formal leaders at the director level and above, one company had identified its informal leaders, those whom employees turned to for guidance outside of the formal structure, and brought them together for a summit on the organization's communication culture. The objective of the retreat was to plan ways for creating and supporting a constructive communication culture. At another retreat, formal leaders got together for one discussion that addressed the "elephants in the room" (i.e., sensitive topics that groups avoid discussing) in order to clear up misperceptions and build trust among them. Of note is the open-forum nature of the discussions where participants share multiple perspectives and different points of view to discuss ideas.

Intranet.

Similar to the all-hands meetings, the corporate intranet was seen as integral to encouraging voice at the companies in this study. By pushing information out to employees, via the corporate intranet, the company ensures that employees are well informed resulting in better decisions and are greater efficiency. Additionally, employees

have a say in the corporate intranet. Employee can rate content based on how helpful the information was. Employees can also submit suggestions for stories.

In this section I have provided a detailed description of the programs, forums, and policies that the companies in our study said they have available for employees to speak up. I sorted them under two broad categories (1) guidelines and (2) mechanisms and forums. The former includes the principles by which employees are socialized to the acceptability of speaking up at these organizations, and the latter includes the means by which employees can exercise their voice. To gather a more complete understand of organizational response to employee voice, we will now examine management's rationale for sanction these mechanisms, forums and guidelines, in the next section.

Research Question #2

What rationale does management give for sanctioning and supporting such practices?

The respondents in this survey are responsible for planning and implementing employee voice programs, and as such explicitly and implicitly expressed many reasons for sanctioning and supporting the mechanisms and guidelines that encourage voice at their organization. In this section, I will list and describe a comprehensive inventory of rationales articulated in the interviews. The rationales are listed in an unordered fashion.

Compliance.

These companies have corporate governance programs, codes of conduct and whistleblower hotlines in place for compliance purposes. As public companies, they are required by law to have mechanisms for employees to openly or anonymously report financial malfeasance or unethical behavior. One respondent noted that when Sarbanes-

Oxley was instituted they already had a system in place. Others also explained that with Sarbanes-Oxley they dusted off their codes-of-conduct and rolled them out to all employees. These companies ask employees every year to sign a statement attesting that they have read the code of conduct and agree to abide by it.

Protecting company assets.

Even though they are required by law to have corporate governance programs, these companies also want employees to alert them to illegal activities or unethical behavior to protect company assets. By providing employees a safe means to report unethical or illegal activities, the organization hopes to prevent misuse or misappropriation of company assets. For example, one respondent described how an investigation into a “phenomenal” expense-reporting scheme prevented a large loss to the company.

Retention.

Considering the competitive hiring market, these organizations recognize the importance of a work environment in which highly-skilled people want to continue working. They provide voice mechanisms and encourage voice simply because it helps retain people. As Hirschman (1970) argued, if employees have a way to voice their concerns, they will choose not to exit. Additionally, employees expect companies in Silicon Valley to have mechanisms for them to speak up. One respondent remarked, “...you’d lose people if you didn’t have a lot of forums in place.” The goal is to encourage “voice” over “exit.”

Discourage unionization.

Respondents asserted that they provide voice mechanisms as an alternative to unions. By providing multiple channels for employees to express their concerns and by responding to those concerns, management ensures that employees are not compelled to seek representation outside the organization in order to be heard. They recognize that in a trusting environment where voice is encouraged, employees are more likely to trust that management is taking their interests into account. One respondent listed all the factors necessary to dissuade employees from unionizing, “communicating with employees; making sure employees have access to management; making sure management gets out frequently to talk to employees face-to-face; making sure you have a vehicle for anonymous complaints.” Another respondent put it more strongly, “Unions really are a sign of a failure of management. If management did the right job they would not be necessary.”

Morale/motivation.

According to the respondents, management encourages voice because of its positive effect on morale and motivation which leads to better performance. “The difference between a good product and a great product is this little thing called motivation,” explains one respondent. “How do you create an environment where people are motivated?” he asks,

I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s important for people to have access to management, to feel that they can make their ideas known; that they can disagree with management and get away with it. Motivation comes from

employees who feel they are part of the decision making, feel that their voice is heard, that they are more than just a number or headcount.

When organizations provide mechanisms for employees to voice their concerns, then actually listen and respond to those concerns, they send a strong message that employees are valued, which in turn increases loyalty.

Provides feedback.

The respondents see voice mechanisms as an important tool for collecting feedback from employees, which helps organizational leaders (1) keep abreast of what is going on in the organization, (2) inform their decision making and (3) assess organizational performance. These leaders believe that they cannot do their jobs well without feedback from employees, and through the voice mechanisms, leaders connect with employees, understand what they are thinking and find out about issues early on so that they can address them. One respondent who works closely with the CEO of her company describes why he supports voice,

He's concerned that he'll get out of touch; he's responsible for making decisions that impact and affect employees and I think he does want to know. Maybe he doesn't like what he's going to hear, but he does want to know what's on people's minds, so he can make informed decisions. I do think that's what's at the heart of it. It's having a finger on the pulse so that when he gets in front of a company-wide audience he has a sense of what's on the minds of the people in the room; what are the themes that he's been hearing the past couple of months so he can address them.

Another executive explained how important the questions that employees ask are in and of themselves a form of feedback,

I learn more from the questions they ask than from the answers they give sometimes. Because with the questions they ask, there is something there.

Why are they thinking that? I've explained it 10 times, and the question comes back [again and again]. Either I haven't explained it well or they don't believe me. But it gives you feedback.

Open communication/information sharing.

The respondents also sanction voice mechanisms because of how it contributes to the open communication culture of these organizations. Open communication means information flows both upward and downward so that employees are well informed and thus able to make good decisions. Management wants to ensure that employees are familiar with, and understand, the corporate goals, objectives, strategies so that they align their own goals and activities to them. When employees do not understand the strategy or question the rationale behind decisions they need only ask. Additionally, open communication means that a large amount of communication happens between members of the organization. As one respondent explained,

Even when it comes to things like creating the organization's strategic objectives, in doing that, it's not done in a vacuum. It's done by reaching out to the teams, talking about things like what should we start doing, what should we stop doing, what's the competitive landscape like. Taking

those inputs that's going to help us steer where we are going, so things aren't done in a vacuum.

Checking rationales behind decisions.

Respondents state that when employees ask questions about decisions, it requires leadership to think about and articulate the rationale behind decisions. This provides an opportunity for leadership to rethink decisions, if there is not a good rationale behind it, or rethink how they are communicating it. According to one executive, explaining rationales is a key responsibility of management.

As an executive you should be able to explain the rationale for your decisions. You have to be able to defend your answer. It's not enough to say, "Yes I hear you, but we're not going to do that, period." You have to be able to say, "Here are the reasons why, and we've thought about it." Or, "Hey here's something new. Let me think about it and get back to you." If you, as the leader of the company, cannot explain the reasons for your decisions, you are in the wrong position. If an employee comes to you and asks you a question and you cannot have an answer then you aren't doing your job.

This same executive, clearly states the value of having employees question decisions, "If I make a stupid decision, I'd rather have someone tell me so I can fix it, than continue with the stupid decision forever."

Organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

Respondents recognize how employee voice contributes to overall organizational effectiveness. When asked about his rationale for having employee voice programs, one vice president quickly responded, “Productivity.” According to him, when employees are aligned with the management’s goals they can be more productive since everyone is “paddling” in the same direction. All the respondents agreed that employee voice mechanisms provide leadership a way through which to find out if employees understand the corporate goals (e.g., what management wants) and how their day-to-day work aligns with those goals. When employees believe there is a disconnect between corporate goals and work activities they will ask questions or voice their concerns upward. Leaders may see a disconnect based on the questions employees are asking.

Additionally, respondents at these organizations recognized that encouraging employee voice can improve organizational efficiencies. According to them, employee feedback improves decision making, increases communication and improves processes. The combination of voice mechanisms and a culture of voice makes it safe and acceptable for employees to challenge processes and decision in an effort to improve them and help the company run more efficiently. In the absence of a culture that encourages voice, a mechanism such as Straight Talk where employees can provide feedback to improve process would remain unused.

Innovation.

A large part of encouraging employees to speak up, ask questions and challenge the status quo is for the sake of creativity and innovation. As one respondent explains,

We live by the model of impact and innovation. So everything we do is what will improve its impact and how do we make it better. From that standpoint, that kind of culture requires people to dissent, because if they're not, you're not getting the best ideas. You're absolutely not getting impact and innovation.

Respondents believe that having voice mechanisms encourages employees to speak up, offer new ideas, and find better ways of doing things. As companies in the business of innovating it is important to them to ensure employees feel free to think critically and challenge processes not only in their own work, but to help the overall organization improve and perform optimally. "The other piece of pushing innovation is to constantly have people challenge our processes to make sure we are nimble," summarizes a respondent.

Builds credibility for leadership.

Another reason given is that when managers listen to employees and follow-through on promises, this builds their credibility with employees, which is important when they want to support for new programs or corporate changes. One executive attests,

You build credibility; you build loyalty; you build a mutually satisfying relationship when you talk with people about what it is you're doing and listen to what their concerns are. And even if you can't satisfy their concerns, you tell them why you can't satisfy their concerns. And we've not had it backfire on us.

However, most importantly managers have to follow through on their promises for employees to trust them. As one executive warns, “Don’t make a promise that you can’t live up to. What we’re trying to build is credibility. You give your word and you live up to it.”

Empowerment/ownership.

Another reason respondents encourage voice is to empower employees to actively participate in the running of the business. For example, one respondent explains how they instill ownership,

One of the big parts of the company philosophy is the spirit of ownership.

If you make people owners in the company, they’ll make better decisions and they’ll enjoy working here more. People make decisions at every level of the company. It’s a question of allowing people to listen and make decisions wherever they are. We also give a lot of stock options, profit sharing. Anything that can stimulate this feeling of ownership is very, very important. So this whole listening to employees and letting them make decisions at every level is critical to the success of the company.

Management believes that when employees see that their questions and concerns are taken seriously and that they can make a difference in the success of the business, employees will feel empowered to make decisions on their own that benefit the organization. The connection between voice and empowerment is described by one respondent who claims, “If you are encouraging the employee to grow, this also means

that you encourage the employee to ask questions and to disagree,” Management at these companies perhaps recognize that providing space for employees to speak up and take initiative will benefit the organization in the end.

Supporting values that they want in the organization..

All the respondents made a connection between voice programs and the organization’s stated core values. Encouraging employees to speak up supports the kind of values (e.g., integrity, trust, credibility, innovation, candor) that are important to creating a constructive corporate culture. One respondent explains, “Values are foundational to the question of employee voice. Candor is one of the core values. At this company we speak and appreciate candor.” Another adds,

Integrity is one of our core values. And that’s also one of the things that makes this company unique, and in particular with [the CEO]. He always talks about if he gets up in the morning and if he can’t look at himself in the mirror and feel good about decisions that he’s made he’ll stop coming in.

The consensus is that voice programs are manifestation of the values and reinforce them at the same time.

Creates a constructive environment.

Many respondents pointed to the contribution employee voice makes to creating an open, trusting, and constructive corporate culture that maximizes human potential. “Communication is the critical factor in all human institutions and if you do it well you reap the rewards. If you don’t do it well, you end up in an adversarial situation.” A

culture based on open communication creates an environment where employees are comfortable speaking up, know they can make a difference in the organization, and know that management treats them with honesty and respect.

As a software company, our employees are our biggest asset. It's really important that we have an environment and a culture where people can thrive. Communication is one of those important things. It's sort of like dirt, water and sun for a plant. One of the nice things about this company is that when it was founded, [the founders] always thought that communication was very important and that people should have the opportunity to openly communicate.

Giving employees a voice.

Some of the respondents also recognize that the voice mechanisms are needed to simply provide employees an avenue by which to express their voice; they were a utilitarian function. Reasons include, "Making sure our employees have got a voice in the organization, [know] where the company is going, having the ability to raise issues and concerns in an environment that is free of any kind of retaliation." Without the mechanisms, it would be more difficult for employees to have their questions answered or their concerns addressed. Where would they turn? With mechanisms in place employees have a structured process by which to speak up. This also means that employees have a way to raise issues and concerns internally. As one respondent explains, "The other piece of that is that people don't feel they have to go outside to find help. I can feel safe in the place where I work."

Support from the top.

Finally, some of the respondents stated that the programs exist because the CEO believes strongly in the programs. “For [this company] it stems from the top. Our CEO is passionate about communication; he’s a phenomenal communicator himself. And he truly believes that communication is what drives strategy inside the company,” explains a respondent.

In an effort to reach a complete understand of organizational response to employee voice, in this section I have listed and examined in detail management’s rationales for sanctioning and supporting voice mechanisms, forums and guidelines. Management at these companies had many reasons for encouraging voice that ranged from improving the organization to providing a people-friendly workplace. In the next section I will begin to synthesize these findings to achieve an even larger view of employee voice in Silicon Valley’s most employee-friendly companies.

Research Question #3

To what extent does management encourage voice at these companies?

The categories of voice mechanisms and guidelines and of management’s rationale that emerged from the first two questions lend much insight into the extent to which management encourages voice at these companies. However, my reading of the data indicated that the voice experience was much richer than that which could be found in a listing of programs and of reasons. To dig deeper into the data I conducted additional open coding into management’s reaction to the concept of voice, which resulted in a larger set of categories (see Table 5).

Table 5

Axial Coding Categories & Subcategories

<u>organizational context</u>	<u>management's rationales</u>
need for innovation	outcomes of voice
cultures of trust	perceived benefits of voice
open communication structures	organizational effectiveness and improvement
higher-than-average compensation, benefits and perks	employee motivation and performance
interesting work	connection between org and employee
autonomy, directionally lead	
teamwork based	<u>leadership's role</u>
high-value for the employee as a person	modeling of behavior
for-profit business	responding to voice
	balancing needs of constituencies
<u>voice mechanisms & guidelines</u>	respecting employees
accessibility and availability	responsibility towards employees
use of multiple channels	
direct access to management	<u>response to voice</u>
integration into culture	listen and respond
alignment with values	make change
	revisit decision
<u>voice constraints</u>	clarify business rationale
alignment of employee's concern with business' concerns	do not always do what employees want

To continue forming a complete view of the phenomena under investigation, I moved to the next level of coding in grounded theory development, axial coding. At this level of coding, I analyzed the data to identify the relationships that exist between the categories. It was during this stage of coding that I began to build out my description of “why” and “how” the phenomenon of employee voice occurs the way that it does. To guide my analysis, as I described in the prior chapter, I employed Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) “paradigm model” (pp. 127-135), in which I identified the conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences of the phenomenon. Conditions provide the

context within which these organizations encourage voice; they answer the questions “why,” “where,” “when,” and “how come” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998 p. 128). Actions and interactions between the categories answer the question, “how” and describe the process by which management encourages voice (Strauss and Corbin, 1998 p. 128). Finally, consequences show the outcomes of the actions and interactions between the categories and answers the question “what happens as a result” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 128). I placed the categories in the paradigm model as follows:

Table 6

Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) Paradigm Model

Conditions

Innovative companies
 Cultures of trust
 Higher-than-average compensation and benefits
 Knowledge work that is interesting
 Employees are led directionally instead of by command and control
 Great emphasis on teamwork
 High-value for the employee as a person
 For-profit business
 Existence of multiple voice mechanisms and guidelines

Actions/interactions

Management provides a variety mechanisms
 Management responds by listening, changing, allowing, acting on, or creating dialogue
 Management models behavior
 Management does not always do what employees say
 Management focuses on business rationale

Consequences

Improves organizational processes
 Builds credibility and trust
 Provides information for improving decision making
 Improves employees’ own performance and productivity
 Contributes to creating a constructive environment

Once I placed the categories within the model, I was able to more clearly recognize the connections between the categories and take my analysis to the final stage of coding, selective coding. At this stage in the coding process, I took the connections found within the paradigm model and developed a storyline or theory that describes the phenomena of employee voice at these companies. The following story line is my interpretation of these data to explain the extent to which management in Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies encourages voice.

Management at the companies in our study greatly encourage employee voice. They encourage it by sanctioning voice guidelines and mechanisms, and by supporting a culture where voice can thrive. They are motivated to encourage voice because of the benefits derived from having employees speak up. Yet, as businesses they are bound to the "bottom line." As a result, management finds itself constantly balancing the needs of the employees, as well as other stakeholders, with the needs of the business (Freeman, 1984).

These organizations clearly encourage voice simply by virtue of the breadth of programs, forums and guidelines that they have in place for employees to speak up, as we saw in the list of guidelines and mechanisms described in the response to research question one. The extensiveness of available mechanisms also becomes evident through an examination of their properties and dimensions. When used in combination, these mechanisms and guidelines provide a comprehensive program for encouraging voice. As a result, employees have many layers of accessibility ensuring that employees (1) have ample outlets available for speaking up that are easy to use, (2) have access to people at

all levels who can best answer their questions or do something about their concern, and (3) have distinct paths to follow to voice their specific concern.

In addition to the traditional channels such as phone or physical mailbox, these companies have taken advantage of ubiquitous electronic formats that make the voice mechanisms available at all hours. As a result, employees can ask questions or make comments as soon as something occurs and receive a response in a timely manner. The use of electronic formats also increases accessibility since the mechanisms are available through the tools that these employees use every day. Instead of having to physically go somewhere to submit their questions or comments, it is easy for employees to write up an e-mail and hit the send button right from their own desk. The use of electronic channels also helps make it easier to ask questions in situations where employees may not be comfortable asking questions. For example, during large company meetings, through a chat mechanism employees can submit their question that is then read by someone else. This saves them from having to stand up in front of everyone in a large crowd.

Employees also have greater access to leadership through the voice mechanisms. Although employees are encouraged to first address concerns with their managers, the open communication policy permits them to raise issues with anyone along the chain of command. They have direct access to executives through the “Ask a Question” box, CEO breakfast chats, or skip-level meetings at which employees can pose their questions straight to the executive in-charge. Additionally, when it comes to ethical or illegal issues they have access to neutral third-parties (e.g., outside vendors, ethics office or the audit committee) who can investigate the situation.

Finally, employees have distinct paths along which to raise specific kinds of concerns thus reducing ambiguity or uncertainty as to the proper recourse. Because of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, there is no question as to how employees report unethical or illegal behavior. Employees also have resources available to discuss issues related to their employment, their relationship with their manager, or other career related issues. They also have specific mechanisms available to them to speak up about organizational practices, policies and process, or to question leadership's rationale for decisions with the intention of improving the organization.

In addition to sanctioning voice mechanisms and guidelines, management defines and supports a culture where voice can thrive. Whether a result of the Silicon Valley ethos or a management team's deliberate effort to build a model company, these organizations purport to have cultures that are guided by principles of trust, innovation, integrity, candor, ownership, action and open communication among others. A culture based on these principles is compatible with the conditions necessary for voice to exist, to be constructive and, as a result, to be supported and encouraged by the organization. As organizations with these values, the companies in our study claim to have made speaking up in the workplace a natural part of their culture. As innovative companies, employees are encouraged to ask questions, take risks, challenge the status quo, and come up with new ideas. While these companies have strict policies against retaliation in the traditional sense, they also do not punish people who take initiative and fail. One respondent describes her own experience,

I've always felt pretty empowered to do and say what I need to and what I believe is the right thing; when I've taken risks that haven't paid off, I haven't been penalized for them; and if anything, [I was] applauded.

Employee voice is so accepted in the culture of these companies that many respondents simply saw speaking up in the workplace as a natural element of the workplace experience. One respondent described how voice had become a standard practice,

You're expected to offer up ideas, to get involved, to say, hey, there's something else we could be doing here. Throw it out on the table and see if we can do it. Sometimes that's really unruly to manage. But I think the results that we have to show for it prove that it's worth it.

Management also encourages voice through its own actions. They contribute to this voice-encouraging culture by modeling behavior that reinforces the values and, in turn, encourages voice. Essentially, as leaders of the organization and those who employees look up to, they set the example, and they model voice encouraging behavior with the manner in which they respond to employee questions and comments. For example, one respondent describes an example of how executives at her company model voice for new employees,

At [the new hire orientation], [you] will see most senior leaders encouraging voice, asking questions, giving answers to all the questions, stating that there are absolutely no dumb questions, there are no wrong questions, there are no wrong times for asking questions. [The executives] model the behaviors that give them [the new hires] confidence to ask

questions and allowing them access to the most senior people to do that.

Which again is a demonstrative way of showing that the culture is open and that everything is up for grabs.

At the most fundamental level, management shows support for the programs simply by showing up for Q&A forums, informal chats, birthday breakfasts and by answering questions that they receive via e-mail. Moreover, they emulate voice-encouraging behavior by the manner in which they respond to employee questions.

First, management responds to employees' questions. When an employee asks a question, they will get a response in a timely manner. The respondents say that management at these companies do not ignore or hide from employees' questions and comments. It is all about "fostering an environment where people realize that they are getting a response; That it doesn't fall on deaf ears," explains one respondent. "In fact some of the things we get is two people who see it two very, very different ways," he continues. "It's in conflict with each other, and it's our responsibility to get back to both of them." Another respondent also agreed, "I can't appease every request that comes in, but I owe them an answer. This is why we can't do it."

Secondly, to build trust and increase credibility, management recognizes that it must respond to employees with a high degree of transparency. "You need to be honest with employees and straightforward, because they know everything anyway. They know when you aren't being honest," said one respondent. Since the culture values open communication, management shares information, strategies, or rationales for decisions with employees to the legal extent that they can. They do this also to better prepare

employees in to make well-informed decisions, according to the respondents. When asked about the relationship between employee motivation and innovation, one respondent replied, “[It’s about] making sure that they get informed because innovation means that you put the decision making down to their level. They cannot make the right decision if they are not informed.” If management cannot respond because of legal issues or public disclosure rules, they will say so, “At [the new hire training] employees that ask inappropriate or confidential question will get a pretty straight answer. ‘That’s not something we’re prepared to share at this time or something we’re not allowed to share at this time.’” Leaders at these companies also give bad news along with the good to increase credibility, explains one respondent.

You can’t just give the positive messages; you have to say when things don’t go well. And don’t be afraid to talk about it. Otherwise [the good news is] just hurrah. Especially with engineers who tend to be cynical by nature.

According to the respondents, management at these organizations believe strongly in following through on their commitments to employees and will do so to the best of their abilities. The respondents stressed that management at these organizations do what they say they are going to do, or they provide some kind of response back to the employee to let them know what happened. When asked about the importance of encouraging voice, one respondent pointed to the open and trusting relationship between management and employees,

Create an environment where the employee feels comfortable approaching leadership, and having leadership be open to listening to employees - even when what [employees] have to say isn't what [management] want[s] to hear.

Organizational leaders encourage voice to the extent that they do because of the benefits they believe they receive from the voice mechanisms and guidelines, as evidenced by the list of responses referenced above. The feedback that employees push upward, whether solicited or not, keeps leaders aware of what is going on in the organization. It informs their decision making, and even helps to improve organizational performance. Employees' questioning and dissent spurs creativity and innovative thinking that leads to new ideas, and new ways of doing things that improve both the company's products and organizational processes. Moreover, when employees ask leaders about their decisions it forces them to think about and articulate the reasons for those decisions. As a result, true to Hirschman's theory, employee voice contributes to the organization's improved effectiveness and performance. "Hopefully what you're getting in the end, the true results of the tool, is that you are improving your processes. You're creating a better way to do business," confirms a respondent in describing one of their mechanisms.

Management also benefits from increased employee morale and greater motivation when they listen to employees and respond to their questions and comments. The respondents believe that employees feel valued and more connected to the organization when they see they are being taken seriously. For example, a respondent

describes an employee's reaction to a change made to a new HR program after she voiced concerns about it during a focus group.

People also need to know that their input is taken and listened to. A day or two after we rolled out the program, the woman who was most vocal about the change said, "Oh, my God, you listened to what I had to say. Thank you." That's how you elicit loyalty from your workforce. You listen to what they have to say and you take action on it.

While the respondents explained that management is motivated by improving organizational performance, they also intimated that management is interested in creating an environment that maximizes human potential.

Even with the extent to which management at Silicon Valley's employee friendly companies encourage voice by sanctioning voice mechanisms and constructive cultures, the fact remains that these organizations are in the business of making money. Therefore, all decisions are guided and bound by the organization's need to generate profits and are premised on business rationale. When employees speak up, their complaints, concerns and ideas are measured using a business rationale. When employees question decisions, they are given the business rationale behind the decision to clarify.

We get a lot of opinions from our employees about certain elements of our benefit plan. So we go back to people and say, "We appreciate your input, but here's the data, and here's the other data that you don't know about." We try to be very logical, very thoughtful and rational and evaluate the

business foundation for what they may be suggesting and explain why it won't work.

When employees continually raise concerns about an issue, management responds by listening and reexamining the business case for the decision. As one respondent explains,

We are very straightforward about stuff like that. I think you have to be honest. You can't skirt around the issue. Look, we have to do that for the viability of the business. And sometimes that is the answer. Sometimes the answer isn't something that employees especially want, but you can't always do that, because you're running a business and you're trying to do that in the best way.

In other words, simply because an employee raises a concern, it does not mean that the issue will change if it is not good for business. For example, when employees at one organization kept voicing their desire for an on-site day care facility, management would respond to employees by revisiting the business rationale behind their decision.

I think we just kept relooking at the situation every time it came up, just checking our data, checking our information, running the numbers.

Where's the business benefit? How does it help our customers? Somebody feels they want a day care center, but do we really need one? What would be the business benefit? There's a lot of analysis that goes into the decision.

A respondent at a second company also faced with employee requests for on-site day-care, applied business rationale to evaluate their decision as well.

If everyone got together and said, “Hey, we want day care here.” that’s not going to get you a day care center unless you could prove that there was some way that it was going to contribute to the bottom line. We have a day care subsidy that is very generous, so it’s not like the company is not concerned with people having children and work-life balance. It’s just a matter of whether or not we are going to use office space to have kids here.

Considering the fact that a day-care subsidy also goes against the bottom line, the organization weighs responses to employee requests in a way that will least affect the bottom line. Consequently, when responding to employee requests these companies do provide a response, but they frame it in terms of the best business decision for the organization.

However, the respondents believe that generating profit does not need to occur at the expense of their employees. Instead, respondents described management as balancing the needs of the employees with the needs of the business as well as other stakeholders when making decisions (Freeman, 1984). One respondent explains,

Do we listen all the time and do everything that they say? No. But I think we are really, really good at going out and saying, “Here are our objectives. This is what’s going to work for our company shareholders, customers, board of directors, and various constituencies. What do you think?” They might come back and ask for tweaks to see how it works in relation to the other

constituencies. If it makes sense then we'll do it. If it doesn't, then we won't do it.

Instead of running the business solely with the owner or shareholder in mind, management balances the needs of all their stakeholders – those with a “stake” in the running of the business (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder theory of the firm (Lawrence & Weber, 2006; Waddock, 2006) posits that organizations – as social institutions – have a responsibility to engage with groups internal and external to the organization and manage their business in relation to those stakeholders. The normative view of stakeholder theory (Lawrence & Weber, 2006; Waddock, 2006) maintains that management has an obligation to respect and value their employees, to look seriously at employees' concerns, and to work with employees to find solutions that take all constituents' needs into consideration. According to one respondent, “I think our roles as senior leaders is to understand what all those constituencies are and test the waters,” As certifiably great places to work, the organizations in this study manage employee voice as a way to develop a trusting, cooperative relationship with their employees that is beneficial to both in the long-term. It is a constant juggling act that requires the highest integrity from the leaders of these organizations.

One of the companies in our study worked with employees and shareholders to find an unusual solution to a serious problem. Faced with a precipitous drop in revenue during the 2001 Silicon Valley recession, the management team grappled with reducing costs. However, instead of resorting to layoffs as shareholders were demanding, the

management team turned to the collective intelligence of employees for a possible fix.

An executive at this company described the situation,

[Management] went to employees and said we don't want to lay anyone off but we need to reduce expenses, and we explained what the numbers looked like. Went to shareholders and told them not going to do layoffs. Shareholders said that we needed to do layoffs, since we had lost 50% of revenues. We explained that we weren't going to do that and here are the reasons why: we want to be an innovative company so need to retain all these employees that we've just hired over the past two years.

We will lose ground in our R&D efforts if we let people go.

From the discussions with employees and shareholders, management compiled a host of options for reducing costs without firing people. "Everybody was really on board with cutting costs," noted one of the respondents. And through the discussions that took place among the organizational members, the organization agreed to progressive salary cuts across the company. The CEO's salary was cut 20 percent, executives' 15 percent, senior-level managers' 12 percent, and so on, until employees with the smallest salaries received no cut in pay. By taking this approach, an executive from the company explained,

Now we've got this very loyal workforce that believes in what it is we're saying and knows that we also listen to what they have to say. And now we have shareholders that say we have lived up to our promise and haven't backed away from the stock.

While the manner in which this organization dealt with the situation serves as a positive example of stakeholder management, not all the organizations in this study take such a collaborative approach. According to Lawrence and Weber (2006) and Waddock (2006) there are four ways of managing the stakeholder relationship (1) *inactivity*, where the organization does nothing in relation to stakeholders' needs; (2) *reactivity*, where the organization takes action in relation to a stakeholder's concern only once it becomes an issue that they cannot ignore; (3) *proactivity*, where the organization seeks to understand the needs of the stakeholder to ensure it's not caught off-guard; (4) *interactivity*, where the organization works with the stakeholder to identify and address needs and concerns in a reflexive mutually-beneficial process. The organizations in this study varied between proactive and interactive in terms of managing employee's concerns. At some of the companies, the manner in which respondents described organizational response to employee voice demonstrated a lack of empathy that is necessary for the collaborative, interactive engagement of the employee stakeholder group (Freeman, 1986). Employee's concerns were seen as "a problem to be managed, rather than a source of competitive advantage" (Lawrence & Weber, 2006, p. 24). In one example, management's response to concerns about an organizational change, according to the respondents, was to reiterate the rationale rather than listen to the underlying assumptions feeding the concerns. By repeating the business rationale the expectation was that employees would eventually "buy-in" to decision. This description from one respondent typifies this approach,

"Once people begin to understand the reasons you've done it and that the rationale is for good business reasons, they might not like it, but they'll

understand it generally. They have the option to vote with their feet.

They can take a walk if they don't like it. But then they start to see that there are a whole bunch of other reasons to continue working for this company.”

The extent to which management encourages voice at these organizations rests not only with the number of mechanisms, but also with the underlying respect for the other that is manifested in the organization's response to voice.

Research Question #4

What are the implications of these practices for the management of voice?

This investigation into employee voice in Silicon Valley's most employee friendly companies, has yielded an in-depth view into the manner in which five companies manage voice in their organizations. Based on the analysis, I have identified best practices for an effective communication system for the management of voice that can inform managers and executives who would like to implement a program for encouraging voice at their companies.

All the companies have developed comprehensive voice programs that provide many options for employees to speak up.

Research shows that the more opportunities employees have available to them the more they will voice upward (Spencer, 1986). Since management at these organizations want to encourage voice, they have made available a comprehensive program of voice mechanisms and guidelines, that provides employees myriad openings for them to voice their questions, comments and concerns upward. As a result, employees have numerous

options to follow based on their specific need. Whether it is a personal matter, to report unethical behavior, or to question a strategic decision, the availability of multiple options makes it easy for employees to find answers or resolutions. All the companies had implemented a combination of mechanisms that included the “Ask a question” box, the whistleblower hotline, question and answer sections during large and small meetings, and forums with executives. Additionally, to maximize employee access all the companies took advantage of electronic communication channels such as conference calls, e-mail, instant messaging and the intranet that employees use in their day-to-day work.

To encourage employee voice, these companies make sure to always provide a response to employees questions and concerns.

Management at these companies recognize that encouraging employee voice will have little impact and even negative impact if it does not lead to some kind of response. Because of this, all the respondents noted the importance of responding to all employee questions and concerns, even when the response is not favorable to the employee.

“People don’t just want to be listened to what they are saying, but they want you to act on what they are saying,” explained one respondent. Management sees it as their responsibility to provide honest, open answers to all employee questions, whether it was to look into and change whatever it was that the employees were asking about or to provide a rationale for why it would not change. “We are very straightforward about stuff like that,” noted another respondent. “I think you have to be just honest. You can’t skirt around the issue.” All the companies aim to answer questions raised by employees through any of the mechanisms in a speedy manner, and many of them share employee

responses with the rest of the company. Moreover, management described the importance of following through on promises made as a part of a response since it maintains management's credibility and trust with employees. Respondents also agreed that it is especially important to show a response or to act on employee concerns when soliciting feedback from employees as in surveys or focus groups. They said that making changes based on feedback is especially effective because of its effect on employee loyalty. For example, when the organization that pretests employee programs through focus groups, changed a program based on feedback from a pretty vocal employee, the employee expressed surprise and appreciation that her opinion was taken seriously and had affected a change.

Leaders at these companies support constructive voice by modeling voice encouraging behavior.

Leaders at these companies play an important role in encouraging voice. They set the example by modeling voice-encouraging behavior. In addition to the electronic question boxes, all the companies in this study host forums where top leadership answers employees' questions. Since these executives participate in these forums and respond to questions openly, they signal to employees that speaking up is welcomed, that their questions are important and that they will get a response. Respondents described how executives at these companies find these forums important. For example, at one company a respondent described how dedicated the CEO is to connecting with employees,

If you ask the CEO what's his favorite thing to do, he will say the Birthday Breakfast. He's absolutely committed to meeting every month with all the employees around the world whose birthday it is that month. And he says it's the best, because he gets to hear what's on employees minds.

Moreover, respondents point to the importance of leaders following through on their commitments in response to employee concerns. Whether it is to investigate a concern, revisit a decision or make changes to a program, according to the respondents, leadership at these companies follows through on its promises, thus demonstrating to employees that speaking up is valued and will make a difference. Recognizing that employees are sensitive to leadership's behaviors, management at these organizations realize the importance of setting the example. As one respondent who was part of the executive leadership team attested,

The teams absolutely do follow the examples set by the leader. [Taking a position that] when there's an issue, [that you're] not looking for a smoking gun, not ever focusing on a person, but focusing on a process that was broken. And in the process they quickly learn what is acceptable to talk about. If you do that a few times and the teams just align.

Here we can see how management believes that modeling behavior affects the way the organization functions. According to one respondent, when employees emulate leaders, then the whole organization supports voice through their behavior, "The biggest

encouragement of voice is actually informal and it happens the minute you meet any [company] person, employee or manager, that they absolutely encourage it.”

The corporate cultures of these companies are driven by values that align closely with the factors that encourage voice.

The corporate cultures at these companies encourage voice through the values and norms shared by the organizational members. The values that management has put forth and model at these companies align with those factors that scholars (Cheney, 1995; Gorden et al., 1988; Gorden & Infante, 1991; Kassing, 2000; Hegstrom, 2002; Lyman, 2003) have identified as voice-friendly: open communication, flat hierarchy, respect for employees, pursuit of quality, and trust between employees and management. Hence, from what the respondents indicated, voice is encouraged to the extent that it is, because it corresponds closely with the organizational belief system already in place. All the respondents in the study mentioned the values when talking about employee voice; they alluded either to the fact that when employees speak up they do so because of the values, or to the fact that encouraging employees to speak up reinforced the values.

These companies provide training and development so that employees learn skills for speaking up within a collaborative, team-based work environment.

The training curriculum at these companies teaches employees skills and approaches for voicing questions and concerns in teams, to their managers and to leadership. There is also training on identifying and reporting unethical and illegal behavior. Respondents believe the training helps encourage voice since it augments the mechanisms and it instills behavior that is consistent with the culture and values. While

the communication training is not specifically about how to speak up, it is intended to address the contextual dynamic within which employees are speaking up: a team-based, collaborative work environment. As one respondent explained, “That’s why we spend time training people how to get things done in a collaborative way through influence and participation rather than command and control.” As described by the respondents, the trainings teach employees how to influence without authority, and how to have courageous or difficult conversations. In the latter, an emphasis is placed on how to effectively communicate contrary opinions or ideas to what others are proposing or that go against the status quo. Respondents assert that training instills the skills and behaviors that encourage employees to speak up.

The implications discussed in this section can serve as best practices for communication practitioners designing an employee voice program in their organization. While each organization has its own dynamics, the findings from this investigation can offer a starting point from which the practitioner can begin to evaluate the extent to which management at his or her organization encourages voice.

In this chapter, I gave the results of my in-depth interviews with managers responsible for developing and running employee voice programs. I described the myriad guidelines and mechanisms that exist to encourage voice, and management’s rationales for sanctioning and supporting them. Then, I described the great extent to which management at these organizations encourage voice by providing these programs and forums, responding to employee questions and concerns, and modeling voice-encouraging behavior. However, I discovered that, even while management at these

employee-friendly companies encourage voice, they still balance employee concerns in relation to other stakeholders and the overall success of the business. Finally, my analysis of these manager's experiences provided best practices that other managers can use in developing their own programs to encourage employee voice.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The results described in the last chapter offer one perspective of organizational response to voice in Silicon Valley's most employee friendly companies. The findings elucidate our understanding of the phenomenon and provide valuable knowledge to practitioners. However, there are also theoretical implications. In this final chapter, I will discuss the results from a theoretical perspective. Subsequently, I will describe the limitations of the study and finally provide future areas of research.

Discussion

This study describes organizational response to employee voice in Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies. While from a functional perspective, voice benefits organizations by affecting the factors that drive high-performance (e.g., improving processes and decision making and increasing morale and motivation), it plays a more critical role by keeping organizations honest. Voice can prevent organizations from co-opting their employees (Hegstrom, 1990, 2002) in its pursuit of profits and efficiency. Critical communication scholars (Deetz & Mumby 1990; Mumby, 2001) argue that a battle of sorts occurs in organizations between the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual with the former usually winning. Hegstrom (1990, 2002) proposes that dissent offers a way to negotiate the tension that arises from that battle. "It may be said that the acid test of an organization's communication system is its reaction to those who disagree ... Each organization can be criticized from the viewpoint of how it deals with its own internal critics" (Hegstrom, 1995, p. 84). If we take a critical view of

the manner in which management at these employee-friendly organizations respond to employee voice, how employee-friendly are they really? Through its purposeful machination to create a great place to work, is management simply creating an environment that lures employees into complicity of their own oppression? For insight into these question we can take Hegstrom's viewpoint and look at how these organizations respond to employee voice when it is critical in nature.

Considering the myriad of voice mechanisms and guidelines these organizations provide and their responsiveness to employee questions and concerns, it would appear that management takes employee voice seriously. Management is concerned for employees as individuals and feels a great sense of responsibility towards them, as evidenced by the company that didn't lay off its employees during the 2001 recession or the company that held town-hall meetings to come to a shared understanding about offshoring. By balancing individual and organizational needs management achieves organizational integration as a result of their openness to critical voice. Management at these companies appear to welcome dissent and disagreement along with other kinds of voice. Since they want employees to speak up they encourage all kinds of comments and questions regardless of whether they are favorable or critical. All the companies in the study accept the critics as part of the process of encouraging voice. And at some companies they respect them, too. As one respondent explained,

And there are those people in the organization who complain more than others. For example, always catching typos on the web site. Those people become your second

editors. You just respect them and respect that they have something to say.

These companies also show that they welcome the critic because they say they would never attempt to silence employees. One respondent stated, “Have we ever shut anything down and said this isn’t somewhere we want you guys to go. That’s really not something we’re going to do. We can’t shut it down but I think we can add to it.” Additionally, we have seen that these organizations encourage dissent when it comes to improving organizational processes or for generating ideas. As one respondent described, “innovation requires creativity, creativity requires constructive conflict; constructive conflict requires being willing to entertain different opposing points of view and to let the best idea win.” However, when it comes to criticizing decisions, organizational response gets a little murkier. When an employee questioned a decision at a large all-hands meeting that had been greatly debated within the organization, the response was not positive. “And it was like...because this is the decision that’s been made. We will give you another computer. End of story. It’s not a discussion. We’re like so past that. I can’t believe they’re bringing it up,” explained the respondent who was present at the meeting. Additionally, the issue of work-life balance is a sensitive subject in Silicon Valley companies. In reference to this issue, one of the respondents described a management team that was not as sympathetic to this employee concern,

the reality is that the CEO and a lot of those other people are still around the clock all the time. There’s not a lot of sympathy for folks who want work-life balance because

there are a lot of folks that don't get it. And it's very hard to choose who gets it and who doesn't. And there's a little bit of if that's what you want, go somewhere else, because you're not going to get it at this company.

However, this company is also trying to respond to these concerns,

A lot of employees are asking we need more flexibility for work-life balance, give us part-time, give us part-time.

And somebody keeps looking at the information and saying what are you really asking for? Are you really asking for a part-time program or are you asking for a consistent approach so that all our managers can help people take care of the situation – be able to integrate their work and their life.

Since management at these organizations encourage dissent and recognize and respect criticism, there is a great chance that they are not co-opting their employees. They have achieved organizational integration to a certain extent, and as a result, these organizations come close to the ideal of workplace democracy that the original pioneers of Silicon Valley desired. Cheney (1995) defines workplace democracy as integrating the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization by “encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices, which allows for the ongoing modification of the organization's activities and policies by the group” (pp. 170-171). Management encourages employees to take individual initiative to improve the organization and uses

that feedback to inform their decisions and strategic plans. So, to a degree these organizations are engaging in workplace democracy. However, there are limits. It is true that employees do not have a formal vote or veto power on the organization's direction. As one respondent so aptly put it, "This isn't a democracy." Decisions ultimately rest in the hands of management. Yet, management takes care to listen to employees and manage everyone's needs to the benefit of the organization as a whole.

While it's true that management at these organizations on a whole encourage voice, they appeared to vary in the degree to which they engage employees in addressing issues and concerns in a reflexive mutually-beneficial process in response to that voice (Lawrence & Weber, 2006; Waddock, 2006). The manner in which the respondents described their communication programs, the rationales for having them and their response to voice, suggested a distinction between two poles: proactively managing employees' expectations to avoid dissatisfaction and actively engaging employees "in an ongoing relationship of mutual respect, openness, and trust" (Lawrence & Weber, 2006, 25.) Managers who embraced the latter approach, displayed a greater willingness to listen to employees and an appreciation for multiple viewpoints. There was less a desire to sell ideas to employees than to engage in the co-creation of a shared understanding of the issues, as evidenced in the town hall meeting about off shoring of jobs to India. Managers who took the former approach relied more on traditional marketing techniques to communicate to employees. They appeared to believe that when employees raised concerns it meant they just did not hear or understand the corporate message that addressed that concern and simply needed to be reminded.

These approaches map to two kinds of communication models, a transmission model of communication and a reflexive, dialogic communication model. In the transmission communication model, the voice programs were designed for downward and upward communication. Management sends information downward to ensure employees are informed so they can do their jobs more effectively. Upward feedback demonstrates to management whether employees understood, and it further informs their decision making. Then management makes decisions based on the input and communicates the decision back down to employees. In the dialogic model, management and employees are engaged collaboratively in the communication process to find mutually-beneficial resolution to issues and concerns.

Listening to employees entailed paying attention to what and how employees were asking or saying things after being encouraged to speak up. The intent is to understand their point of voice. When it comes to listening, it's about allowing employees the space to offer up their points of view, allowing a polyphony of viewpoints to exist, and providing the guidance by which to establish the best approach to resolve the concern while valuing all points of view. One of the companies, in fact, called their voice programs "listening programs." A top executive at this company emphasized the importance of listening to employees by asking open-ended questions and by simply keeping quiet.

"You cannot understand someone without listening. The first role of management is trying to understand how they think. And you don't do that by talking, can only do that

by listening to them. Listening to what their concerns are.

Sometimes, it's not the concern itself that is of importance, but it's the fact that they are even thinking this way that is important."

By listening to employees you uncover what is not being said. By appreciating many points of view you break down the management/worker dichotomy. By blurring the lines between management and employee there is less distinction between who is responsible for what; employees are more empowered to make decisions that benefit the organization. "Anything that can stimulate this feeling of ownership is very, very important. So this whole listening to employees and letting them make decisions at every level is critical to the success of the company," explained one respondent. Another described how they train employees to appreciate multiple viewpoints and how it affects morale,

We teach people about advocacy and inquiry, how to deal with conflict. A lot of it is listening, showing respect for somebody else's point of view. And for helping employees work through their ideas, and to have their ideas listened to and respected. Put [it] in a position where it's *an* idea, but not *the* idea. Managers who have a little greater perspective may have heard five great ideas that morning. They're all great ideas. You just can't do everything. Invariably you're going to prioritize and pick one idea for everybody to group around to go get that stuff done. But the four people whose idea weren't chosen will feel bent out of shape and unless

they're dealt with appropriately and they get to see the big picture, they can feel their ideas were dismissed. So managers are taught to give people the airtime they need, to listen to them, to explain the big picture, to advocate between different ideas.

At this same company, the communications team took a creative approach to addressing a specific instance of strong employee voice. During the 2001 recession employees were being asked to cut back on costs. During this difficult period, which was affecting morale, the communications team decided it was important to promote the organizational values to guide the organization through the tough times, and designed, printed and distributed full-color "values" posters. Some employees saw this as a wasteful expense considering the belt tightening they had been asked to do, and voiced their disagreement loudly. In response, instead of simply hammering home their rationale for printing the posters, the communications team took the disagreement to the public square. They posted a page on the company's intranet with the pros and cons of both sides of the argument and let employees form their own opinion about the value of the "values" posters.

Lastly, There are also ethical implications to this study. While management listens to employees and takes their needs into account, the ultimate decision-making rests in their hands. Organizational leaders decide how to balance the needs of the employees with the organizational needs; the power ultimately rests with them. Hence, it takes someone with great integrity and a high sense of ethical standards to, first, realize the need to balance individual and organizational needs, and, second, to do it

appropriately. It takes a big person to be willing to accept criticism without reacting defensively, as one executive explained,

The big thing you have to do is overcome your ego.
Believe me when someone tells me something negative, my
first reaction is, “Ok, calm down. This is your ego
talking.” But here is an opportunity to improve and
understand what’s going on. You have to have certain
acceptance that you make mistakes also.

Considering the great responsibility management has to balance the needs of the organization and the needs of its employees, organizational leaders need to have a great sense of integrity and a “generosity of spirit” to create a trusting environment where employees have confidence that management does in fact take their interests into account.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First, the group of companies studied here is a unique grouping that do not represent the mainstream American workplace. Hence, the results provide but a snapshot of a small group of companies who exemplify what it is to be a great place to work. Additionally, these companies are also within the high-tech industry, which involves highly-skilled work, higher-than-average pay and better benefits than most manufacturing or service companies. The results are not generalizeable to organizations on a whole. Hence, what appeared to work well for these organizations, may not work as well or at all in companies in different industries or with a different

dynamic. Finally, this study only approached the investigation from management's point-of-view, since we were investigating organizational response to voice. Since I did not interview employees from these organizations we could not validate management's perceptions on employee's use of the voice mechanisms. Neither could we gauge the effectiveness of management's approach to encouraging voice. Although management might believe that they are achieving favorable results, only employees would be able to tell us whether this was accurate.

Future areas of research

Considering the study's limitations, there are plentiful opportunities for further research. First, it would be valuable to query employees on their impressions of management's response to voice at these exemplary companies. While employees have rated these companies highly through the Great Places to Work Trust Index[®], an investigation from a communication perspective would add to the current body of knowledge. Additionally, we could compare the results from this study to other subsets of companies such as Silicon Valley companies that are not on the Great Places to Work list, non-high-tech companies that are on the list, or even non-high-tech companies that are not on the list. By continuing our inductive analysis using constant comparison, the categories that emerge from subsequent study of other sets of companies can broaden our understanding of the phenomena to a point where the findings do reflect a larger scope of organizations. Secondly, the field would benefit from an in-depth analysis of the on-site, day-care facility and work-life balance examples described by the research participants. As obvious examples of employee criticism, we could learn more about organizational

response to voice through an in-depth analysis of the way these companies handled and are continuing to handle those two employee requests that show disagreement with management decisions. An investigation into these two areas of organizational response to employee criticism would further contribute to our knowledge of participatory democracy in the workplace and the tensions that arise from being employee-friendly. A third area of future study would be to take the findings from this study even further, and investigate more deeply how and why management balances individual and organizational needs, perhaps even taking a critical perspective. As management balances the needs of employees with the needs of the organization, to what extent are they privileging the organization and co-opting its employees? What forces lie within management's best intentions to create a humane workplace that continue to subjugate workers? How employee-friendly are these organizations? The critical organizational communication perspective would benefit from an investigation into the extent to which these organizations tolerate criticism. Finally, management would benefit from a reexamination of the questions posed here from an ethics perspective. How much does ethics and integrity play into the phenomenon? What are the ethical implications of leading an employee-friendly organization? To what extent are leaders responsible for supporting a culture that encourages employee participation and criticism? These are but a few of the questions that arise for future study, since this study has only begun to scratch the surface of organizational response to voice.

Summary

In this study, I have proposed one possible description of employee voice in Silicon Valley's most employee-friendly companies. By sanctioning a multitude of voice mechanisms and supporting a culture where voice can thrive, management at these companies appears to strongly encourage employee voice in an effort to increase employee motivation and improve organizational performance. It became clear, through the interviews, that management views their employees as important co-contributors in the success of the firm. In responding to employee concerns, management however tries to balance employees needs with the needs of other stakeholders and ultimately against the "bottom line."

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for this interview. I'm studying employee voice in Silicon Valley's most employee friendly companies. As one of *Fortune's* "100 Best Places to Work," your company has a corporate culture that supports open communication, collaboration, fair and equitable treatment of employees, respect and trust. Companies that espouse these characteristics are, usually, also receptive and even appreciative of employees who voice their opinions when they have a concern with or complaint about something that is happening in the organization. Hence, I would like to find out about the policies, programs or forums your organization has set up to allow for employee voice and the reasons behind their implementation. In this study, I'm investigating employee voice from two levels. At the macro level, I would like to understand organizational response to employees who voice their dissatisfaction. And at the micro level, I would like to become familiar with the kinds of practices that are available to employees through which they can voice their concerns.

I want you to understand that while I have specifically named the companies I am including in my sample, I will be aggregating all the data from these interviews and not identifying any companies specifically in the results. Any quotes that I include will be completely anonymous. And, finally, I want you to know that this interview is completely voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable at any time during this interview, just let me know and we can stop immediately.

Questions

Grand-tour question

If an employee disagrees with something going on in your company (e.g., company policy, procedure, behavior, other employee(s), their supervisor), how would that person go about voicing their opinion?

Programs and how they work

What policies, programs or forums does your company provide for employees to voice their concerns or complaints? For example:

- suggestion boxes
- employee-management meetings
- non-management task forces
- employee-attitude surveys
- ethics appeal board
- "hot-line"
- open door policy
- 360° or skip-level performance appraisals
- designated employee advocate or ombudsman
- grievance procedures
- corporate town hall meetings
- corporate intranets
- special interest email list-serves

- newsletter (print or email) contributions
- that includes employee - grievance procedure

Effectiveness

What factors make these practices effective or ineffective?

Encouraging voice

What kinds of issues are these programs designed to handle?

Response to voice

What happens after the employee has voiced a complaint or concern?

Rationale 1

What is management's rationale for sanctioning these programs?

Rationale 2

What is the reaction of other managers in the organization as you implement the policy, program or forum throughout the organization?

Closing

Well, that's it. Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will be compiling these responses and would like to share the preliminary results with you as a way to gauge their accuracy. Would that be ok? Also, how should I contact you if there are any follow-up questions or I need clarification on something you said today? Thank you again for your time.