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Strategic or silencing? Line managers' re-purposing of employee voice mechanisms for high performance

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how the pressure to deliver high performance influences line managers in their shaping and re-purposing of employee voice mechanisms to encourage improvement-oriented voice in organisations. Using qualitative data (50 semi-structured interviews) from two case studies including a manufacturing organisation and a university, we find line managers were proactive in the (re)shaping and repurposing of employee voice mechanisms in response to the high-performance strategy. Where there was less HR support given to line managers, we found line managers were more inclined to create their own voice mechanisms. However, we observed that a focus on improvement-oriented voice associated with employer interests diverted employee-interest voice away from collective and formal channels, into more informal channels. We indicate the dangers of prioritising an employer-interest, improvement-oriented voice approach.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a focus on designing voice mechanisms as a means to establish and sustain competitive advantage (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Holland, 2020). Organisations' top management and its human resource (HR) department have given increasing attention to designing voice mechanisms and channels that enable employees to have a say and to influence organisational affairs (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020 a,b). These voice mechanisms are seen as a response to increased competition, with many organisations developing individualised employee voice mechanisms (Dundon and Gollan, 2007) in order to build employee commitment and contribute to performance (Harley, 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge that employee voice is not merely concerned with the provision of opportunities to encourage suggestions and ideas that will benefit the organisation. Voice can also play a significant role in relation to employees having a say regarding employee interests. This dual purpose of employee voice can create tensions as actors emphasise one or the other of these aspects. In this paper, we seek to understand how a high-performance strategy may influence the design of the voice architecture and the prioritisation of voice concerned with employer versus employee interests. We also examine how the high-performance strategy and support for the HR function influences the role of line managers (LMs) in creating and shaping employee voice.

Central to any employee voice arrangements are the managers throughout various hierarchical levels of the organisation, who design and implement those voice mechanisms. While top management and its HR department are often credited as the creators of the employee voice systems (Marchington, 2007), middle and frontline managers also play a significant role in the management of employee voice (Townsend and Mowbray, 2020).

Extant research suggests that LMs play a crucial role as a linking pin (Wall and Wood, 2005; Wright and Kehoe, 2008) to escalate voice up and down the hierarchy, and in implementing voice mechanisms (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998, 2001). However, the wider HR literature indicates that LMs may not implement HR practices as they are intended (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Thornhill and Saunders, 1998; Townsend *et al.*, 2012; Trullen *et al.*, 2020) and they may act as a champion for those mechanisms or contribute to their demise (Marchington *et al.*, 1993). Ramsay's (1977; 1983) cycles of control thesis and Marchington et al. and colleagues (Ackers *et al.* 1992; Marchington *et al.*, 1993) waves' thesis argue specific mechanisms may fall in and out of favour according to macro or micro influences. It is also argued mechanisms may be refashioned by managers through agenda setting (Donaghey *et al.*, 2011) and the trivialising of matters (Butler, 2009).

In this paper, we build on these ideas to examine how strategic influences and the extent to which LMs receive support to manage the HR function will influence the creation and shaping of employee voice mechanisms. Firstly, we contribute to the voice literature by showing a high-performance strategy creates tensions for LMs in their management of employee voice mechanisms, thus causing them to create or reshape voice mechanisms to encourage improvement-oriented voice, reflective of a market participation scenario (Ackers *et al.*, 1992). This form of voice can be defined as constructive ideas, suggestions, concerns and opinions with the intent to bring about improvement or change (Morrison, 2011, 2014). We show that when LMs are faced with demands to build high performing units, this creates tensions within the voice architecture, such that employer-interest improvement-oriented voice may be prioritised over employee-interest voice. Our research shows, as a consequence, voice that is challenging (Burris, 2012) or content related to employee interests, are often shunted down informal avenues or silenced, thus falling outside of the formal voice system. An examination of various voice forms is important, as disciplinary silos has led to narrowly

focused studies that usually focus on one form of voice, such as pro-social improvement-oriented voice by the OB scholars (Morrison, 2011; 2014) or collective voice to redress grievance by ER scholars (Freeman and Medoff, 1984).

The second main contribution of this paper is to show that LMs are not only strategic translators (Spyridonidis and Currie, 2016) of the voice system created by the organisation and its HR department. Rather, they can also be creators of additional voice mechanisms. Our paper shows that without strong HR support, LMs are more likely to actively reshape and create new mechanisms to meet their high-performance goals. Hence, we contribute to the HR implementation literature to show that LMs have greater agency and are not merely implementors of a system designed by the HR function (López-Cotarelo, 2018).

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the literature on voice mechanisms and their purpose and the debates concerning how they are modified over time. We then discuss LM's involvement in voice implementation and creation. Next, we discuss our research methodology, including a description of our two case study organisations (a manufacturing company and university), data collection and analysis. We then present our findings and provide a discussion outlining our contribution. We also identify a future research agenda and practical implications.

Voice Mechanisms and Purpose

In recent years, we have seen some organisations implementing a suite of HR practices, commonly known as a high performance work system (HPWS), that together are seen as being able to help improve employees' ability, motivation and opportunities to perform (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000; Ramsay, Scholarios and Harley, 2000). An integral component of HPWS is employee voice, which provides employees with the opportunity to be involved in decision-making that will contribute to organisational performance (Boxall and Purcell, 2016). For example, voice mechanisms such as problem-solving groups and improvement

teams, encourage employees to contribute to an organisation's strategic imperative to develop

a high-performance organisation (Harley, 2020; Salge and Vera, 2013). Voice in this context

tends to be improvement-oriented voice, a pro-social type of voice that is seen as bringing

about improvement and change for the organisation, and not about merely venting or

complaining (Morrison, 2011). However, as Barry and Wilkinson (2016) argue,

dissatisfaction is at the heart of the ER literature on voice and hence voice that challenges

management or which provides employees with self-determination is also important. Cunha *et

al.* (2018) also point out the paradox that providing employees with a mechanism to voice on

improvements may indicate to employees they can challenge management. Dundon *et al.'s*

(2004) examination of eighteen organisations in the United Kingdom, ascertained that there

were two motives for establishing voice systems: to eliminate employee dissatisfaction; and

to capture suggestions in order to improve business performance.

With these two main purposes in mind, employee voice mechanisms can be designed

to capture *indirect* or *direct* voice. Indirect voice involves collective employee representation

through trade unions or consultative committees. Direct voice refers to mechanisms that allow

for individual employee input and can be broadly categorised as: task-based participation,

upward problem solving, and complaints about fair treatment (Marchington, 2007). It is

important to note voice can also be managed informally, with informal voice defined as 'ideas

or concerns…expressed directly and outside a structured process' (Klaas*, et al.*, 2012, p. 324)

through the 'ad hoc or non-programmed interactions between management and their staff'

(Marchington and Suter 2013, p. 286). The management of informal voice is usually at the

discretion of managers and is the focus of OB studies (Morrison, 2011) but has tended to be

neglected in ER studies (Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse, 2015).

Motivation to Create Voice Mechanisms

Adopting a macro perspective, Ramsay's (1977) 'cycles of control' posits that during strong economic growth, when there are ample job opportunities, there will be greater pressure on organisations to provide participation through the provision of voice channels. A later framework by Marchington (2007) considered a wider group of forces that could either promote or discourage voice, including societal, organisational and workplace factors. Therefore, the design of voice mechanisms and their implementation and maintenance is not static and can vary not only due to external and organisational level forces, but also at the workplace level.

Providing an alternative to Ramsay (1997), Ackers *et al.* (1992) suggested other motivations to introduce employee involvement initiatives. Amongst these scenarios that are particularly relevant here, is the union by-passing model, whereby direct mechanisms are created to shift voice away from union channels. The market participation scenario is also pertinent, whereby organisations are driven by product market pressures to develop initiatives such as total quality management, to focus on the improvement of quality and performance. The waves theory (Marchington *et al.*, 1993) also highlights how middle management and supervisors are motivated to champion employee involvement schemes as a means to create a good impression and increase their own prospects of promotion. Hence, there are a number of competing factors that may motivate actors to create or dissolve voice mechanisms.

Line Managers as Creators of Voice Mechanisms

Middle and frontline managers (referred to collectively as LMs in our paper) are increasingly being tasked with responsibility to implement voice mechanisms and there is much discussion regarding the unsuccessful devolution of this HR role to the line. A common theme throughout the literature is that LMs may not implement voice schemes as the designers intended (Renwick, 2003; Bos-Nehles, Bondarouk and Labrenz, 2017) and senior managers often blame LMs for not implementing voice mechanisms effectively (Fenton-O'Creevy,

1998; Wilkinson *et al.* 2013). LMs have often been portrayed as reluctant to undertake the HR role (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1993) due to competing interests between the LM and the HR department or employees (Gilbert *et al.*, 2015) or because they are constrained by a lack of training or incentives to implement HR practices (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001).

This portrayal infers a rather negative view that LMs are either inept or constrained in implementing voice mechanisms. However, such a perspective neglects the agency and managerial discretion that LMs may have in undertaking their own initiatives in the pursuit of organisational objectives (López-Cotarelo, 2018). Balogun's (2003) and Spyridonidis and Currie's (2016) portrayals of middle managers as intermediaries of change and interpreters of strategy supports this contention that LMs may indeed be proactive players in translating organisational goals. Therefore, in this study, we look more closely at the role of the LM as a significant actor in the creation and shaping of voice mechanisms.

The assumption within the employee voice and HRM literature is that top management and the HR department are responsible for designing and creating voice mechanisms and other HR practices, while LMs are tasked with implementing them at unit level. Therefore, much of the literature focuses on the LM's implementation of voice, rather than the active creation of employee voice mechanisms (Townsend and Mowbray, 2020). This assumption that the voice system is one designed at the top is reflected in employee voice mechanisms typically being examined using an embeddedness model i.e. breadth and depth (Cox, Marchington and Suter, 2009) and has been reinforced by the common approach of primarily using top management or HR informants to elicit our understanding of the voice system (Marchington, 2015). Recent conceptual models of HR implementation also perpetuate this view. For example, van Mierlo *et al.* (2018) highlight the need to consider how various organisational actors, including LMs, "shape" the HR practices through their own interpretive schemes, however their framework explicitly incorporates the perspective

that HR professional and top managers lead the first two stages (ideation and design) of HRM implementation.

In instances where we do see managers modifying voice mechanisms (see for example, Kougiannou, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2019) these are senior managers, not LMs. We do see some exceptions in the operational management literature regarding the initiation of suggestion schemes, for example, where an operational manager such as a project engineer, may be responsible for their creation (Rapp and Eklund, 2002). Yet, in other examples (see Smith's (2018) study of a suggestion scheme in a call centre), we see LMs once again illustrated as the drivers of a scheme designed by senior management. Therefore, understanding why LMs may create these initiatives, rather than senior management or the HR department, needs to be better understood.

We propose the extent to which LMs are provided with HR functional support and the formal HR practices and voice mechanisms to implement, will influence the extent to which LMs independently create voice mechanisms. Some organisations have their HR departments adopt a strategic or business partnership role to meet the joint imperative of successful HR devolution to the line and alignment of units with business strategy. (Keegan and Francis, 2010; Gollan, Kalfa and Xu, 2015; Trullen et al., 2016). In such cases, the HR department is closely aligned with executive functions, while at the same time HR partners may be embedded within business units and assist LMs in their implementation of HR practices and their people management (Op de Beeck, Wynen and Hondeghem, 2016). Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk and Kees Loooise (2013) suggest HR support is necessary to improve LM's HRM implementation. However, not all organisations adopt this HR business partner approach, or necessarily do so successfully. Farndale and Hope-Hailey (2009) argue that due to academics' high levels of discretion and self-determination, the power of the HR department within higher education institutions is diluted, operating as a highly centralised bureaucracy and

administrative expert, rather than strategic partner (Ulrich, 1997). Consequently, they propose that rather than the HR department driving HR, individual departments and schools have greater power and LMs within these units are able to take on a functional HR role.

When the HR department plays a supportive role of LMs in their implementation of voice mechanisms, this then raises the question of whether this will encourage or limit LM's need to be involved in the creation or reshaping of voice mechanisms. The role of LMs in creating formal voice mechanisms is underplayed in the literature and there is the need to further consider how various actors shape the voice system, along with an understanding of the implications this has on different voice forms. In the following section, we present our case studies to explore these themes. Overall, our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways does a high-performance strategy influence LMs in their shaping of voice mechanisms?
2. To what extent does the HR role influence LM involvement in voice reshaping and creation of voice mechanisms?

Research Methods

Case study attributes

We conducted an inductive qualitative, multiple case study, appropriate when the research problem requires rich, detailed data to generate new ideas to explain the phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Our cases included two Australian-based organisations from within different sectors i.e. manufacturing (DairyBevCo) and higher education (HigherEd). A comparison of two diverse organisations enabled us to more effectively explore our research questions. In particular, there were differences in HR philosophy and the role of the HR department, enabling us to examine this as an "object" (Thomas, 2011) of our study and to

consider how this would impact the design of voice mechanisms and the role LMs would play in the management of voice mechanisms. The cases also had similarities, including both being large organisations with multiple sites/departments, having an espoused strategic intent to create a high-performance organisation and both being unionized. This provides some "essential features" that are shared between them, which can justify empirical generalisation (Tsang, 2014) to organisations of similar size and with similar strategies and formal voice systems. An embedded case study design (Yin, 2003) was used, with the inclusion of two distinctly different units from within these two organisations. This "nesting" (Thomas, 2011) enabled within and between case comparisons. Our subcases include two outliers from DairyBevCo: *DairyCo* (recently acquired and experiencing cultural challenges) and *BeerCo* (considered a "star performer") and two subcases at HigherEd representing different employee types: *Admin* (general staff) and *Academic* (faculty staff). Refer to the online Appendix for additional information on the cases.

Data collection

A triangulation of data collection methods was used to minimise reliance on a single approach (Bryman and Bell, 2003). This included on-site semi-structured interviews, observation of the general day-to-day activities of employees and LMs at the case study organisations, along with publicly accessible and confidential documents provided by the HR department or LMs.

Interviews lasted on average, one hour, and were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants included senior managers from each HR department, LMs from each sub-case, and several employees who were considered "experts", such as representatives on committees or union representatives. A non-probability, non-random purposive sampling approach was utilised to select employees who fit these parameters. In total, 50 participants were interviewed across the cases, which is credible for our study type (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Key characteristics of the organisations and participants are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Case Organisation and Interview Details

Organisation	Employees (approx.)	Participants	No
DairyBevCo	7000	Senior HR Manager	1
DairyCo	250	HR Partner	1
		Line Manager	4
		Expert	1
BeerCo	220	HR Partner	2
		Line Manager	13
		Expert	2
		Subtotal:	*24*
HigherEd	4000	Senior HR Manager	2
Admin	250	Line Manager	12
		Expert	1
Academic	550	Line Manager	9
		Expert	2
		Subtotal:	*26*
		Total participants:	**50**

Analysis

The formal interviews are the primary data analysed for this study, while additional sources provided background information on the organisations' strategies and detailed information on HR practices or voice mechanisms. A qualitative data analysis package, NVivo (QSR International, Victoria, Australia) was used to code and analyse the transcribed interview data into themes, ideas and concepts. An open coding approach was used, utilising a 'start list' (Miles and Huberman, 1984) generated from employee voice literature reviews associated with employee voice behaviour (Morrison, 2011, 2014), such as "improvement-oriented voice", and voice articles detailing voice mechanisms, such as "informal voice" (Marchington and Suter, 2013), and "suggestion scheme" (Dundon *et al.*, 2004). An inductive grounded (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach was also utilised, which enabled us to identity new themes that were not evident in the extant literature, such as "practice created by LM". During

the axial coding process, these themes (referred to as child nodes in NVivo) were aggregated to parent nodes.

Six final themes were identified in relation to our research questions, including HR role, reshaping voice mechanisms for employer OR employee interests, shifting indirect voice into direct channels, avoiding grievance voice, and LM as creator, which we explore within our findings.

Findings

Both our cases had in place numerous formal direct and indirect voice mechanisms, such as roadshows and online suggestion schemes (DairyBevCo) and reviews and forums (HigherEd) designed for voice targeted at the organisational level, as well as formal mechanisms designed at the site level (See Tables 2-5). Given our focus is on the reshaping and creation of voice mechanisms within each of our subcases, we focus our discussion on voice mechanisms directly associated with our LMs and these cases.

Table 2 Formal DairyBevCo Employee Voice Mechanisms and HR Practices

Form	Intended Range (Content)
Formal Reviews • Achievement • Bonus • Development • One-on-ones	Employer/Employee: • Personal development to improve performance • Remuneration • Employee personal and wellbeing issues
Lean manufacturing program • Daily meetings • Focussed improvement teams • Team meetings • Gemba walks	Employer: • Operational issues • Operational/process improvements • Safety issues
Engagement surveys	Employer/Employee: • Staff attitudes and engagement
Roadshows and Forums	Employer: • Downward information • Strategic information
Website suggestion box	Employer: • Suggestions

Open door	Employer/Employee: • Operational issues • Improvements • Employee issues
Leadership model • Values • Behaviour • Engagement	Employer/Employee: • Initiatives to improve manager and employee behaviour • Initiatives to improve employee engagement

Table 3 Formal HigherEd Employee Voice Mechanisms and HR Practices

Form	Intended Range (Content)
Council	Employer: • HigherEd policies and strategy
Consultative committee	Employee: • Issues including work load, semester structures
Health and safety committee	Employer/Employee: • Organisational health and safety issues
Various committees under Council • Financial • Academic	Employer: • Operational issues
School committee	Employer: • Operational issues
Campus advisory groups	Employee: • Local campus issues e.g. parking, air conditioning
Forums	Employer/Employee: • Organisational change
Reviews	Employer: • Scheduled reviews of groups, schools etc.
Performance management system • Annual review	Employer/Employee: • Personal development to improve performance • Personal work-related issues
Grievance procedures	Employee: • Complaints about fair treatment

Table 4 Formal Site Level DairyBevCo Employee Voice Mechanisms and HR Practices

Form	Intended Range (Content)

Consultative committee (DairyCo only)	Employer: • Operational issues • Strategic site issues
Health & safety committee	Employer/Employee: • Health and safety issues • Wellbeing
Other committees • Roster • Social (DairyCo only)	Employer/Employee: • Changes to roster • Engagement, social occasions • "tea and toilet rolls" issues
Site forums	Employer/Employee: • Issues concerning organisational changes e.g. redundancies • Enterprise bargaining discussions
Off-site days (BeerCo only)	Employer/Employee: • Issues associated with improving the site • Initiatives to improve employee engagement
Planning sessions (BeerCo only)	Employer: • Site strategy
Grievance procedure	Employee: • Complaints about fair treatment

Table 5 Formal School/Unit Level HigherEd Employee Voice Mechanisms and HR Practices

Form	Intended Range (Content)
Committees	Employer: • Operational and strategic issues regarding Schools e.g. learning, teaching, research
Staff meetings	Employer: • Operational issues regarding unit/school or team
Retreats	Employer/Employee: • Issues related to school or unit e.g. course structure • Employee issues such as work load
Engagement surveys	Employer/Employee: • Staff attitudes and engagement

HR role and support of LMs

DairyBevCo. At DairyBevCo, the HR department was seen as strategic and partnered (Trullen *et al.*, 2016) with LMs at the individual sites. The HR Department were involved in the "strengthening" corporate culture initiative (see Willmott, 1993) to promote high performance, and they saw their leaders at all levels to be paramount to this success:

> We use and rely on our leaders to build our culture and to engage our people. It's absolutely not seen as an HR responsibility. (DairyBevCo HR1)

The HR department built the capability of site leaders to shape the culture and to undertake people management through extensive training, based on developing skills conducive to the prescribed DairyBevCo leadership model. Taking on a business partner role (Wright, 2008), the HR Department supported its LMs in the implementation of HR practices and ensured these were aligned with DairyBevCo's strategic goals for achievement and high performance.

The HR department embedded voice expectations within the HR practices, such as performance management reviews which included stipulated monthly one-on-one meetings where employees were expected to voice on improvements. Here, a BeerCo LM discusses how these face-to-face meetings between the employee and their LM was used to align the individual's voice with the organisation's goals, so they would be better placed to raise improvement-related issues and concerns:

> So the aim in doing that is to get really clear line of sight for an individual so they know in their role how they are contributing to, not only just the running of the business day to day but also the improvement in terms of improving the business. (BeerCo7)

The lean manufacturing processes provided a framework for managing voice with a focus on continuous improvement. This included in-built voice mechanisms such as problem-solving groups, formalised shift and team meetings and a hierarchical tier structure that

provided for the systematic escalation and management of employee voice. There was the expectation these mechanisms would generate improvement-oriented voice, accompanied by solutions, and not just comments:

> We might come up with two or three suggestions … this is the problem; these are the potential solutions. … It's about trying to send the solution up. (BeerCo17)

Thus, we can see the strategic HR partner role contributed to the design of HR practices and voice mechanisms at the site level, such that LMs were given a number of HR practices and voice mechanisms to implement that would encourage improvement-oriented voice.

HigherEd. In contrast, the HigherEd HR department followed a more centralised and functional approach to HRM, where the purpose of the HR department was primarily seen to manage risk:

> The very nature of the employment relationship is fraught with extraordinary risk and it's a very expensive risk. Fundamentally, bottom line, your HR department actually sits at the edge of managing that risk. … I'll bet my bottom dollar the CEOs would say, "I could have lived without that [culture building] but I have to have that [risk management]". (HigherEd HR1)

There was limited HR support provided to LMs beyond routine, administrative matters. Consequently, at HigherEd, we found responsibility for encouraging performance and voice, beyond the indirect committee mechanisms situated at the organisational level, was devolved to LMs. There was evidence of this new emphasis within Admin, whereby HigherEd had negotiated with the union to include in the general staff enterprise bargaining agreement, a stipulation that managers were responsible for maximising performance within their units. However, there was a lack of available HR practices to assist LMs to do so.

Managers at HigherEd were expected to be "visionary" and drive the performance of their employees (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), however unlike DairyBevCo, there were no prescribed leadership models to do so. Consequently, there was no "HigherEd way" and thus no corporate culture agenda as at DairyBevCo. Rather, LMs were encouraged to create high performing units (in ways they thought appropriate) to meet the KPIs stipulated by the organisation, leading to LMs taking on a greater HR functional role. Here, the HigherEd HR(1) manager discusses the devolvement of the cultural engineering role (Alvesson, 2002; Kunda, 1992) to LMs:

> The idea that HR is some warrior of a culture, is someone kidding me? Get back to your knitting. What HR can do is like wreck a culture. … The line manager sets culture and people set culture, they get set through the line.

Therefore, while both organisations recognised their leaders as integral to the high-performance culture, the HigherEd LMs did not receive the same level of HR support as at DairyBevCo. At HigherEd, we saw the shift from the collegial, self-determination approach to a more managerial model meant that the HR department, acting as an agent of top management (but not as a partner to LMs), was able to push the agenda of improvement-oriented voice and the articulation of dissatisfaction down to the LMs and away from top management. For example, staff engagement surveys had been redesigned to remove an omnibus whole of organisation survey that originally may have captured employee dissatisfaction about top management. In its place was a directive that each faculty/group design and administer its own engagement survey with the localised results fed up to the corporate level.

The actions undertaken by both HR Departments and at the organisational level sent clear messages to employees about the type of voice that was expected. In particular, improvement-oriented voice was encouraged at DairyBevCo, while dissatisfaction and

grievances were discouraged at HigherEd (toward the executive level, at least), with a preference for voice associated with employer, rather than employee concerns.

LMs' involvement in shaping voice

We now turn our attention to how LMs in each of our cases reshaped those voice mechanisms entrusted to them to implement. We also identify instances where LMs created their own mechanisms to deal with their unit level issues.

Reshaping voice mechanisms for employer interests

At DairyBevCo, indirect and representative voice mechanisms such as consultative committees were site specific, with site managers responsible for managing these. BeerCo had reshaped many of its indirect voice mechanisms, including the mandated health and safety committee, with LMs reducing what they saw as complaining. Instead, they encouraged the employees to partake in improvement-oriented voice and the creation of associated solutions. Here, the manager responsible for running those meetings discusses changes made:

> For a long time, our safety committee, to go to those safety committees, it was just an hour of a half of complaint, complaint, complaint and slowly over time with the new format of the safety committee, setting some ground rules, … being more specific about what was going to be discussed and people taking on actions … So if someone brings up an idea, then "Okay, what can you do about making that happen?" (BeerCo16)

At DairyCo, which at the time of data collection was undergoing a cultural change process, we found the new LMs were attempting to reshape these existing voice mechanisms in order to encourage improvement-oriented voice; thus making the voice agenda more employer-focused. For example, LMs were frustrated that union delegates on the consultative

committee were raising issues associated with employee interests and dissatisfaction and were educating the employees to use this mechanism to voice on site issues:

> There was a union delegate that would just put everything to union issues … we've got this Consultative Committee meeting where we're supposed to be representatives of the floor talking about things that affect the whole site, site-wide issues. (DairyCo2)

At HigherEd, we found committees had been reshaped by LMs to ensure issues raised would be in greater alignment with the interests of managers. In this example, the Chairperson of a school committee ensured their employees spoke to them beforehand in "corridor chats" before raising issues in the formal meeting. In this regard, LMs were able to limit dissenting voices within group settings that could be considered as challenging management or have the potential to garner the support of peers:

> The Chairs work very hard to garnish unanimous, certainly majority, support for decisions … So we do a lot of work, a lot of work with staff to get them to shape their ideas before they come to committee. (Academic9)

A similar scenario was seen in Admin. Several LMs discussed how they felt they had to discourage individuals from using team meetings to engender support for individual employee interest issues, thus ensuring the meetings were reserved for collective, pro-social voice:

> If I hear anyone bringing things up that they are not happy about what's happened so they can get the others on board, I usually try to say to them, "Oh, that's not for this forum. Come and talk to me on your own," because it's an individual thing, unless the whole team goes, "Yeah, yeah." (Admin5)

Reshaping direct mechanisms for employee-interest voice

At BeerCo, where the lean manufacturing and HR practices were well entrenched, we found considerable evidence of LMs using existing mechanisms to encourage employee-interest

voice that had not initially been designed for that purpose. For example, in daily tier meetings where morale was listed as an issue to discuss each day, and in the daily gemba walks on the floor, which were traditionally designed to look at safety issues and encourage more informal dialogue:

> So the theory is problem solving never gets resolved in a room. So you need to go out and look at the facts and talk to people and get an example of what's actually happening… Then they talk about the issue and then that leads to "Oh, this is the problem. This is the problem as well." So it opens up discussions on any issues they have. You know, sometimes it can be their personal issues as well. (BeerCo14)

At HigherEd, where there was a lack of formally prescribed voice mechanisms, we found LMs using more informal methods to manage individual employee interests, such as an open door or creation of social opportunities. This Academic LM spoke about using lunches to encourage collegiality and likelihood of employees raising employee interests:

> I do, as a manager, encourage staff to be present on campus so that they can interact, and if they like, can be able to offer opportunities of collegial work together. That sometimes does involve raising concerns or getting some collectivity about issues, worries, components, etcetera. … We have communal lunch a couple of times a week. (Academic8)

Shifting indirect employee-interest voice into direct channels

At BeerCo, we found managements' relationship with the union and employees had changed considerably since the introduction of the DairyBevCo leadership model and lean manufacturing processes:

> I mean four, five years ago, the guys are out on the grass, placards, that sort of crap. So we're not - in the scheme of things, not long past that, and we've had a very significant turnaround. (BeerCo2)

There was the sense that, generally, the union representatives were now more closely aligned with management strategy and interests, and there was evidence of management at the site trying to minimise union voice:

> We are in a transition phase between a very old way and a much more contemporary, you know, one way of doing things … Part of the journey is bringing people away from the yank of having to be represented if I have a voice. (BeerCo2)

Some mechanisms previously associated with the union, such as the consultative committee, had been removed and replaced with a focused improvement team mechanism as part of lean manufacturing practices. Thus, voice issues normally raised using a consultative committee were now directed into managerial controlled mechanisms where the focus was employer-interest, improvement-oriented voice.

Another consequence of removing the consultative committee was that employee issues normally raised using such a mechanism sometimes found an informal route. One example was where several employees had informally approached several LMs regarding the changing of the roster and they subsequently agreed to temporarily remove the night time shift over the winter months. There was the assumption by the LMs that the few informal conversations they had with some employees were representative of all employees. However, several union delegates complained the union had not been consulted. Thus, the voices of other employees throughout BeerCo had potentially been silenced due to the avoidance of the formal voice mechanism and encouragement of the informal channel to deal with this employee-interest voice:

> I just thought because we've got such a great relationship they wouldn't get their noses out of joint. It would be just it's all for the greater good and it's all about well-being. And a few of them kicked back a bit and said, "No, we haven't been consulted." (BeerCo1)

Avoiding grievances

While our findings show LM's encouragement of employee-interest voice through more informal routes, we also found LMs at HigherEd, in particular, were reluctant to hear grievances. Participants felt if there were issues of conflict, the HR department would take the side of senior managers, rather than frontline or middle managers, thus demonstrating the HR department's role of minimising risk to the organisation and its executive leaders. Several participants believed this contributed to a high level of union membership among academic staff and a greater number of employees approaching the union regarding grievances, rather than going through internal managers in the first instance. The implication of this perceived lack of HR support was that LMs were then reluctant to seek feedback from their employees or engage in performance management, for fear of counter claims and the practice actually generating grievance-related voice content, such as charges of bullying:

> [HR] don't try and douse the flame. They just go, "Oh, there's bullying claims pouring in." … And I guess that's why I'm coming back to the culture because that very much then impacts on the culture of staff, encouraging staff feedback and encouraging -- and I'm just thinking back to my days when I was in [unit] where the last thing you would want to do in some of those areas was encourage staff feedback because there's a lot of people that had been there for a long time and there's a lot of baggage and bitterness in some of those little groups. (Admin8)

In contrast, BeerCo participants felt grievances were relatively easy to manage. As the culture had changed at BeerCo, there had been a shift from using the union to manage grievances, to approaching leaders directly and informally:

> So it's a very open conversation. And rather than "Oh, talk to [the union representative]," whereas previously it would have been like that. It would have been

"I'm not going to have a conversation unless [the union representative] is there". (BeerCo2)

At DairyCo, we also found LMs managing grievances informally, but for different reasons. The legacy of the previous management had created trust issues, with employees reluctant to raise issues or formalise complaints. Employees were starting to approach the newer LMs informally, and while open to the informal voice, LMs were keen for employees to follow the grievance process:

My door is always open. I get a lot of guys coming in to the office where they should be going via their team leader … where I'm encouraging them now to go by their team -- I've always said to do that. They should be following the process. But I don't want to shut the door and not be approachable. (DairyCo5)

Line manager as creator of voice mechanisms

At BeerCo, we found LMs mostly reshaped the lean manufacturing practices, such as daily team briefs, to include both employer and employee interests, rather than create additional mechanisms. We did find one instance, however, where a LM had created a weekly feedback session similar to a 360-degree format, where team members rotated and gave feedback to each other. The same LM had also created a weekly online survey to capture anonymous concerns and suggestions. These mechanisms provided the opportunity for peer-to-peer voice (Ohana, 2016) and for employees to voice to their LM:

We made it sort of a bit quirky, these little cartoon people and we put photos of our heads on them. You just move the heads and so you get a different person each week just within our team. (BeerCo9)

At DairyCo, where the site was still in the middle of their cultural change process and where the HR Partner role at the site had intermittently not been filled over various recent times, we found that site managers here were more involved in the creation of mechanisms,

such as a suggestion scheme:

> So the [LMs] are involved in putting that process together and then we'll roll that out to the people on the floor and say, "Look, this is the way you can basically register any ideas you've got for improving the business." It could be improving safety, productivity, quality or reducing cost. (DairyCo3)

It was at HigherEd where we saw LMs play a significant role in the design of voice mechanisms, due to a lack of direction or provision of voice mechanisms from the HR department or top management. Driven by the need to increase unit performance, the LMs at HigherEd instigated the use of additional staff meetings, retreats, one-on-ones and informal interactions and shaped these to encourage improvement-oriented voice. For example, one Admin LM(11) discussed the inclusion of a brainstorming session in each weekly team meeting, to encourage employees to speak up with new ideas:

> We often use this meeting as a brainstorming because we're in an area that's presented often with new concepts or new issues, and that's our chance to go in there and try to see what's the best we can come up with as a team.

An interesting similarity between our two case study organisations was that, even in the absence of organisational practices to encourage high performance at HigherEd, some of the HigherEd LMs interviewed had developed their own models of high involvement practices (Harley, 2014) and corporate culturalism methods (Willmott, 1993) that were similar to those developed by DairyBevCo's HR department. For example, a Head of School had used culture building strategies, such as a developing an articulated vision, values, philosophy and listing desired behaviours, along with associated HR practices, such as selective recruitment, reward and training. The intent was to create a participatory voice climate where employees within the school were encouraged to voice on both employer and employee interests:

It's so part of everything we do … So we have learning and teaching retreats. We adopt an absolutely participatory approach to everything we do. (Academic11)

Hence, we see LMs proactively creating both voice mechanisms and HR practices for their own units, to encourage and support a climate for voice.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate how demands for high performance and the HR role influenced how LMs reshaped voice mechanisms to encourage either employer or employee-interest voice; and the extent to which LMs created additional voice mechanisms.

Ackers *et al.*'s (1992) waves model can help explain the reshaping of voice mechanisms by LMs. At DairyBevCo, and particularly at BeerCo, strong HR support and embedded voice mechanisms and HR practices within the lean manufacturing system were designed to encourage high performance and elicit improvement-oriented voice. However, there was less discretion for the LMs as the HR department was more firmly in control of the design of these mechanisms. Nevertheless, there was evidence of LMs repurposing existing voice mechanisms to generate voice more aligned with the high-performance strategy, which LMs approached using a combination of union by-passing and market participation methods (Ackers *et al.*, 1992). For example, the consultative committee, that had previously been designed more for employee-interests, had been refashioned by the BeerCo LMs into focused-improvement teams. By their very nature, these encouraged employer-focused improvement-oriented voice, reflecting Ackers et al. (1992) market participation scenario, whereby employee voice was utilised to improve quality.

At DairyCo, we found LMs were also trying to use a combined by-passing and market participation model, seen in their reshaping of the agenda of the consultative committee toward improvement-oriented voice, and in doing so, diluting union influence and employee-

interest voice. However, at this site, we found a break-down in the HR business partner model, with DairyCo LMs lacking HR support and fully developed HR practices. Hence, we found DairyCo LMs not necessarily intentionally being given more HR responsibilities; rather, they were neglected by their HR department and had to engage more in HR. This led to the creation of their own idiosyncratic voice mechanisms, such as the suggestion scheme to capture improvement-oriented voice.

LMs at HigherEd had market participation motives to create high performing units, yet with limited HR support, felt they had to create voice mechanisms themselves to respond to the organisation's demands. Unlike the Marchington et al. (1993) study which ascribed impression management motives, the HigherEd LMs purpose was to translate the organisation's strategy (Renwick, 2003; Currie and Procter, 2005) for high performance. The agency of the LMs can also be explained by the HR functional role and power of the HR Department at HigherEd. At the time of this study, the HR department were developing a stronger strategic partner role, albeit their generation of greater power was through their alignment with the executive and protecting the university and executives' risk (i.e. the employees), rather than positioning themselves as a partner alongside the LMs. Hence, while they were partially responsible for encouraging high performance through the establishment of performance management practices, their focus was largely as an administrative expert (Ulrich, 1997) in relation to support given to LMs. Therefore, as Farndale and Hope-Hailey (2009) suggested, this may have led LMs to have greater power with respect to the HR responsibilities, leading to their confidence in creating their own HR practices and voice mechanisms.

The handling of employee-interest voice across the cases provides insights on how the tension to create high performing units and consequent encouragement of employer-interest voice, impacts the mechanisms used for employee-interest voice. Of note, at HigherEd we

saw a reluctance to hear grievance voice, due to a perceived lack of HR support and the HR department positioning itself as a strategic partner to the executive only. The consequence of this was that by limiting the opportunities for employees to express grievances (such as not holding performance appraisals), this also potentially reduced the opportunity to hear improvement-oriented voice that could contribute to high performance.

Our findings at BeerCo illustrate formal and informal mechanisms were re-purposed and employee-interest issues that once would have been raised via a union, were now being raised informally; while informal voice was being encouraged within the formal systems, such as the gemba walks. At HigherEd, we found employee-interest voice was diverted from team meetings into informal channels, while a lack of voice mechanisms encouraged some LMs to create informal opportunities for this form of voice. Critical voice scholars (Nechanska *et al.*, 2019) argue management uses their prerogative to determine the level of influence given to employees and shape the formal agenda. Our study supports these contentions and shows that while LMs were prepared to allow challenging and employee-interest voice within the informal voice channels, this potentially diluted the influence employees may have achieved by using the formal representative mechanism. Moreover, the informal channels had the potential to exclude some employee voices, especially related to employee-interest voice and the types of issues that would ordinarily be raised via a collective or group mechanism.

Our study makes a contribution to the LM HRM practice implementation literature and the employee voice literature. Our findings challenge the notion of LMs being the mere *implementers* of employee voice, or indeed the reluctant managers (Scase and Goffee, 1989) devolved with this responsibility (van Mierlo *et al.*, 2018). In doing so, we show LMs are more than translators of strategy; rather, they not only reshape and re-purpose existing voice mechanisms, but also create new voice mechanisms. We identify the extent to which LMs

will be involved in the creation of voice mechanisms may be dependent upon a combination of the HR role and market strategy. Brewster, Brookes and Gollan (2015) found when the HR department played a more strategic role and partnered with LMs, the HR department continued to maintain control over HR activities and LMs actually had less responsibility for people management. So, in these circumstances, LMs may have less discretion, or need, to design their own idiosyncratic voice mechanisms and HR practices, and instead reshape existing ones, such as at BeerCo. Interestingly, despite a lack of HR support at both HigherEd and DairyCo, we saw that the pressure for high performance led to these LMs adopting a market participation strategy with regard to their shaping of voice. To achieve this, the LMs created new mechanisms and reshaped existing ones, primarily designing their mechanisms to encourage improvement-oriented voice to contribute to performance. Hence, we see that even in the absence of strong HR support, the pressure to deliver high performing units leads LMs to shape the formal voice architecture to prioritise employer-focused improvement-oriented voice.

This leads to our problematization of the notion of using improvement-oriented voice as a means to achieve high performance. Our study demonstrates that employee-interest voice may be minimised or silenced when employer-focused voice is privileged. The consequence of this may be that mutual gains are reduced (Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2016) and the potential performance benefits accrued from the well-being associated with the provision of employee-interest voice, may not be realised (Harley, 2020).

Conclusion

In summary, our findings demonstrate that LMs play a significant role in creating and modifying voice mechanisms and associated HR practices, and thus may be the creators of their own unit-level voice systems. This challenges HRM theories that place LMs as merely an implementer, and instead places them as a pro-active creator and contributor to the design

of a voice system. Our findings also suggest that idiosyncratic practices designed at the unit level may contribute to performance outcomes, even when they are not supported by an HR department with a business partnership role. Here, we cast a new light on the role of LMs in managing employee voice and show that even without HR support, the pressure to deliver performance will encourage LMs to reshape and create voice mechanisms that will primarily encourage improvement-oriented voice within those formal mechanisms. However, we find as a result, that grievances and employee interests were redirected into informal channels, potentially silenced or inadvertently directed to union channels. Given this, we suggest that the strength of the voice system and its ability to contribute to organisational goals may be compromised when LMs neglect to provide a voice mechanism or channel that enables employees to voice on employee-interest matters with some level of influence.

One limitation of this study was we were not able to examine in-depth the differences between middle and frontline managers. Future research could delineate whether there are differences between middle and frontline managers in terms of their creation and shaping of employee voice. Furthermore, with the exception of a few employee experts, our study did not include employees outside of managerial roles, and thus our data is skewed to a managerial perspective of voice. Future research which replicates our study across other organisations would assist in generalising our findings. Inclusion of subordinate employees to provide multiple informants (Bou-Llusar *et al.*, 2016) would also help to extend our findings.

Our findings demonstrate a combination of voice mechanisms and HR practices, such as engagement and training initiatives concerning values and expected behaviours, were designed to shape the organisational culture and subsequent encouragement of improvement-oriented voice. Future research which considers how LMs use or create HR practices to encourage employee voice may elicit novel findings. Examining how voice mechanisms are designed under different organisational strategies or change initiatives may also generate

important findings. Given we identified the tensions between providing mechanisms for employer versus employee-interest voice, further research examining the tensions and paradoxes (see Aust, Bradl & Keegan, 2015; Francis and Keegan, 2020) associated with managing employee voice could be examined. For example, how to manage the tensions between increasing performance and improvement of wellbeing.

Our findings have important practical implications for the design and management of employee voice. We have shown even where LMs are not given voice mechanisms and HR practices to implement, LMs may still encourage voice that will contribute to performance outcomes, by creating their own mechanisms and practices. Thus, the actual voice mechanisms and HR practices will be reflective of the behaviour of individual LMs and their desire to meet their objectives. However, not all LMs will necessarily be proactive in developing their own voice mechanisms and HR practices, so HR departments will have a role in assisting them to align voice mechanisms with the organisation's intended culture and business strategy. Organisations should also consider how they can incorporate a mutual gains perspective of voice into the voice mechanisms and HR practices and assist LMs to encourage both employer and employee-interest voice. A consideration of voice beyond pro-management to a genuinely pro-social agenda may contribute to better outcomes from the voice system.

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