

Why it's Time to Move from Speaking Up to Speaking IN[®]

If you want thriving people working in a safe and thriving organization, you must create the emotional conditions to unlock the power of diverse perspectives. Speaking IN[®] helps you do that.

It was the perfect, sunny, summer day...

I was on my front porch, reading an article on ambiguity, (nerdy, I know) when suddenly, I was struck by a bolt of lightning!

OK, not the real kind, but you know the kind when you realize something BIG...something that fundamentally changes your life, and the way you see and do things?

It happened to me that day.

I realized that our common organizational practice of telling people to “speak up” has multiple foundational flaws!

And this is why it is not working, and never will...

I realized that the flaws of the “speak up” approach actually keep us stuck in the dangerous dynamics of employee silence and disengagement.

Wait a minute! I thought (jaw dropped, eyes open wide).

Have we spent billions of dollars and hours improving and karate-chopping our processes to near perfection, yet forgot this one?

It seems we have...

Have we left a process that is failing people and organizations at a dismal rate unexamined and unchallenged?

It seems we have...

...and at great cost.

I actually had a period of despair when I thought “we will never have safe outcomes if this is our “best” practice.”

But I don't give up, and the stakes are too high, so I thought about it for a while and realized **there is another way!**

Now my mission is to challenge the practice of telling people to “speak up” and offer a completely different approach.

Below, I will reveal the flaws of the “speak up” approach so that you can decide for yourself if this is one of the biggest problems and opportunities facing organizations today.

Then, I will share a new way to work with you, one that unlocks the most precious resource in your organization- what your people know but are afraid to share.

You will see why this new way to work is one that creates psychological safety, engagement, and inclusion.

The foundational flaws of “speak up”



It's rooted in faulty assumptions

There are many, but here's the big one:

Telling people to “speak up” is rooted in the top-down, command and control approach. This means leaders imagine how work will unfold then write plans, policies, and procedures to cement work patterns in place for others.

Behind this leadership behavior sits the flawed assumption that management can actually anticipate how work will unfold on the frontlines. Yet and the reality is:

“...you cannot write procedures to anticipate all the situations and conditions that shape people's work.”

Managing the Unexpected-2001

A better way to work will be built on assumptions that align with the big picture of the dynamics in play as we work in our modern world.



We are talking to the wrong people!

Research has made it clear that **only** the people in power can create a culture where everyone knows it is safe and worthwhile to share needs, questions, concerns, and ideas because they will be valued.

A better way to work will re-direct our attention to the people who can create a culture where contributions are invited and valued-the people in power.



Works against human nature...

The “speaking up” approach asks people to engage in a process that runs counter to our basic human needs for safety, belonging, and meaningful contribution.

It does not help anyone overcome the fiercely human experiences that drive and perpetuate silence and disengagement like:

- Believing personal harm may result
- Defaulting to silence because it’s been socialized from youth
- Feeling powerless
- Having learned that “speaking up” is futile

Risking the experiences of embarrassment, exclusion, wasting time and energy, or even loss of employment is perceived by our primitive brains as a threat to our survival.

No amount of repeating “speak up” will ever overpower our basic human needs.

A better way to work will meet human needs for safety, trust, belonging, and contribution.



A narrow view of why we need people speaking

“Speaking up” is understood primarily as a way to illuminate risk or point out mistakes. It does not convey the full need for, and value of, open upward communication including:

- Making sense of what is going on (situational awareness)
- Safety
- Team performance
- Improvement/learning
- Innovation

A better way to work will help people recognize how important diverse perspectives are for multiple processes foundational to human and organizational success.



The language is working against us in multiple ways!

First, when we use the phrase “speak up” we are creating meaning for people. Subconscious processes come into play simply because of the words and grammar we use.

Our use of “up” literally means “up the hierarchy” to a person of greater power. Because we are based on a command and control model, we may be asked to tell the designer of the failing plan that has a problem that is not always so popular....

Next is a big question:

When we keep saying “up,” are we unconsciously and/or subconsciously reinforcing the hierarchy that is causing quite a bit of the problem in the first place? (I think so).

Another flaw, “speak up” is an imperative statement, a command.

It’s what I call the “non-conversation” way to work.

There’s no personal invitation, just a blanket command that if you encounter a problem or error let us know.

Meanwhile, we leaders will be busy with other stuff..

A better way to work will use language that helps overcome hierarchies' negative effects and shifts to more respectful and helpful words and grammar.



People in power intermittently telling people to “speak up” places all the responsibility for upward communication on people of lesser power.

This is not equitable.

A better way to work will redistribute responsibility for creating open communication more fairly.

Time to move on

I believe the flaws in the foundation of the “speak up” approach leave it condemned.

To survive and thrive in our modern work world, we need a way to work built on a different and firm foundation. We need one constructed from solid assumptions based on the theory and science related to what we already know about what it takes to meet human and organizational needs at the same time, in a complex system, nested in a VUCA world.

And...it needs to be fair.

built on a firm foundation

Speaking IN is a new way to work built from a different perspective and creating a different conversation. Here's why it works.



Its Big Picture

It acknowledges the many dynamics affecting our organizational experiences and outcomes:

- Our VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous)
- The nature and needs of human beings
- The nature and needs of complex socio-technical systems
- Power dynamics in hierarchies
- Language
- Organizational Justice

Speaking IN is not a bunch of initiatives glued together; it is a holistic way to work. It applies solid theory and research in a way that aligns with what needs to happen to create success given the big picture.



Directs our attention to the people who can create change

Speaking IN acknowledges the tricky dynamics of social power.

It acknowledges that only the people in power can change the culture to one where it is safe and worthwhile to expose individual and organizational gaps in needs and knowledge.

It's built on, then equips people with powerful knowledge like this:

“The stifling effect of powerlessness is reduced or even eliminated when the individual expects that the voice target will be open to input.”

Morrow, K. J., Gustavson, A. M., & Jones, J. “Speaking up behaviours (safety voices) of healthcare workers: A meta-synthesis of qualitative research studies.” International Journal of Nursing Studies 21 Sept 2016

And this:

“Our results suggest leader inclusiveness-words and deeds by leaders that invite and appreciate others’ contributions—can take nature off its course, helping to overcome status’ inhibiting effects on psychological safety.”

Nembhard, I. M., & Edmondson, A. C. “Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams.” Journal of Organizational Behavior 21 Sept 2006.

The research is clear. We just haven’t applied it! Speaking IN applies the wonderful work of researchers for the benefit of everyone, equips them with people with the mindset and skills they need to adapt to our modern workplace.

Foundational to Speaking IN is people in power INTentionally, INcluding and Appreciating Diverse Perspectives.



Re-focuses us on purpose

Speaking IN addresses purpose at multiple levels.

The purpose of the organization: Speaking IN facilitates gathering and aligning people and departments around the organizational purpose to contribute, always guided by values.

The purpose of the individual: Speaking IN recognizes our human need for meaningful contribution at work and creates a structure to support that.

The purpose of contribution: we need people in power to be aware of the multiple organizational processes that are best served by diverse perspectives: safety, team performance, improvement/learning, innovation, and more.

Foundational to Speaking IN is the importance and power of diverse perspectives around purpose.



I'm afraid we have not been working in line with this...

“Language...as an articulation of reality is more primordial than strategy, structure or corporate culture.”

Ted Kaufman-Thinking in Systems

What happens when we shift to the language of Speaking IN?

First, the shift from an imperative command to a question shares power and shows respect.

Secondly, the direction of an individual's voice is no longer “up” to a person but “IN” to whatever process is needed for the situation. This de-personalizes the interaction helping viewpoints to be re-framed from a challenge to a constructive contribution.

Thirdly, the “ing” matters. Speaking IN implies a continual conversation, not an intermittent interruption.

Foundational to Speaking IN is the language that helps create a healthy, productive conversation.



Ultimately, Speaking IN results in a more fair way to work by sharing power and responsibility. The inclusive, collective nature of the model flattens the hierarchy when needed so that the organization can learn and people can thrive.

It's easy to see that we need a different way to work if we are going to have thriving people creating thriving organizations serving a thriving world.

To do this we must reconsider power and how we use it. We must use power to create an environment where everybody knows it's safe and worthwhile to contribute their perspective.

Speaking IN® will allow you to tap the real sources of power to create the change you desire:

the power of purpose
the power of language
the power of humility
the power of inclusion
the power of appreciation
the power of fairness
the power of trust
and
the power of diverse perspectives.

I INvite and appreciate your comments and feedback (of course...)

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