The front-line manager's role in informal voice pathways

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Abstract

Purpose – There is a long line of human resource management and employee relations research that points to the important function that line managers play within organisations. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the level of line manager closest to the employees, the front-line manager (FLM), to understand the role they play in informal voice pathways.

Design/methodology/approach – The research project from which these data are drawn is of mixed method design in a multi-site case study organisation. The organisation is a quasi-military, public sector organisation with around 2,000 front-line employees. While this paper focuses primarily on one aspect of data collection, survey results are provided to allow a deeper contextual understanding while the qualitative data progresses the theoretical contribution.

Findings – The findings suggest that the FLMs play an important role in informal voice, however, the context of a strong and militant union means that the power dimension is different from previous studies into informal voice that have been conducted in the poorly unionised hospitality sector. In this context, informal voice with the FLM becomes just one pathway for employees to take when raising issues.

Research limitations/implications – The single case study used is an exceptional case, therefore, has limited generalisability, nevertheless it does provide the opportunity to progress the theoretical understanding of voice pathways.

Originality/value – This paper has originality in that the research focus is the role of FLMs in informal voice in an organisation that is strongly unionised and militant. It provides a conceptual development of employee voice pathways that can be further developed and tested in the future.

Keywords Line managers, Employee involvement, Employee participation, Front-line managers, Employee voice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Line managers play a critical role in managing various aspects of an organisation including their people management – a role that can be seen to involve both human resource management (HRM) and industrial, or employment relations (ER). However, it has been noted that various levels of line managers are expected to play different roles within HRM and ER (Townsend, 2013, 2014). The focus of this paper is the front-line manager (FLM) – the group of managers who are placed closest to the employees and have the greatest level of responsibility for implementing HRM and ER policy and practice.

Research on formal employee involvement and participation (EIP)[1] from the industrial relations (IR) and HRM fields is quite vast. Although informal voice has been implied in research on ER since the 1960s (e.g. in custom and practice research Brown, 1972) it has only recently been recognised as an important and ongoing process in its own right leading to employee and organisational outcomes. It refers to direct communication between employees and FLMs, and according to Marchington and Suter (2013), informal voice operates sequentially and in parallel with formal voice

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systems. Furthermore, Townsend *et al.* (2013) suggest that informal voice can be seen to "fill the gaps" when the multiple channels of voice documented by Wilkinson *et al.* (2013) and Pyman *et al.* (2006) prove inadequate. Although it is clear that the FLMs are central to informal voice in workplaces, the nature of their role and outcomes of informal interactions are not well investigated. This paper explores the use of informal voice in an organisation where the union is strong, and indeed, militant. It finds that in this context, informal voice through the FLM is often, but not always used as the first point of improving "an objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman, 1970) rather than as a means to "fill the gaps".

This paper is structured as follows: first, the literature relevant to FLMs in the workplace is reviewed, followed by literature regarding EIP. The next section details the case selection and data collection and analysis process. We then provide a theoretical development with the introduction of the notion of employee voice pathways. Finally, the discussion and conclusion provide an explanation of the important role that FLMs play in the use of informal voice pathways in workplaces.

Literature review

The term "front-line managers" is gaining popularity in leadership research (e.g. Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Townsend and Russell, 2013) possibly in response to the evolution of FLMs' role in recent years. Decentralisation of many management activities has seen a consequent increase in the breadth of responsibility devolved down the line to the FLM (see, e.g. Guest and King, 2001). In this new context, the FLM is typically required to possess both the managerial skills and the operational capabilities and intricate knowledge of the processes conducted by employees. Often, they are promoted from the employee level with advanced operational knowledge of the role and handed the additional associated managerial responsibilities.

While aspects of these roles varies between industry and organisations, the administrative tasks that comprise the managerial aspect of the role share many similarities across organisations and sectors (Hales, 2005). The result of decentralising HRM responsibility is that FLMs are generally expected to deliver the face-to face aspects of the HRM function, or at least, to manage the greatest number of people directly. Consequently, FLMs have taken a more central role in the management of HR in organisations. They are often regarded as a critical lynchpin in the HRM architecture (Wall and Wood, 2005; Wright and Kehoe, 2008), effectively bringing paper based policies and procedures into operation (Child and Partridge, 1982; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003). In previous work, Townsend (2013) notes that different levels of line managers have different responsibilities in IR and HR matters including employee voice, but the details of these differences are not yet explored.

The FLM and employee voice

EIP is, according to Knudsen (1995, p. 5), "extremely plastic"; it can be "moulded" into a variety of shapes with "a wide variety of meanings for different groups". Despite this, much of the research on EIP from the IR and HRM fields has developed with a focus on the role of unions in ensuring employees have the opportunity to play a role in decision making at the workplace, organisation, or industry level (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Heery and Frege, 2006). Researchers have developed more nuanced themes to better reflect what occurs in modern workplaces on a daily basis, for example, formalised non-union participation (Dundon *et al.*, 2005); informal participation (Marchington and

Suter, 2013; Townsend *et al.*, 2013); and multiple channels of participation (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013) and it is clear that contextual factors influence the approaches taken to employee voice. This is significant, as contextual factors are likely to change over time (Ramsay, 1977) and it becomes important to determine the extent to which individual FLMs implement any particular schemes at unit level (Marchington *et al.*, 1992; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013).

While it has been largely ignored in IR and HRM, informal participation is seen as the "day to day relations between supervisors and subordinates in which the latter are allowed substantial input into decisions […] a process which allows workers to exert some influence over their work and the condition under which they work" (Strauss, 1998a, p. 15). This definition of informal participation will be used throughout this paper *sans* the word "substantial" as it is quite an imprecise notion.

Power is an important influence on the use of informal vs formal voice but as yet has received limited research attention. Indeed, the employment relationship is one that begins from a starting point of power imbalance. If an organisation relies solely on informal voice (as is common in smaller organisations), it is possible for more vulnerable employees to be faced with a situation where they are expected to overcome conflict with a more secure party in the employment relationship, the employer (through their representative, a FLM). As such, informal practices can undermine the position of an employee (Head and Lucas, 2004, p. 697), further shifting the power differential towards the managers. Furthermore, management typically has the power to decide what structures and processes are in place in an organisation and how they are used (Dundon *et al.*, 2005).

The simple existence of a voice or participation mechanism does not mean that employees will accept and use it. Indeed, Landau (2009, p. 47) found no relationship between the number of voice mechanisms that exist in a workplace and the propensity of employees to speak up at work, concluding that alternate voice mechanisms are not required if employees have competent and approachable managers. Evidence indicates that regardless of the number of possible forums, when an employee wishes to discuss a grievance, they are most likely to communicate directly with a supervisor (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the role of informal EIP and the FLM's response to it when compared with individual and organisational outcomes like productivity, retention or other indicators, should be subject to consideration.

Strauss (1998a, pp. 17-18) argues that the difference between formal and informal participation is not always clear, but notes that the interaction between the two is important. There is limited research examining how formal and informal voice interact in the non-unionised sectors of hospitality (see Townsend *et al.*, 2013; Marchington and Suter, 2013) and these papers indicate that within the context of their studies, informal voice through the FLM is often not only the preferred approach, but the initial approach. We need though, to have more empirical work within a broader range of workplaces, including those in other sectors and in organisations with varying levels of union involvement, to better understand the phenomenon. This study contributes by examining the place FLMs hold in the voice systems of a public sector, quasi-military style of organisation in the broad area of human services, specifically in offender rehabilitation. The research used the following broad research question:

RQ1. What is the role of FLMs in progressing informal voice in a strongly unionised, militant, public organisation?

In answering our primary research question, we also propose the model of "voice pathways" presented later in Figure 1. This model outlines three broad means of voice activities – silence, formal channels, or informal channels with each having a pathway that leads to the possibility of an outcome, satisfactory or otherwise. The decision to follow an informal pathway in the first instance – either through the union or FLM – might lead to a formal voice mechanism as a more appropriate means of achieving an outcome. Alternatively, employees might decide that one informal pathway provides an inadequate solution and consequently another pathway is sought. Our research interest in this paper is the role of the FLM in influencing which pathway is ultimately chosen, hence, we highlight data that considers the employees' motivation to either seek or avoid their FLM as the preliminary voice pathway.

Organisational context

As mentioned, the organisation in this study is an Australian public sector, para-military style of organisation in the broad area of human services. To protect the identity of the organisation we are unable to provide more information, aside from demographic detail. There are almost 2,000 employees "on the front-line" of the organisation with as many administrative employees and support staff. This study focuses on the experience of front-line workers. There are 15 worksites in the organisation evenly split between metropolitan and regional areas and ranging in size from 40 employees to almost 400 personnel. In total, 92 per cent of the operational staff are union members and the organisation has a union negotiated enterprise bargaining agreement in place. This agreement stipulates various forms of employee voice mechanisms and processes for employees and managers to follow. The organisation operates in a highly regulated environment and these national and state level legal requirements force a high degree of policy at an organisation and workplace level. This, in turn, creates complications similar to those noted by Atkinson and Lucus (2013), that is, where the HR systems are developed as an attempt to comply with formal regulations, the organisation is not always able to then put quality people management practices in place.

We would consider this organisation from a case study perspective to be an "exceptional case" (Vincent and Wapshott, 2013). That is to say, we would not expect the same findings to be replicated consistently across all, or many organisations; nevertheless, the differences within this organisation allow us to develop and extend current theoretical understandings.

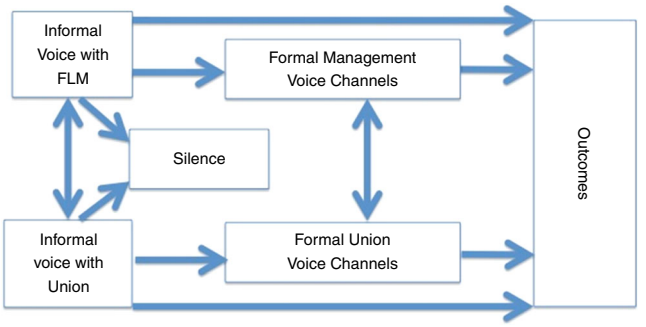

Figure 1.
Pathways of escalating informal employee voice

Methods

The study draws on interview and survey data. In total, 56 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees chosen to provide a vertical and horizontal representation of the organisation. In addition to four executive members of the organisation, 52 interviews were completed throughout five worksites ranging in size from around 400 employees to just ten employees in regional and metropolitan areas. The average length of tenure for the interview employees (excluding executive managers) was 12.5 years compared with an organisation wide mean of 10.4 years.

Surveys were distributed to a randomly selected 50 per cent of employees. While the focus of this paper is not the quantitative data, some survey results are presented to provide important contextual data and to demonstrate that the FLM is a vital, indeed a primary avenue, for information exchange. The survey questions were not designed to elicit information regarding employee voice and decision making, nevertheless, some of the data allow for important contextual information to assist in understanding the qualitative data.

Interview procedure

Participants were selected randomly from the daily roster at head office and provided to each of the five workplaces. Participation in the study was voluntary; a small percentage of employees declined to participate and additional employees were invited from the list until the interview schedule was full. Interviews were mostly an hour in length, although an interview with one employee who had been at the organisation for only a few months lasted just 40 minutes and an interview with a union delegate lasted almost two hours. Following a general period of discussion to develop rapport and collect demographic data from participants, the primary questions were asked to investigate areas of IR and HRM including EIP; various levels of line managers; and union management relationships.

Coding and analysis strategy

Analysis began at the start of the interviewing process rather than waiting until all data were collected. Specifically, the research team discussed the data after each round of approximately three interviews to: identify preliminary themes or categories that were emerging; assess the relevance of existing codes to new data that were collected; and to examine relationships between codes (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981). A two-person approach was used for most of the interviews with one researcher performing the interview and the second researcher documenting the interview on a laptop, close to verbatim. This approach was chosen because interviewees were not willing to have the interviews recorded, but it also provided a way of cross-checking the data for misunderstanding or bias in interpretation. The process used through data collection and research team discussions formed a loose version of convergent interviewing, a technique that Jepsen and Rodwell (2008) argue improves the internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity.

Although evidence suggests that data saturation is likely to be reached by around 30 interviews in a heterogeneous group such as this (Cresswell, 2007), additional interviews were completed to collect what has been referred to as "run-off" or additional data following saturation (Townsend, 2013). Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, a commonly used qualitative data analysis software programme. A thorough examination of existing, disciplinary specific research led to the experienced research

team developing a set of codes for data. These theoretically derived codes were from the broad HR and IR literature around our primary research questions.

Results

The FLM and informal voice – goes where?

In previous papers about informal voice, Marchington and Suter (2013) suggest that informal and formal voice operate in parallel and sequentially and Townsend *et al.* (2013) argue that in a non-unionised workplace, informal voice "fills the gaps" left behind by other forms of formal voice. In each of these cases, the next level of line manager was a critical component of how informal voice succeeded or failed. However, this organisation is one where the union is very strong and militant and provides employees with a strong voice. This strength is demonstrated through a range of activities, for example, the union's control over approving the roster at all sites, and the strong enforcement of demarcations between levels of staff. The perceptions of power that a strong union provides, means that the employees feel that they have alternative avenues when the matter is important to them.

Information is, accordingly to Marchington and Wilkinson (2007), the lowest level of voice in the participation escalator. Nevertheless, it can tell us some things about downward communication and hence, possible views of upward voice behaviour in the workplace. Overwhelmingly, and not surprisingly, when asked how much they rely on various sources for information (with one being "I don't rely on information from the source" and five being "I rely heavily on information from this source") employees responded that they rely most heavily on their immediate supervisor for information. As is indicated in Table I, the union, local delegates and senior workplace managers are closely listed while the "organisation" and the executive management come a distant last in sources of information. This does not suggest that this question considers only the unilateral delivery of information from managers. Indeed employees can seek out information or answers to their concerns (higher order voice activities) from any of the sources identified in the question.

Starting with the FLM

There has been a great deal of literature from a range of disciplines that place an importance on the FLM role. From the organisational psychology and organisational behaviour perspective, leader-member exchange (LMX) and social exchange theories are often lenses through which the evidence is presented (see, e.g. Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). Commonly, results suggest when these relationships are strong, there is a greater opportunity for positive results (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). However, a flaw within this research stream is the failure to include contextual factors to understand how

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Total responses	Mean
Organisation	51	77	127	106	45	406	3.04
Executive management	72	110	120	75	30	407	2.70
Senior workplace manager	39	57	98	139	72	405	3.37
Immediate supervisor	22	40	86	156	109	403	3.75
Fellow employees	10	33	129	142	91	405	3.66
Union	38	51	114	120	82	405	3.39
Local delegates	38	60	111	123	75	407	3.34

Table I.
Information sources within organisation

issues like union involvement, labour markets and power, might influence aspects of the LMX relationship and results.

From HR and ER literature it is clear that the FLM has a critical role in people management. The FLM is the first level with managerial responsibility who interacts with employees on a day-to-day basis (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). This same research indicates that the FLM is the primary point for employees who want to raise matters, that is, engage in voice behaviours. The findings of this study certainly support this view. As outlined in Table I, immediate supervisors are the key source of information and many employees spoke positively throughout the interview about their FLM as a source of support and problem-solving information:

> There's no one more knowledgeable than my line manager on legislation and procedures. He is a very knowledgeable person. I don't have to go to him often […] but if I want to make a snap decision which is not consistent with procedure then I still need to run it by him.

> He's understanding […] he is also accepting about you putting proposals to him. I would take lots of issues to him […] If you have an idea and want some input you can run your ideas by him […] I know I can knock on his door and get good advice.

> He has always been able to fix any problem. If he couldn't I'd take it higher […] but I'd never take it anywhere else. I wouldn't take it to the union.

However, as we would expect in any organisation, the story is not a consistent one. Some employees gave an indication that they found the organisational structure to be a complicated one leading to confusion and frustration over where any matter should be raised:

> I can't tell you about my line manager because there are five different people each having a say in how I do my fucking job. And some of them are "yes men" who are the worst people to have in management because they appease, rather than make the right decision.

Additionally, results suggest that some FLMs are good decision makers in certain contexts, but when under pressure might find the decision making more difficult:

> She's very good at making things consultative but it gets hard when she won't make a decision. We don't always have the flexibility to make people involved in every decision because we're left short (staffed).

And finally, for some people, the manager is not the first point of call for any information or discussion about the workplace. As an example, the first participant interviewed for the study listened to the researcher explain the scope of the project before responding that he would need to call his union delegate to check that it was okay to be interviewed. As the organisation's executive had already discussed the project with the union, delegate approval came quickly and interviews proceeded, but it does demonstrate the well-organised and militant nature of the workforce. Looking at examples from the interview, data employees noted:

> Depending on what the issue is I go see my line manager. The only issues I've had here are with HR. Anything to do with HR, pay etc, leave, I would take to the union rather than my line manager.

And:

> Employees tend to go to line managers but they will go to the union if they don't get their way or if they feel it's a rights issue.

So we can see from these examples that the FLMs is in this organisation are the first point within the workplace for employees to raise matters that are of concern for them. However, not all problems are solved with the FLM, and not all employees are satisfied with the FLM's suggested resolution of such problems. Hence, it appears that the FLM might be the first point of informal employee voice for many, but certain matters will start elsewhere, or be escalated or shifted to a different pathway.

Escalating voice or shopping for the right answer?

Once we recognise that not all matters are resolved in the first instance, the question becomes, what happens to these matters? Our first quote demonstrates the importance of the qausi-military style organisation and the respect for the processes expected. However, the employee also makes the point that the answer that is received from managers is not necessarily the final answer:

> I guess in this job you are taught to take stuff where it belongs. Certain paperwork goes here, there, everywhere. The same with problems. You go to who should be dealing with it – the union delegate or your manager. It's never a choice – the choice is made for us. If I wasn't happy with the answer I'd always go to the delegate though. That happens a lot.

This is a view shared by many employees in the organisation:

> I was always brought up that your boss is your boss and what your boss says goes. And if you don't think that's fair you have other people to go to.
>
> There's a real culture of taking the path of least resistance, not necessarily the correct path.
>
> I put in a leave form yesterday and I was told that she wouldn't take it from me […] they try to breach the rules all the time and that's why we need the union to be militant, to keep HR honest.

FLMs in the organisation also recognise and share this tension and that it is not necessarily them as individuals, or as managers, that leads to influencing decisions. It can be the "role" or "title" that they hold in this style of workplace:

> Most blokes will go to the union in the first instance but then the union doesn't represent their interests exactly […] and this is a funny job (site manager). I'm referred to as Sir, they stand up when I come in to a room […] they respect me and the job but this formality creates a barrier that stops people from talking to me.
>
> I'm […] neutered sometimes in decision-making.

Based on the evidence, we have an organisation that is strongly unionised, and where the majority of employees see their FLM is the primary source for information. Yet there are alternatives when it comes to where an employee might go as their first place to engage in voice behaviours. Combining our data from what we recognise to be an exceptional case, and the understanding we have of employee voice from the extant literature, we provide the following model that demonstrates the way FLMs are often the starting point in employee voice activities.

Discussion and conclusions

The development of a "voice pathways" model is an important theoretical development in understanding employee voice systems and warrants further investigation. If we conceptualise voice as an employees' means to "have a say" in the workplace, or in Hirschman's (1970) more emotive words "to escape from, an objectionable state of

affairs" then the motivation for voice is likely to be put into some form of action. Commonly, it seems, the FLM is the first focal point of that activity. There may be a resolution that is satisfactory to each party, however, it is possible that there may not be a satisfactory resolution. In which case, what occurs? How does voice escalate and under what circumstances? What paths do the escalation of voice follow? Do managers and employees behave in such a way that these voice pathways become more readily trodden than other pathways? Is the development of voice pathways similar to neural pathways, that become natural the more frequently they are used, eventually becoming custom and practice within an organisation? These are important questions that can be further explored with research projects designed with the FLM and employee voice pathways as the research focus.

Strauss (1998b), Townsend *et al.* (2013), Marchington and Suter (2013) and Wilkinson *et al.* (2013) all give differing accounts of the interaction between informal and formal avenues of employee voice. The most relevant here is Wilkinson *et al.* (2013) who attempt to differentiate the types of activities that are raised in various different employee voice mechanisms. Within this public sector firm with a quasi-military structure, employees are strongly unionised, organised and quite militant. As such, results indicate that the union is viewed by some employees as an equally appropriate initial avenue for having a say, as their FLM. However, how employees choose which avenue is varied. Some employees hold their organisation in such low esteem that they feel their FLMs are impotent in decision-making capacity through complex bureaucracy. Hence, they will go to their union as the first avenue for voice. Traditionally, through collective bargaining, unionised workers have increased power to convince employers of the use of any particular practices (see Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Krats and Brown, 2013). However, we go beyond the strong union membership to understand the way the FLM plays a role in employee voice.

While some employees do go to the union as a starting point, many employees also view their FLMs as a strong source of support and advice and readily use the next level of line manager as an avenue to have a say. A third key group of employees more or less perceive their immediate line manager as the first port of call. Should their issue be resolved, they can get on with their duties readily, but should the line manager not provide the employee with the "right answer", these employees quickly revert to their militant approach and seek union support.

While we did not have a great deal of qualitative data that indicated employees went to fellow employees for support and voice activities, our survey results indicate that fellow employees are indeed the second most likely source of information. Hence, future research could address the question of the role employees play in voice systems, particularly informal voice systems. If all employees are uninformed due to poor levels of communication from senior management, it appears we have the potential of the workplace being the proverbial "blind leading the blind".

Furthermore, employees and managers hold an implicit and sometimes explicit recognition that the individual in a position is of less consequence with voice activities. As the manager who notes employees will stand when he enters the room and refer to him as "Sir", there are elements of custom and practice in this workplace that are deeply rooted and influence an employee's willingness to go directly to their FLM for informal discussions.

As is always the case in single case study research, we are modest in our conclusions. Furthermore, our limited data are the result of emergent themes evolving throughout the data collection process, rather than having FLM's role in informal voice

at the centre of the data collection process. However, these limitations are compensated for by the theoretical development through a conceptualisation of pathways of escalating informal voice.

We understand that the voice pathways in this organisation are not likely to be the same as other organisations because, as we know from decades of research in the area, these matters are very sensitive to context. This organisation is an exceptional case (Vincent and Wapshott, 2013), one where we would expect unusual results. Hence, we need further conceptual research to further expand the notion of voice pathways, along with empirical research to map how the conceptualisation of voice pathways plays out in a wide range of workplaces. Nevertheless, our preliminary model provides us with a valuable insight into the way power plays out in the escalation of employee voice. Many within the organisation suggest their union is too militant, but equally, many suggest the problem is with poor management. Regardless, when we compare these employees to the poorly unionised samples in the Townsend *et al.* (2013) and Marchington and Suter (2013) studies of the hospitality sector, a strong union backs the employees in the current study. Hence, informal voice as a process can lack the power to be much more than raising trivial, minor or immediate operational matters. When the proverbial gorilla is standing in the background, the informal voice gains muscle.

Note

1. There are debates about the extent to which EIP and employee voice are similar or different notions, but we are not entering that debate and will use the terms interchangeably throughout this paper.

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