

If you have no intention of considering employee suggestions, then don't ask

If you are a manager, you were probably told at one point in your career to consult your subordinates before making important organisational decisions. Consulting makes employees feel respected, fairly treated and in control, which leads to more work motivation, a better job performance, and [increased group morale](#). Because of the positive effects associated with consultation, organisations worldwide frequently invite their employees to share their views on various issues. Popular ways to gather these views are for example surveys and the old-school suggestion box.

But what do managers — like you — actually do with these suggestions? Do you consider all ideas your employees come up with, compare them with your own, make an elaborate decision, and provide your team with detailed feedback? Or is there truth to the myth that suggestion boxes are nothing more than a charade and that ideas are [often ignored](#)? To be fair, it might be tempting to benefit from the positive effects of consultation while leaving the ideas in the box and making decisions autocratically by yourself (plus saving time as a result!).

Providing voice opportunity is costly in terms of [time and money](#). So why should you make the effort of consulting your employees to begin with, if you have no intention of actually following up? It would be as easy to just not give feedback opportunity at all. One reason to offer 'pseudo voice' could be that you work in a democratic environment. The ideology of your organization might require you to offer your employees an opportunity to voice their opinion while you prefer a more autocratic decision-making process. In a sense, this compares to what happens in some communist countries.



Another reason to offer pseudo voice might be that you are the type of manager who likes to deceive your employees. This could well be the case if you are a destructive [narcissist](#), a corporate [psychopath](#) or a [Machiavellian](#). These unfortunate types of managers have several (if not all) of the following characteristics: an inflated self-view, fixation on power and prestige, no ability to feel any empathy or commitment for those who report on them, and a need to win at all costs. These characteristics make it very likely for a manager to pretend to be interested in their employees' views and disregard them consequently. Especially when these views are not in line with their own. That is because they are often also intolerant of criticism, and [unwilling to compromise](#).

Organisations can suffer badly when employees withhold useful ideas, information, and opinions that could improve general performance.

Whatever reason there is to offer pseudo voice, it might not be the best strategy. Due to feelings of unfairness, deception and anger — triggered by perceptions of pseudo voice — employees might keep silent. They will probably avoid suggestion boxes and delete surveys or complete them with fake information which could be even worse. Organisations can suffer badly when employees withhold useful ideas, information, and opinions that could improve [general performance](#) (employee silence). Perhaps even more important than not being able to take advantage of employees ideas is the possibility that employee silence (caused by perceptions of pseudo voice) leads to disagreements within a work team. Namely, when employees are frustrated by their boss and have no

say anymore, they might act out toward their co-workers by bossing them around or starting fights. This is a form of anger displacement; the shift of aggressive impulses. In sum, pseudo voice can have detrimental effects.

The detrimental effects of perceived pseudo voice have been demonstrated by research in a healthcare institution in the Netherlands. Employees of this institution responded negatively when they had the idea that their manager's interest in their views was feigned. A group of 137 employees (121 females, mean age of 41) completed a survey with questions on voice opportunity, voice behaviour, managerial consideration of employee input, and the amount of conflict in their team. It was found that perceived pseudo voice led to reduced voice behaviour (i.e., employee silence) and, as a result, increased conflict within the team. Also, 14 managers were surveyed (6 females, mean age of 47). Surprisingly, these managers revealed their disregard for employee input on more occasions than their employees suspected. Apparently, employees were **more frequently deceived** than they thought.

If you are a manager or decision-maker, remember that asking employees for their opinion comes with a responsibility. Voice opportunity is likely to backfire when your employees think that you are only pretending to be interested in their ideas.

◆◆◆

This post is based on an [article](#) Gerdien wrote with co-authors Karen Jehn, PhD and Bart Terwel, PhD, who both supervised her at Leiden University. Featured image credit: [Subharnab Majumdar CC-BY-2.0](#) Inside image credit: [J E Theriot CC-BY-2.0](#)

Gerdien de Vries is a social scientist with a strong interest in the unwanted (and unforeseen) effects of established organisational strategies. Gerdien has a PhD in social and organisational psychology from Leiden University in the Netherlands. She is currently affiliated with Delft University of Technology, where she further investigates pitfalls in persuasive strategies. She is a new tweeter at [@GerdienDeVries](#)



- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics