ARE YOU STIFLING EMPLOYEE VOICE?
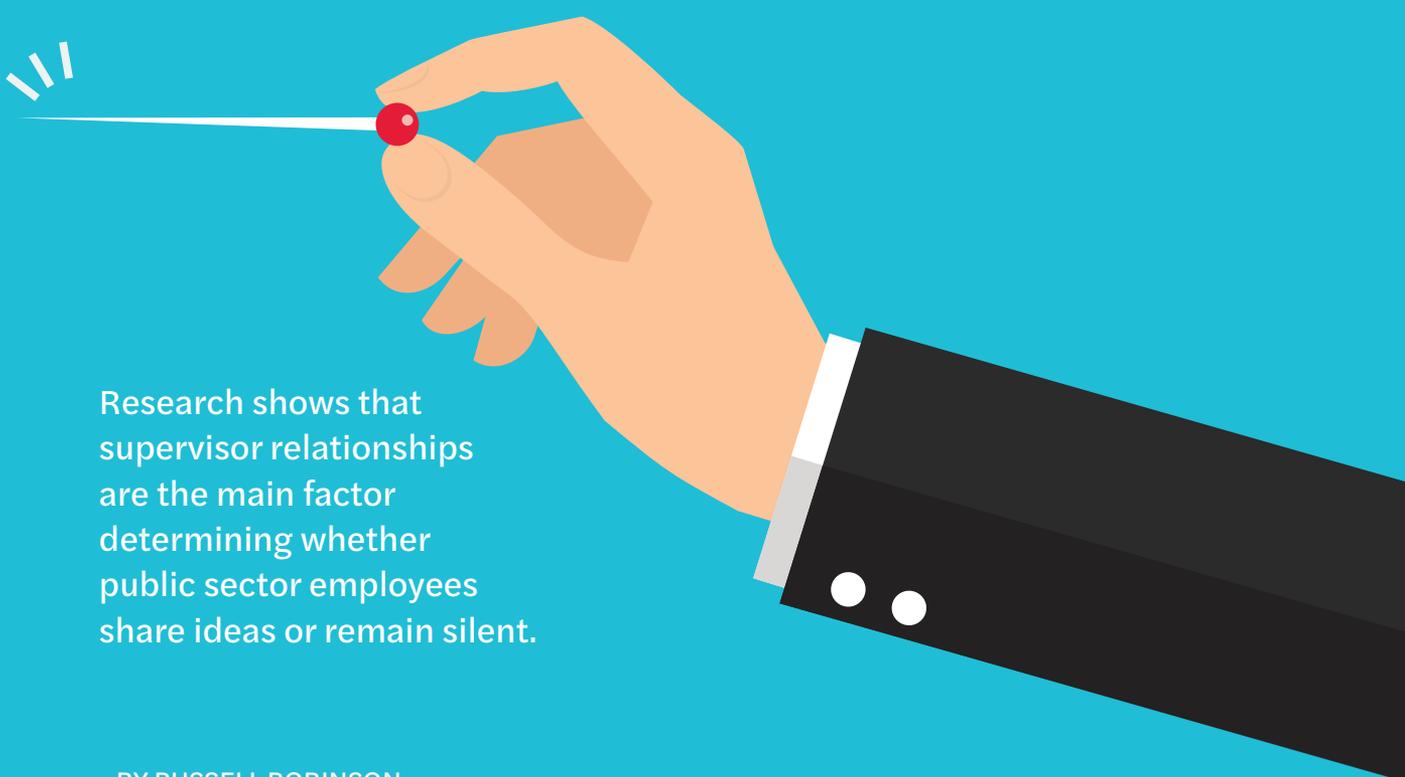
Research shows that supervisor relationships are the main factor determining whether public sector employees share ideas or remain silent.

BY RUSSELL ROBINSON

When asked why she had chosen to share her idea with her supervisor, a government employee whom I'll call Chantal (all research subjects featured in this article have pseudonyms) thought about the question for a few seconds. Finally, she smiled, and the truth came out: "His leadership style when it came to me, from the very beginning, I felt he was my cheerleader. He thought I had great ideas." Conversely, when she later pondered a job in which she had not taken her ideas forward to leadership, she described a different environment. "I don't feel like anything would be done [with my suggestions] since my peers had already tried to get upward mobility through sharing their own," she explained. "And, I never said anything. At one point, I started looking for a job, then I would stop. The morale was bad at that point. I wasn't coming to work happy every day and just treated the job as something that needed to get done."

Chantal's comments come from a research project I recently completed that explores federal government employees' experiences deciding to share, or not share, with their supervisors and leaders ideas to improve their work group or agency.

Within the public sector, there is an evolving understanding of the importance of employee engagement as a medium for driving various outcomes such as performance and well-being. Understanding employee engagement helps capture and improve public servants' work experiences, ensuring that they have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in their roles. This, in turn, supports agencies' drive to deliver improved and more efficient public services and better outcomes for citizens.

So, how does Chantal's comfort presenting ideas to her leader affect her engagement and, therefore, her ability to support her agency's mission? In *Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance Through Employee Engagement,* David Macleod and Nita Clarke indicate that being listened to is the most important factor in determining how much employees value their organizations. Further, employees often do not feel comfortable speaking to their bosses about organizational problems or issues that concern them. When employees withhold such input, as New York University Professor Elizabeth Morrison argues in "Employee Voice and Silence," they choose to deprive their organizations of potentially useful information.

In other words, federal agencies have clear incentives for building leadership cultures that invite employees to speak up rather than stay quiet. And based on my research, which uncovers drivers of both employee voice and employee silence, federal leaders can implement specific practices that foster the upward communication of ideas.

Supervisor relationships

In my study, participants identified their relationship with their supervisor as a key factor in deciding whether to communicate their ideas or remain silent. And as other research shows, when supervisors and leaders are approachable and visible, build trust, and promote open communication, they can build cultures where employees propose ideas. For example, one of the participants in my study, Nadine, explained her supervisor's impact: "I think he just continuously was encouraging me to think outside the box and to come up with different solutions," she said, adding that she could "use him as a sounding board."

Conversely, supervisors who develop a negative relationship with employees foster a culture where employees feel sharing ideas is unsafe or futile. According to "An Exploratory Study of Employee Silence: Issues that Don't Communicate Upward and Why," employees do not feel comfortable speaking to those above them about any issues or concerns. This silence reflects damaged employee trust and morale, which can undermine organizational decision making.

What's the most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent about ideas? The fear of being viewed or labeled negatively and, consequently, damaging valued relationships. One of my research subjects, Rebekah, illustrated the point well when she explained that she does not share ideas with her leaders because she knows her suggestions will be shot down. "I attempted to take them to her a lot," Rebekah said of her supervisor. "She does not entertain a lot of innovation. I am now at a point in my career where I would consider other things because I feel discouraged."

To build better relationships with their teams, supervisors should strive to be conscious of the influence they have on upward communication. As University of Louisville professor and employee engagement expert Brad Shuck states, "The way employees experience their leader directly impacts their willingness to share their voice, authentically. Over time, employees either choose to engage or disengage based on that experience and what they believe about how their supervisor will react when they share their voice."

One technique a leader can use to create this authentic culture is asking her staff member for his feedback on his project

SUPERVISORS SHOULD STRIVE TO BE CONSCIOUS OF THE INFLUENCE THEY HAVE ON UPWARD COMMUNICATION.

performance before giving her own appraisal. David Rock, director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, recommends this strategy because the process of asking for feedback leaves both the supervisor and the employee feeling less threatened and less anxious.

Targeted approach to communication

In my study, participants didn't just reveal what influences whether they bring ideas forward. They also disclosed their processes for crafting and delivering proposals in a successful way—so that their supervisors listen and act on the ideas. A few strategies participants used before presenting information to their supervisors include performing due diligence, sharing information and seeking feedback from stakeholders, requesting insight from their supervisors, and understanding the right time for communicating ideas. However, Isaac summarized what all these strategies mean when implemented together as he relayed the advice a previous supervisor had given to him. "Hit the target about what you want to talk to me about," the boss had said.

Just as with their private-sector colleagues, public-sector employees should make sure to clearly express their ideas and how their suggestions can help the organization. This increases the chances of successful communication. They also should seek input from stakeholders, which can strengthen their proposal and gain the necessary buy-in.

Another strategy for employees is to put as much thought into when they communicate ideas as they do to the ideas themselves. Patty explained how she finds the fertile times when ideas are most likely to be heard. "I try to gauge the temperature in the room," she said. "Some of my prep work addresses the unknowns or what stakes other people might have and trying to address some of those concerns that may pop up."

For federal employees, it's essential to account for contextual factors, such as budgeting cycle issues and changes in administration philosophy. For example, proposing a new training program for acquisition personnel during the fourth quarter of the fiscal year—these professionals' busy season—would be viewed less favorably than a training initiative timed for the first quarter of the fiscal year.

On the reverse side of this strategy, leaders should communicate to employees about which factors make a successful idea, one that is heard and acted upon. This approach can include leaders sharing their previous experiences with both successful and unsuccessful ideas. Further, leaders can provide an outline for employees to follow when crafting and pitching an idea.

Insecurity and newness on the job

Many government employees expressed to me that they did not communicate ideas to their supervisors due to feelings of insecurity, which ultimately made them decide to remain silent. Why did they feel insecure? One factor was risk. As Van said, "In instances where I don't understand the risks, or there are high risks, my confidence goes down."

Another factor was the self-conscious feeling many employees have when they start new jobs, which can relate to not totally grasping the nuances of the job, not understanding the workforce culture, or not wanting to disrupt the status quo. For example, Helene, a supervisor at a large federal agency, reflected on how not having anyone to watch or support her at her first government job had made her feel insecure. "I was new, I didn't have that much courage. And I was new in the country, too," she recalled, which made it even tougher to share ideas at a time when she "didn't know the systems or the people that well."

To create an environment that encourages employees to speak up with suggestions as soon as they start working at an agency, leaders can set up one-on-one meetings during onboarding to ascertain new hires' confidence and ask them for thoughts or ideas about their new jobs. Also, leaders can use these meetings to share their own experiences with confidence and being new on the job and how that affected their idea sharing.

Most recommendations about communication between employees and their supervisors focus on performance feedback. But to get the discretionary effort of employees providing their suggestions for improving the work group requires supervisors and leaders to create and foster a culture that encourages and nurtures upward communication. When employees exercise their voice, there are positive impacts on myriad organizational outcomes.

Tony Mitchell, chief evangelist for Waggl, an employee engagement solution focused on authentic employee voice, says that being heard is a basic human need, and when people are heard, validated, and included, they buy in—and great things start happening for all parties. Supervisors and leaders should focus on the low-level and everyday communications with employees by understanding that every interaction has the potential to engage or disengage employees. And they should encourage employees to exercise their voice. Additionally, to foster idea sharing, supervisors and leaders should work with staff to help them craft proposals that can be successful and encourage employees to share their ideas early in their work tenure.

Russell Robinson is the senior training and engagement adviser for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Program Support Center; russlogic@gmail.com.