Choice and Input: We All Want Our Voices to Be Heard
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My dear friend Sam Goldstein frequently travels to give seminars in the United States and abroad. He has told me about fascinating discussions he has had with passengers who sit next to him during flights. I also travel a great deal but have not had the many exciting dialogues in planes that Sam has experienced. Of course, there is an explanation for this state of affairs, not withstanding possible differences in our social skills capabilities.

I am certain that Sam conveys verbally and/or nonverbally a message to his fellow passengers that he is receptive to engaging in a conversation. In contrast, I view travel time as an opportunity to catch up on professional activities, whether reading a book or writing an article. Shortly after boarding I will smile and say a quick hello to the person sitting next to me, but then I resort to a common technique used by many travelers to communicate the message "Privacy please. I want to get work done." The technique is simple—I put on headphones and turn on my iPod. I tend to listen to soft music without lyrics to avoid being distracted as I read or write. Judging by the increasing number of people wearing headphones on flights with laptops in front of them, many employ the same strategy I do.

I am aware that I probably miss out on some interesting discussions during my travels, but that benefit is offset by the amount of work I am able to accomplish. However, on a recent trip before the announcement was made that the plane had reached an altitude in which approved electronic devices could be used—the signal for me to put on my headphones and take out my laptop—the man sitting next to me (I will call him Joe) entered into a discussion that went beyond the usual perfunctory questions "Do you live in the city you're flying from or flying to?" or given the bad weather of late "Were any of your flights delayed or cancelled?"

Joe inquired what I did. I must admit that given a few previous experiences when I answered "clinical psychologist," a response that for some seemed to be an invitation to share their life histories with me, there was a slight pause to my response. I answered truthfully, which led Joe to ask politely and not intrusively what I had been doing in the

city I was leaving. I responded that I had given a couple of presentations for parents, teachers, and community members about the themes of resilience and motivation.

My answer piqued Joe's interest. He asked questions about resilience, intrigued why some people deal with stress more effectively than others. Then he inquired about motivation. To my surprise I was soon involved in an active dialogue with him and the headphones remained on my lap. I found myself discussing themes such as the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

I learned that Joe's interest in motivation was not simply of an academic nature. He told me he was in charge of a team at work and often struggled with the question of how best to motivate them to collaborate more effectively and meet deadlines on various projects. He also expressed his unhappiness with his immediate boss whom he described as offering little positive but much negative feedback. It is amazing what people will share with strangers on a plane, perhaps feeling safe since they are strangers whom they are not likely to meet again.

Joe continued, "My boss tends to be punitive rather than encouraging. I don't know why people think that's an effective approach. I think it creates a negative atmosphere that limits success." I agreed. Joe also described his boss as "micromanaging" and not delegating responsibilities or displaying a willingness to listen to those who reported to him, such as Joe. One need not possess a Ph.D. in clinical psychology to recognize that Joe had major misgivings about the managerial style of his boss or that Joe himself was struggling to initiate a more positive approach with his team.

We spoke for quite a while. As frequently occurs in such circumstances, I don't even think we formally introduced ourselves until the flight was landing. We said our names, offered the scripted "It was nice to chat with you," and we went our separate ways. I don't know how much Joe reflected on our conversation afterwards, but I rationalized that although I had not accomplished the writing I had planned to do during the flight, at least our discussion centered around a major focus of my work, namely, the ways in which motivation permeates all domains of our lives. It is a topic I have featured in many of my website articles and other writings.

I would characterize my conversation with Joe as lively and energizing. I even had a fleeting thought that perhaps I should invite such dialogue more often as Sam does

during his flights. However, I must report that my interaction with Joe has not resulted thus far in a modification of my usual social behavior on planes. On the very next flight I smiled at the woman sitting next to me, but when I noticed the headphones on her lap waiting to be put on when the plane reached an acceptable altitude, I had my headphones ready as well. I could only imagine the conversation that Sam would have initiated.

Thoughts After the Flight

I was reminded of my conversation with Joe a few days later while reading several articles, especially those that reviewed studies based on the work of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan at the University of Rochester. Deci and Ryan formulated Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory that has contributed significantly to our understanding of the differences between extrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on external rewards and punishments that may lead to a feeling of being controlled) and intrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on what Deci terms "authenticity and responsibility" and a feeling of having choice). Intrinsic motivation has been found to increase an individual's sense of ownership, engagement, and perseverance in tasks (please see my February, March, and April, 2010 website columns for a more detailed description of SDT and intrinsic motivation).

There is an increasing body of research that confirms that individuals will be more engaged and involved in projects if they feel their voice is being heard and they have some input into what occurs in their school, work, or business environments. Yet even with the emergence of these research findings, I have interviewed many students, teachers, and business people who believe their ideas are not elicited and/or are too quickly dismissed. Instead of experiencing an upsurge of positive energy to complete a task, they feel less than enthusiastic participating in an activity that does not invite their input. Intrinsic motivation is best nourished in a climate in which we feel respected and our interests and ideas are validated and honored.

I think there are too many people like Joe whose daily lives are riddled with unsatisfying activities that afford them little, if any, sense of purpose or passion. But, as I have emphasized in my writings and seminars, it need not be a Herculean task for those in authority to introduce practices that nurture intrinsic motivation and a cooperative atmosphere. Some fear that encouraging input from others will lead to a loss of authority

and weakened productivity. However, studies indicate that such input if handled effectively will eventuate in an increase of cooperation, motivation, and performance.

A Choice of Homework

One of the articles I read, "The Effectiveness and Relative Importance of Choice in the Classroom," highlighted the influence of choice not only in reinforcing the intrinsic motivation of students to complete a task but also in contributing to their developing a more positive perception of their teachers. The article, co-authored by Erika Patall at The University of Texas at Austin and Harris Cooper and Susan Wynn at Duke University, is thought provoking. These researchers hypothesized that intrinsic motivation is nurtured when individuals are provided with a choice when engaged in a task. They write, "Providing choice may be the most obvious way to support a person's experience of autonomy. As such, self-determination theory holds that choice should result in positive motivational and performance outcomes."

One of their studies included 207 high school students in grades 9 through 12. One group of students was given the option of selecting one of two similar homework assignments to complete. The two assignments were of equal challenge and difficulty. The other group of students was given only one of the assignments to complete so that choice was absent. Both groups of students were required to do homework, but one group had a choice of selecting one of two homework requirements while the other did not. The students were then administered the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory.

At the next unit of study, the conditions were counterbalanced. Students who had previously received a choice of homework were re-assigned to the no-homework-choice group, while those who had not been given a choice during the first unit were now in the homework-choice group. The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory was administered again following the second unit of study.

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail all of the questionnaires administered and data obtained in this study. The test instruments included the Provision of Choice subscale of the Rochester Assessment Package for Schools, the Learning Climate Questionnaire, three items assessing perceived competence from the Activity-Feelings Scale, and the Intrinsic Motivation and Identified Regulation subscales of the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire.

In summarizing the findings, the authors note, "Consistent with self-determination theory, we found that students reported feeling more interested in and enjoying homework more as well as more competent regarding their homework and they scored higher on the unit test when they received a choice between two homework assignments covering the same content and of intermediate difficulty, compared with when they were not given a choice. Students also tended to complete more of their homework when provided with choices."

While these research findings are impressive and have major implications for educational practice, the authors note, "Providing multiple homework options for every homework assignment places an additional burden on the teachers who have to design, distribute, and collect these assignments." As one possible solution they suggest, "In order to reduce the burden on teachers, an important initial step for schools and school districts trying to implement homework choices regularly in classrooms may be to develop a system by which teachers can share homework with others teaching the same course or at the same grade level. . . . Similarly, efforts to organize textbooks such that multiple, alternative end-of-chapter questions and exercises are provided may be another effective way to facilitate the implementation of choices within the classroom."

The authors also emphasize, "While we investigated the utility of choice with the specific pedagogical strategy of homework, we believe that the benefits of providing choices are likely to extend to other forms of schoolwork and other pedagogical strategies."

I agree with this last statement and would add that while the study involved only high school students, the inclusion of choice as an integral educational strategy is applicable at all grade levels.

There was another very significant outcome of Patall, Cooper, and Wynn's study, one that resonates with my observations and beliefs. It is an outcome of special importance given the increased focus by many educational researchers on the concept of student engagement and the critical dimension of student-faculty relationships. In summarizing their findings Patall, Cooper, and Wynn emphasize, "Results suggest that students will also feel that teachers are actually providing rationales, listening to them, understanding them, and encouraging or accepting them when they perceive that they

have the opportunity for making choices. Providing choices may be the most concrete way for teachers to communicate to students that they view them as autonomous learners. Alternatively, not providing choice may convey the opposite message."

Patall, Cooper, and Wynn's study is intriguing and invites further research to articulate more precisely the key components of intrinsic motivation. The data obtained by these researchers clearly indicate that introducing choice in the classroom routine heightens an experience of ownership and autonomy and fosters a collaborative, respectful relationship between students and faculty. Their study as well as similar research conducted by others should serve as a catalyst for all schools to consider the ways in which choice and autonomy became an integral feature of the school environment.

Speaking *Up*

Issues of ownership and intrinsic motivation are as significant in the business world as they are in schools. In addition to the research reported by Patall, Cooper, and Wynn, another article I read recently, although published several years ago, also reminded me of my conversation with Joe. The article in question appeared in Harvard Business School's "Working Knowledge" and represented an e-mail interview conducted by Sarah Jane Gilbert with Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School and Professor James Detert of Penn State University (he is now at Cornell University).   The article "Do I Dare Say Something?" examined factors that contribute to whether or not employees are willing to express their thoughts and feelings with their superiors.

Edmondson and Detert state, "Latent voice episodes describe those moments at work when someone considers speaking up about an issue, problem, or even an improvement opportunity. . . . We call the episodes 'latent' because they are *potential* communications that may or may not in fact occur. Understanding the factors that encourage or inhibit people speaking up at work with the relevant ideas and concerns they have is the focus of this research. 'Upward voice' refers to communications directed to someone higher in the organizational hierarchy with the perceived power or authority to take actions on the problem or suggestion. This is what we mean by 'speaking *up.'* If leaders send signals that they are open, interested, and willing to *act* on subordinate voice, it is logical to expect the subordinates' motivation to do so will be increased;

conversely, where subordinates perceive leaders' behavior to indicate it is either unsafe or futile to speak up, they are less likely to do so."

Joe, my companion on the plane, certainly felt it was futile to speak with his boss. Similar to studying variables that contribute to the nurturance of intrinsic motivation in the school setting, one can raise the question what factors influence employees to feel comfortable and safe using their *upward voice.*

Edmondson and Detert assert that two main factors play a role. One involves individual personality differences (e.g., some people are more extroverted and proactive, while others are more introverted and cautious), while the second is what they describe as *context* or organizational structure. Aspects of the latter include "the degree to which an organization is hierarchical or egalitarian, or has explicit mechanisms for inviting upward input (e.g., suggestion boxes, regularly-scheduled meetings, surveys)."

Edmondson and Detert contend that some organizations are dominated by a "culture of fear" with people afraid that voicing their opinions will lead to retribution. In contrast, they write, "Other companies we know, in which voice or other learning behaviors are relatively widespread, were founded on principles of respect for all employees, deep commitment to openness, etc. But changing a culture so that people believe speaking up is expected and desired is likely to require some fairly drastic indications of commitment to change. This would include placing individuals who are known to be open in key roles, illustrating in visible ways that voice is celebrated rather than punished, and making fundamental changes to how people get evaluated and rewarded."

In my workshops involving individuals in leadership positions, I typically ask them to consider how proactive they are in encouraging openness among their staff and, as importantly, how accepting they are of feedback and input. As Edmondson and Detert suggest, "Ultimately, every manager needs to work at being open and accessible and taking action on ideas or reporting back on why action can't or won't be taken. These are behavioral skills that all of us can continue to practice and improve. They don't need to be grand, highly contrived actions. Some of the people we've interviewed pointed to immense value in leaders simply stopping by in the cafeteria, or pulling them aside in the hallway for a couple of minutes and really listening."

Finally, Edmondson and Detert offer an observation that is rooted in the theme of motivation. As you shall see, part of what they said reminded me directly of my dialogue with Joe. They note, "Perhaps most surprising to us has been the degree to which fear appears to be a feature of modern work life. Whenever we talk with others about work, such as on airplanes with strangers, we get a similar response—'Oh yeah, I can relate to wanting to speak up but biting my tongue.' It's really a shame how much apparently untapped knowledge there is out there. . . . This suggests that employees aren't failing to provide ideas or input because they've 'checked out' and just don't care, but because of fear."

In essence, Edmondson and Detert believe that many individuals who seem to have "checked out" still have a desire to share their thoughts and feelings. However, fear serves as a major obstacle for them to do so. Fear evokes what has been labeled "avoidance motivation" or a desire to avoid those situations in which we feel our views are not validated and we experience an increased sense of helplessness and hopelessness. When the wish to flee is the primary motivation, the structure and productivity of any organization will be weakened.

A Concluding Thought about Our Voices Being Heard

Self-determination and autonomy are basic needs that exist throughout our lives, from our toddler and preschool years through our senior years. Intrinsic motivation and democratic ideals flourish when environments encourage and support one's voice being heard. In all of our institutions, whether in schools or in various organizations or businesses, those in leadership positions must ask if all members truly believe their opinion is respected and that they are afforded a certain level of choice and autonomy. This kind of respect does not imply a loss of authority on the part of leadership, but rather the cultivation of a climate in which leadership will be honored for validating the input and voices of others.

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