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# EMPLOYEE VOICE TOOLKIT

DEVELOPED FOR: REDF  
Flying Whale Strategies  
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**PURPOSE:** To provide employment social enterprises (ESEs) with a review of various Employee Voice Strategies that includes a description, benefits, and challenges of each and helping them choose one via a self-guided quiz.

## **GLOSSARY:**

**Employee Voice:** The ideas, opinions, concerns, and feedback of employees across the organization—including employees hired from the focus population, not solely leadership or program staff.

**Employee Voice Strategy:** The process an organization follows for employees to express ideas, opinions, and concerns with the leadership team and in turn, how leadership uses that

feedback. It fosters a sense of involvement in decision-making to enhance employee engagement and organizational transparency.

**Equity:** Eliminating and repairing injustices caused by barriers due to oppression. An employment social enterprise's equity strategy could be twofold: not only responding to the injustices that make economic opportunity harder to access for some populations but also allowing the voices of those the ESE serves to shape those efforts.

## INTRODUCTION:

In any organization, employee voice is a vital tool for developing a culture of collaboration, innovation, and shared ownership. Yet, there are a variety of strategies that an organization might leverage to hear from the individuals who staff their organization. An Employee Voice Strategy refers to the way that employees express their feedback, concerns, and ideas and how that information is used to drive organizational decision making and strategy. An Employee Voice Strategy is particularly important for social enterprises, whose organizations are rooted in a desire for equity, or to remove and repair the harm caused by barriers due to oppression. In fact some organizations' equity plan is synonymous with their Employee Voice Strategy as it creates an opportunity to honor the lived experiences of employees that are created by injustice and restore balance and wholeness<sup>1</sup>. Selecting an Employee Voice Strategy helps leaders move from simply assuming that their organization values and uplifts the voices of their employees to formalizing the process for doing that, which has several important benefits:

- It helps to ensure **mission alignment** and **accountability** as leaders have a regular and consistent process for hearing from the people their enterprise exists to serve. An effective employee voice strategy can help to build trust and demonstrate commitment to the ESE's values.
- It promotes **inclusivity and empowerment**, which is essential for ESEs who exist to empower marginalized groups. Employee voice strategies help ensure that everyone—especially those who may have been historically excluded from decision-making—has a platform to share insights.
- It is becoming more and more common for **funders** of nonprofit organizations to require grantees to have an effective approach to hearing from those they serve that applicants can clearly articulate and implement during the grant cycle.
- An organizational Employee Voice Strategy also means that staff have a clear understanding of how to share feedback, which can contribute to a **positive employee engagement experience**, increasing employee satisfaction and retention.

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<sup>1</sup> Change Elemental. (2020). \*Centering equity in the journey toward transformation: Intermediaries and the role of equity\* [Report].

[https://changeelemental.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Centering\\_Equity\\_Intermediary\\_report\\_WEB.pdf](https://changeelemental.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Centering_Equity_Intermediary_report_WEB.pdf)

This toolkit is designed to introduce you to the various approaches to developing an Employee Voice Strategy at your employment social enterprise. While there isn't a hard and fast rule on which strategy is the best, there are considerations that might make one option more appropriate and effective to your unique context.

### **EMPLOYEE VOICE STRATEGIES:**

- Employee Ownership
- Employee Board Representation
- Advisory Councils
- Employee-Led Initiatives
- Listening, Monitoring & Evaluation Tools
- Open-Door Policy

### **Employee Ownership**

**Description:** In an employee ownership model, employees have a direct say in decision making for the enterprise across all levels—often through cooperative structures or democratic governance models. In an employment social enterprise, one of the most common forms of employee ownership is a worker cooperative. In a worker cooperative, the employees own the business and they participate in its financial success on the basis of their work contribution. Employees also vote for and have representation on the board of directors and typically follow the principle of one worker, one vote.

### **Benefits:**

- The Employee Ownership model brings with it a strong sense of ownership and purpose.
- The Employee Ownership model and the social enterprise model can work synergistically as they both prioritize people and strong values.
- When the San Diego Workforce Partnership reviewed employee ownership research, it found that 72% of employees prefer worker-owned companies and 40% of consumers are more likely to make purchases from companies that share ownership ([US Chamber of Commerce](#)).
- Worker-cooperatives are more resilient to economic shocks and have higher employee retention rates ([The Aspen Institute](#)).

### **Challenges:**

- ESEs must be structured as a for profit to adopt this approach.
- Democratic decision making can be slow and become increasingly more complex as the number of staff in the cooperative grows. This is especially problematic in moments that require decisive action, such as moments of crisis or when a competitive market requires a quick pivot.
- Employees may not have the skills needed to manage a business at the governance level, particularly in areas such as finance, strategic planning, or legal compliance.

- ESEs may face a tension between distributing profits to employee owners or reinvesting into the business for sustainability and growth.

**Example:** [CHI Fresh Kitchen](#)

### **Employee Board Representation**

**Description:** This strategy for listening to employee voice proposes that workers have representation on an organization's board of directors. The employee(s) chosen to serve on the board of directors are either elected directly by employees or selected by other employee committees.

#### **Benefits:**

- Studies of for-profit corporations with worker representation on the corporate board show increased productivity and value added per worker ([MIT](#)).
- Employee voice has a direct impact on organizational decision making through regular board meetings.
- Board representation communicates to employees that their voice is essential and has a tangible impact on the organization's decision making.

#### **Challenges:**

- It is possible that a power dynamic may exist among employee representatives on the board and senior leadership, which could limit an employee's willingness to share candidly or voice disagreement.
- Employees could experience a conflict of interest around decisions that they have a personal stake in.
- Employee representatives will need to understand the importance of confidentiality on certain issues the board discusses and balance that with their role as liaison between employees and other board members.

**Example:** [Center for Employment Opportunities \(CEO\)](#)

### **Advisory Councils**

**Description:** When using an Advisory Council as an Employee Voice Strategy, an ESE gathers a small group of current employees or alumni to serve as an Advisory Council. Typically, Advisory Councils exist outside of an organization's board of directors and do not hold any legal or fiduciary responsibility. When convening an Advisory Council, an ESE should consider factors such as racial and gender diversity, length of tenure, and role. An ESE building a council of alumni should also consider the roles and experiences that potential members have had following their involvement at the ESE to see if there are additional skills or insight that person can bring to their service on the council. The Advisory Council would help leaders consider employee voice by either sharing from their own experiences or acting as an approachable person that staff could communicate directly with. Advisory Councils

#### **Benefits:**

- Employees may feel more comfortable giving feedback to a peer than a superior.
- Leadership has regular, defined intervals to intentionally consider employee voice—due to scheduled meetings with the Advisory Council.
- Participating in an Advisory Council provides additional opportunities for leadership development for members.

#### **Challenges:**

- Ensure there is a process for two-way feedback: The Advisory Council should not only speak to leadership but also share back with employees.
- The role and level of power that an Advisory Council has will need to be clearly defined. For example, Advisory Council members may shed insight but ultimate decision making power typically lies with senior leadership or the organization's board of Directors. ESEs will need to transparently set expectations so council members and employees know what to expect.
- ESEs should consider the extra time commitment that Advisory Council members are making and if/how to compensate those individuals.

**Example:** [The Welcoming Center](#)

#### **Employee-Led Initiatives**

**Description:** To use Employee-Led initiatives as an Employee Voice Strategy, ESEs gather a group of employees who function as a task force for a particular project or decision-making process. This group of employees will play a key role in researching, planning, and implementing whatever it is that they have been tasked with and will make recommendations to leadership.

#### **Benefits:**

- Leadership saves time by delegating certain tasks to the employee team.
- Employees have firsthand experience working for the organization which can inform their decision making.

#### **Challenges:**

- There may not always be tasks/projects that are appropriate for an employee-led team, so leadership may need to seek employee voice in other ways also.
- A small number of employees may not represent the opinions of the larger group.

#### **Listening, Monitoring & Evaluation Tools**

**Description:** Listening, monitoring and evaluation (LM&E) tools include surveys, focus groups, and interviews. These tools provide formal opportunities for leadership to collect feedback from employees, often at regular intervals (e.g. annually, after resigning, etc.). Surveys provide broad, often quantitative information about employees' experiences, while interviews give more in-depth, open-ended and qualitative feedback. Focus groups create opportunities for collaboration as employees come together to discuss topics that affect them at the ESE.

Together, these tools can give leadership insight into employees' perspectives and be helpful guides for decision making and prioritizing.

**Benefits:**

- The ESE can reach a large number of people for collecting feedback.
- Using a variety of methods (surveys, focus groups, interviews) gives employees different options for providing feedback and they can choose the one that makes them feel more comfortable.
- Feedback can easily be organized and analyzed.

**Challenges:**

- Leadership may receive limited feedback if participation is low.
- ESEs whose participants face language, educational, or digital literacy barriers will need to consider factors like accessibility and comprehension.
- Participants may struggle to answer honestly—particularly if surveys/interviews/tools are conducted by leadership. Using an external consultant may be beneficial to ensure more organic feedback.
- Employees may struggle with feeling like they are sharing feedback that is never implemented. Leaders should develop a plan to not only share back findings but identify changes that were made as a result of employees' voices.

**Example:** [More Than Words](#)

**Open-Door Policy**

**Description:** An open-door policy is a practice that encourages employees to make their concerns, questions, or ideas known to managers or leaders in the workplace. Although staff should be made aware of this policy during their orientation and regularly during the time they are employed at your ESE, this strategy is relatively informal. Feedback is unprompted by managers but instead initiated by staff.

**Benefits:**

- Easy to implement
- Informal, casual, and accessible
- Employees can share feedback in real time

**Challenges:**

- This strategy may not do enough to account for the power dynamic that exists between employees and leadership. Employees may struggle to share negative or difficult feedback candidly.
- Employees may not have time to share feedback regularly due to competing priorities or a leader's busy schedule. Others simply may not share feedback unless prompted.
- The feedback that is collected may be disproportionately focused on HR issues, rather than topics related to the organization's direction or mission

- Leadership must formalize a plan to ensure it is not only collecting information but also looking for opportunities to implement it.

**Example:** [Global Neighborhood](#)

### **“WHICH EMPLOYEE VOICE STRATEGY IS RIGHT FOR YOU” QUIZ”**

For each question, choose the response that best fits your organization. Add the points for the answers you select and check the recommended strategy based on your total.

#### **Questions**

##### **1) What is your primary goal for your employee voice strategy?**

- A) Empower employees to manage the business at the governance level and participate in financial success (5 points)
- B) Ensure employees have representation in high-level decision making (4 points)
- C) Form a group of employees or alumni to provide advisory feedback to leadership (3 points)
- D) Collect feedback from as many employees as possible (2 points)

##### **2) How much influence do you want employees to have in decision-making?**

- A) Full ownership and control (5 points)
- B) A formal role in decision-making processes (4 points)
- C) An advisory role but not formal decision-making power (3 points)
- D) Influence through formal feedback channels (2 points)

##### **3) What level of formality do you prefer in the employee voice process?**

- A) Structured systems in place for ownership and decision-making (5 points)
- B) Defined governance roles and regular decision-making meetings (4 points)
- C) Organized meetings for employees to provide feedback (3 points)
- D) Informal, with open-door conversations where employees provide feedback as needed (1 point)

##### **4) How comfortable are your employees with engaging with leadership?**

- A) Employees feel empowered when they own the organization and have a direct say in its direction (5 points)
- B) Employees appreciate having elected representatives to voice their concerns in leadership meetings (4 points)
- C) Some employees are comfortable giving feedback directly, but others might prefer giving feedback to peers (3 points)
- D) Employees feel comfortable giving direct feedback to leaders in informal settings (1 point)

##### **5) How do you prefer to gather feedback?**

- A) A formal council that meets regularly to share employee insights (4 points)

- B) Surveys or interviews to gather feedback from a wide group of employees (3 points)
- C) Delegate a small group of employees to lead projects or make recommendations (3 points)
- D) Informal discussions whenever an employee feels the need to share (1 point)

**6) What kind of staffing capacity does your organization have to oversee an Employee Voice Strategy?**

- A) We have the staff capacity to implement a fully structured employee ownership model (5 points)
- B) We could lead a special short term project to implement employee board representation which would then be fully integrated with the Board of Directors (4 points)
- C) We can manage a small group, like a council or task force, to gather employee feedback (3 points)
- D) We cannot allocate additional personnel to manage this process (1 point)

**7) How would you describe your organization's culture?**

- A) Highly collaborative, with shared decision-making (5 points)
- B) Formal and structured, with clarity on who makes what decisions (4 points)
- C) Moderately collaborative, but with defined leadership (3 points)
- D) Casual and informal, with open lines of communication (1 point)

**8) How much are you willing or able to invest in training employees for leadership or governance roles?**

- A) We're ready to fully train employees to manage and govern the organization (5 points)
- B) We can invest in more advanced leadership development and governance training (4 points)
- C) We're willing to offer basic training to support employee involvement (3 points)
- D) We can provide minimal training (1 point)

**9) How important is fast decision-making in your organization?**

- A) Not important, we prioritize broad employee involvement in decision-making (5 points)
- B) Not as important, we prioritize thorough discussion and participation (3 points)
- C) Moderately important, but we can take time for key decisions (2 points)
- D) Very important, we need to make decisions quickly (1 point)

**10) What level of employee engagement are you aiming for?**

- A) We want employees highly engaged in the business, with a deep sense of ownership (5 points)
- B) We want employees engaged at the governance level (4 points)
- C) We want employees to participate regularly in structured feedback (3 points)
- D) We want basic employee feedback without needing deep engagement (2 points)



**11) Are you willing to give employees full ownership and control over decision-making in your organization?**

- A) Yes, we are ready to fully transition to an employee-owned model (5 points)
- B) We want employees to have a strong voice, but not full ownership or control (3 points)
- C) No, we are not prepared for employee ownership but are interested in other ways to involve employees in decision-making (1 point)

**Scoring and Results:**

Add up the points you have from each question and record the total here: \_\_\_\_\_

**41-55 points: Employee Ownership (Worker Cooperative)**

Your organization is suited for the Employee Ownership model, where employees not only have a direct say in decision-making but also own the business and participate in its financial success.

***Note:** If you answered "B" or "C" to question 11, Employee Board Representation or Advisory Councils might be a better fit.*

**31-40 points: Employee Board Representation**

Having employees represent their peers on the board of directors is a good fit, allowing them to voice concerns and contribute to high-level decision-making.

**21-30 points: Advisory Councils**

Your organization is well-suited for using Advisory Councils, where employees or alumni regularly meet with leadership to provide feedback and help guide decisions.

**16-20 points: Employee-led Initiatives**

Your organization can benefit from giving employees specific tasks or projects to lead, empowering them to take ownership of initiatives while freeing leadership for other tasks.

**11-15 points: Listening, Monitoring & Evaluation Tools**

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups are the most effective ways for your organization to collect and analyze feedback from employees.

**0-10 points: Open-door Policy**

An informal, open-door policy that encourages employees to directly share feedback with leadership is the most fitting approach for your organization.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- What is our current stage of growth related to equity and inclusion? How can our Employee Voice Strategy move us forward with those goals?

- Are we looking to address specific challenges (e.g. retention, engagement, etc.) which could be solved by changing our Employee Voice Strategy?
- What is our organization's culture—collaborative, hierarchical, or something else?
- What level of engagement do we want from employees?
  - Do we want them engaged at all levels of decision making or just offering feedback on something specific?
- How quickly do we need decisions to be made in our organization?
- Does our strategy account for the diverse needs of our workforce?
  - For example, for ESEs that employee refugees, will the language barrier or a differing view of authority impact how feedback is given?
  - What about varying educational backgrounds?
- What will we do with the information we receive through our Employee Voice Strategy?
  - How much time and staffing will we contribute to the implementation process?
  - What is our plan for reporting back to employees?

## **SUMMARY**

Hearing from employees can help ESEs promote mission alignment, keep employees engaged, and guide organizational decision making. Selecting and implementing an Employee Voice Strategy holds leadership accountable for hearing from employees and ensures that staff have a clear process for engaging with leadership.