

The business benefits of speaking up and how to encourage it.



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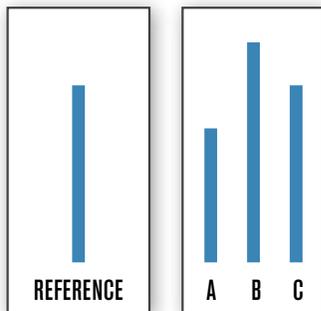
Speaking up is essential to bringing an inspired idea to life. Innovation requires doing something completely differently than in the past. At some point, someone went against the status quo. Speaking up has saved lives, prevented PR nightmares, informed managers what employees really need to be successful and preserved company culture. Right now, employees are working differently and customers are buying differently. People need to speak up to say what they need, identify problems before they materialize and offer novel ideas to solve them.

But speaking up is hard. In 1951, Solomon Asch told a group of people they would be participating in a visual perception test. One of the individuals was an actual study participant and the rest were in on the experiment.

They had no relationship to each other and no power dynamics. The participant was asked an objective, easy question: which line (A, B, or C) equaled the reference line, as pictured in figure 1. The participants who were in on the experiment sometimes insisted an obviously too short or long line was the reference line. If the group stated the wrong answer, so would the participant. ([If you're curious, here's a video of one participant.](#))

If we cannot go against the group when evaluating the length of a line, how do we expect employees to speak up at work – with its complicated relationships, built-in power dynamics at play and difficult and subjective tasks?

Figure 1



The card on the left is the reference, the card on the right shows the comparison lines.

We have found four ways to make speaking up more likely.

1
one

Instill confidence by training. While some confidence is inborn, people who said they received the training they need to do their jobs well in the past year were more likely to say they would voice their opinions at work, even if they were unpopular.

2
two

Let them lead. People who lead projects, initiatives or teams, or who have just been heard and taken seriously before, are more likely to speak up in the future.

3
three

Give it meaning. Speaking up is often uncomfortable and comes with some social risk. While we can do our best to lower that social risk in our organizations through culture, we can also make it more likely for people to speak up if we ensure they really believe in what they are doing. People are more willing to protect something that is extremely valuable to them, even if protecting it comes at a cost.

4
four

Improve belonging and support. Speaking up is far less scary if you know you are in a safe space and have a strong team behind you. Those who feel like they have the support of their team members and belong to that team are more likely to voice their opinions.

Ask your employees what they need and what they think the business needs. And when they answer, listen.

