Voice in Change

Understanding divergent perceptions of employee voice amidst organisational change

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of divergent perceptions of employee voice in an organisation where managers and employees have different views on the frequency and effectiveness of employee voice. The study aims to provide insights into how these divergent perceptions originate and the factors that contribute to them. By using a qualitative approach, the study examined the case of a multinational organisation undergoing multiple change processes resulting from an organisational merger. Conducting and analysing ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews resulted in four factors contributing to the divergent perceptions; the poor reception of voice, attributed to the factors of labelling of voice as resistance to change and the busyness of managers. Additionally, the introduction of new hierarchical structures and the presence of socially acquired fear of managers are believed to hinder the clarity of raised concerns. Consequently, the combination of inadequate voice reception and limited clarity in expressed concerns gives rise to divergent perceptions of voice.

Keywords: voice, employee voice, organisational change, divergent perceptions, organisational change

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

1   Introduction

The atmosphere in the company seemed heavy as we began our interviews at Vista. "Let's hope something will evolve that makes it possible for people to air their concerns". Alex continued painting a picture of the company as if only a few dared to voice their concerns and opinions. As we conducted more interviews, the employees consistently reiterated the same account. They described voicing their concerns - about lost company culture, about the derailing of change, and about improving the work climate. Chris states, "We are absolutely important for the business. We know that. We understand that. But I think many people have lost that feeling that they are seen". The employees experienced that no one seemed to care.

Just as the employees did not recognise the voice of their colleagues, neither did the managers. During one interview, a manager even expressed that they were struggling to get the employees to open up and share their voices of concerns. This was a stark contrast to what the employees had shared with us. According to the managers, the employees remain quiet, and the managers have no idea what's going on in their minds. It seems that there's a phenomenon of no one voicing concerns, yet everyone claims they do.

While it is easy to say that employee voice is important, little else is easy about this concept. To start with, the concept of voice itself has been described as "messy" (Dowding et al., 2000; Morrison, 2011). Employee voice is a flexible and multidimensional concept lacking a consensus definition (Morrison, 2023). Employment Relations scholars refer to voice as the mechanisms granting an opportunity to employees to take part in decision making, whereas Organisational Behaviour refers to voice as an act, something that employees do (Morrison, 2023) and an individual expression for problem solving (Kaufman, 2015). For example, Wilkinson and Fay (2011), writing from the HRM discipline, defines voice as an opportunity to have a say. Fleming and Spicer (2007) have a different frame of reference and view voice as a dimension of resistance, such as using a union to get valid representation. For clarity, this thesis uses the

definition of employee voice described by Morrison from the Organisational Behaviour discipline: "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organisational or unit functioning" (2011, p. 375). In other words, it refers to voluntarily sharing with the goal of improving the organisation.

The phenomenon of divergent perceptions about employee voice, where there is a disagreement between managers and employees on the frequency and effectiveness of employee voice, has been observed in organisational research. While previous research has focused on the outcomes of these divergent perceptions, there is a gap in understanding how they develop in the first place. Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) suggest that further research is needed to investigate this issue, as it could have significant theoretical and practical value. We believe this issue is critical in times of organisational change, where the stakes are higher and detecting employee voice is potentially more problematic. Today, there is allegedly more pressure for change than ever to ensure organisational existence (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2019). Not at least considering the current tight labour market, growing emphasis on mental health, and the increased focus on inclusion and diversity in the workplace. In this, employee voice plays a significant role, as by listening to the voices of employees, top managers can gain valuable feedback and suggestions, leading to better decision making and more effective organisational strategies (Morrison, 2011). The case at Vista provided an interesting one, as being a company amid multiple change processes resulting from an organisational merger, where we could speak to both managers and employees.

Our initial hunch was that the divergent perceptions were due to these ongoing intensive change projects happening within the organisation. With so much going on, perhaps employees felt their voices were drowned out. However, as we probed further, we discovered deeper, more nuanced reasons for this discrepancy. Our research aims to provide further insights into the theoretical gap in understanding how divergent perceptions about voice originate. We aim to do so by answering the question: What factors contribute to divergent perceptions of employee voice within changing organisations? By doing so, we hope to provide insights that could help changing organisations minimise the negative consequences of these divergent perceptions.

This thesis will explore the contributing factors of divergent perceptions about voice through a qualitative study using the mystery approach (Alvehus, 2020; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The thesis will start by addressing existing literature on both voice and change in the literature review chapter. Here, relevant topics, such as silence and social dynamics affecting voice, will be addressed, followed by the methodology chapter, which will describe our research approach in depth, including data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. The findings chapter will present our sorted data with comments and interpretations. The findings will be connected to the existing literature in the discussion chapter. This is also where our contribution starts to be outlined. Finally, in the conclusion, we summarise what was discussed in the discussion chapter and attempt to answer our research question: What factors contribute to divergent perceptions of employee voice within changing organisations? In addition to answering the question, we also reflect on the implications and limitations of our study and propose further research on the topic.

2   Literature Review

This chapter seeks to present a thorough analysis of the relevant literature on employee voice. The chapter begins with a brief history and comparison of different meanings present in the various disciplines. Further, we will discuss key concepts related to employee voice and outline its relation to different social dynamics in an organisation. By examining the existing literature on employee voice, drawing on the extensive work of others, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of its significance in the workplace.

2.1   History of Employee Voice

As per Kaufman's (2014) observation, when one reads the employee voice academic literature, one might conclude the concept did not exist before Albert Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" in 1970. Many scholars cite his work as the origin (Morrison, 2011; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Satterstrom, Kerrissey & DiBenigno, 2021; Wilkinson & Fay, 2011) and with that, Kaufman (2014) argues there is a long history of writing on employee voice unacknowledged and unrecognised. Kaufman (2014) continues that present scholars have essentially reinvented a well-known and utilised concept and tend to ignore the contributions of past scholars. The past scholars addressed by Kaufman (2014) highlight employee voice as a cross-disciplinary concept with various dimensions, such as communication vs. influence, individual vs. collective. However, Kaufman admits that research on employee voice has noticeably advanced since the study of Hirschman (1970).

Hirschman's work focused on voice as dissent, but the term 'employee voice' is a flexible and multidimensional concept that has been, as mentioned in the introduction, examined by a range of disciplines, including Human Resource Management, Political Science, Organisational Behaviour, Psychology and Law (Wilkinson et al., 2014). Due to this diversity of perspectives, there is little consensus on what employee voice means (Morrison, 2023). Employment Relations scholars refer to voice as the mechanisms granting an opportunity to employees to have a say in decision making, where Organisational Behaviour refers to voice as an act, something that employees do (Morrison, 2023), an individual expression for problem solving (Kaufman, 2015). For example, Wilkinson and Fay (2011), writing from the HRM discipline, define voice as an opportunity to have a say, whereas scholars Fleming and Spicer (2007) have a different frame of reference and see voice as a dimension of resistance, such as using a union for efforts to get valid representation. According to Wilkinson et al. (2014), employee voice is distinct from, but related to concepts such as participation, involvement and, in more recent times, engagement.

To deal with the lacking consensus and to make voice less messy, Morrison (2011) did an analysis of the different conceptualisations of employee voice. This included multiple definitions, sharing several important aspects. Firstly, voice is a verbal expression of a message to a recipient. Secondly, Morrison (2011) analysed that voice is defined as discretionary behaviour, therefore, not recognised directly or explicitly by the formal reward system (LePine, Erez & Johnson, 2002). The third commonality is the constructive intention of voice, meaning an objective to accomplish change rather than venting or complaining. Morrison (2011), writing from the Organisational Behaviour discipline, concluded the analysis with the following definition "informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change" (p. 174). This definition focuses on employee voice behaviours rather than voice procedures, which is also the primary focus of this thesis. This allows focus on experiences of the involved parties rather than the technical execution. Morrison's definition has been criticised for allegedly excluding voice as venting or complaining (Wilkinson et al., 2014). However, Morrison (2023) has responded on this critique and argues this definition does allow for voice in the form of

venting and complaining. With that, this definition covers the ground of our direction and will be used throughout this thesis.

2.2   The Concept of Voice

Literature describes voice as a social equation (Welsh et al., 2022), a co-created phenomenon that depends on the response of others to be effective (Withey & Cooper, 1989), and manifests through social interaction (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Detert and Burris (2007) argue there is a shared responsibility regarding voice, where employees are responsible for effectively making issues known, and managers for setting the right tone. Leaders may have the desire to create opportunities for voice, but ultimately, employees continuously decide whether to speak up or remain silent (Ashford, Sutcliffe & Christianson, 2009). Morrison (2011) found that employees consider two main costs/benefits before voice: perceived efficacy of voice; and perceived safety of voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999; Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012; Satterstrom, Kerrissey & DiBenigno, 2021; Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003).

Perceived efficacy of voice is described as the employee's consideration if voicing will lead to an effective change. Perceived safety of voice is described as the calculation of risks from voice and could be linked to psychological safety. Psychological safety, according to Edmondson (2003), is the "climate in which people are comfortable and expressing themselves" (p. 1). It relates to trust, but (Edmondson, 1999) distinguishes the two concepts. The former is how individuals perceive the potential outcomes of taking interpersonal risks in a work environment, such as voicing opinions or admitting mistakes. It consists of implicit beliefs about the responses of others when asking questions, proposing new ideas or seeking feedback. Psychological safety is mostly experienced at group level and characterizes a work environment that fosters productive discussions but does not imply the absence of pressure or issues (Edmondson, 1999). However, trust primarily revolves around the expectation that others' future actions will align with one's own interests (Edmondson, 1999).

Regarding the managerial responsibility in the voice co-construct, Satterstrom, Kerrissey and DiBenigno (2021) argue that the authority holder can affect how psychologically safe the employees feel in an environment. This, in turn, will impact the likeliness of employees to speak up (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999; Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012; Satterstrom, Kerrissey & DiBenigno, 2021). In addition to voice being dependent on the response, Liu, Zhu and Yang (2010) argue that voice is target sensitive because the costs and benefits of speaking up are related to whom the employee voices their concerns. Further argued by Satterstrom, Kerrissey and DiBenigno (2021) is that consequences and outcomes of voice are impacted by how the manager views the act of voicing concerns. For example, if a manager holds a negative value to the idea of employee voice, the result of voice is more likely to be negative for the employee. Because of the co-created nature of voice, voice reception plays a crucial role (Welsh et al., 2022). Voice reception is the recipients' reaction to voice and has the ability to guide the voicer's discretionary behaviour in the workplace. Research by King et al. (2019) found that by properly explaining the reason for not endorsing a voiced idea or concern, leaders promote safety in the co-creation. Welsh et al. (2022) discussed the effects of different types of voice reception on social behaviours. They refer to positive, negative and no voice reception. Positive reception is characterised by encouragement after voice, while negative reception is characterised by dismissal of voice. A voicing situation where no reception or acknowledgement occurred, is referred to as "no reception". Detert and Edmondson (2011) add an important notion, that despite the co-creation of voice implying a collective benefit, individuals voicing bear voice's costs alone.

The literature provides a wealth of resources on what influences the voice reception. Morrison and Rothman (2009) identified that managers with an inflated self-view of power, may be less receptive to inputs differing from their initial thoughts. Similarly, Li et al. (2019), found that depleted managers use less cognitive efforts to process voiced concerns. A state of depletion means "a state in which the self does not have all the [self-control] resources it has normally", according to (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 2; Li et al., 2019, p. 869). The research by Li et al. (2019) addressed a paradox, while managers could potentially benefit more from employee voice when being depleted, they are less likely to notice or endorse it. This is a phenomenon that Ashford, Sutcliffe and Christianson (2009) attribute to constraints on time and attention, which

can signal a lack of openness to voice, such as not listening and responding brusquely. Signalling from managers that voice is unwelcome could decrease the frequency of voice as it is no longer considered safe to engage in (Fast, Burris & Bartel, 2014; Satterstrom, Kerrissey & DiBenigno, 2021). Additionally, Fast, Burris and Bartel (2014) found that managers with low-self efficacy, which is the perceived ability to meet the competences required from a manager, may signal that voice is unwelcome.

2.3   Distinctions within Voice

Research by, among others, Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) extended the voice literature by including both constructive suggestions and concerns, as much earlier research mainly focused on promotive aspects of voice, and less on the prohibitive aspects. Research by Liang, Farh and Farh (2012) builds further on these two content domains and argued that the two types differ in behavioral content. Promotive voice seeks to realise potentials and ideals, while prohibitive voice aims to prevent harm or negative consequences. The former is future-focused, as it concentrates on improving ways of doing it, the latter can highlight negative factors that occurred in the past or might cause harm in the future. As mentioned in the definition of Morrison (2011) voice is discretionary behaviour, and an often used term in the literature is prosocial voice (Morrison, 2023). Often, the term prosocial is equated with pro-organisational, but the former encompasses actions aimed at promoting the interests of employees, customers, and stakeholders, even when these interests conflict with managements'. Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) acknowledge prosocial voice as one of three types of voice, and note the primary focus to be the benefit of others. They suggest two other types of voice to be included, which enrich the understanding. Defensive voice aims to protect the self, rather than the other-oriented notion of prosocial voice. Acquiescent voice is a type of voice focused on resignation and therefore is less proactive than the other types, as it results in expressions of agreement based on the feelings of inability to make a difference (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003). Table 1 displays the different types in a structured manner.

Table 1.1 Employee Voice Distinctions

Type of voice	Authors	Definition
Promotive Voice	Van Dyne and LePine (1998), Liang, Farh and Farh (2012)	"aspects of voice, or expressions of ways to improve existing work practices and procedures to benefit organisations" (Liang, Farh and Farh, 2012, p. 71)
Prohibitive Voice	Van Dyne and LePine (1998), Liang, Farh and Farh (2012)	"aspects of voice, or expressions of individuals' concern about existing or impending practices, incidents, or behaviours that may harm their organisation" (Liang, Farh and Farh, 2012, p. 72)
Prosocial voice	Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003)	"expressing work-related ideas, information, or opinions based on cooperative motives" (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003, p. 1371)
Defensive voice	Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003)	"expressing work-related ideas, information or opinions – based on fear – with the goal of protecting the self" (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003, p. 1372)
Acquiescent Voice	Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003)	"expression of work-related ideas, information, or opinions – based on feelings of resignation" (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003, p. 1373)

Liu, Zhu and Yang (2010) add that voice is associated with risks, due to the challenge-oriented nature of voice behaviour. They revealed that employees differentiate between speaking out, towards peers, and speaking up, towards supervisors, and they are more likely to voice their opinions to targets they strongly identify with. A social identification with the organisation encourages employees to express opinions towards peers, while personal identification with the supervisor encourages an expression directly to them (Liu, Zhu & Yang, 2010). Their research suggests that the voice target is an essential dimension in the decision making to voice or remain silent.

2.4   Silence

Because of the common assumption that silence is simply the absence of voice and signifies inaction, employee silence has received less attention in organisational research (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). As in the voice literature, plays Hirschman's (1970) work also a role in the silence literature, although Pinder and Harlos (2001) recognise that silence received much less of his attention. In his analysis of the Exit, Voice and Loyalty options, silence has been ordered with loyalty, where "some may simply refuse to exit and suffer in silence, confident that things soon will get better" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 38; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Morrison (2014) argues that literature on voice and silence should be integrated, as "conceptually, silence is failure to voice, and voice is a choice to not remain silent" (p. 177) and defines silence as "the conscious withholding of information, suggestions, ideas, questions, or concerns about potentially important work- or organisation-related issues from persons who might be able to take action to address those issues" (Morrison, 2011, p. 377). Silence is often a collective phenomenon, as per Morrison and Milliken (2000), and name the shared perception among employees that speaking up about difficulties or issues is dangerous and/or futile, a climate of silence. Pinder and Harlos (2001) add to this concept of climate of silence, that the norms in organisations can influence people to stay quiet, possibly forever. The reluctancy to share negative information because of the experienced discomfort of being the messenger of bad news, is referred to as the mum-effect (Rosen & Tesser, 1970).

2.5 Implicit Voice Theories

Detert and Edmondson (2011) found that employee silence may have implicit voice theories as a hidden reason. Their research focused on self-protective implicit voice theories, which are "knowledge structures that individuals use to avoid trouble that could arise from speaking up to authorities" (Detert & Edmondson, 2011, p. 462). The implicit voice theories involve assumptions that are not always accurate, but can be useful to individuals by providing psychological control (Levy, Chiu & Hong, 2006). Because of implicit theories, individuals can rapidly and easily determine courses of actions (Chiu et al., 1997), which happens unconsciously (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Detert and Edmondson (2011) argue that people come to work with a built set of implicit voice theories, which are shaped by learning and socialisation in past hierarchical organisations. They identified five self-protective implicit voice theories; "presumed target identification; need solid data or solutions to speak up; don't bypass the boss upward; don't embarrass the boss in public; and negative career consequences of voice" (Detert & Edmondson, 2011, p. 470).

Detert and Edmondson (2011) propose difficulty in countering or reducing the impact of these implicit voice theories, as silence can be perceived as effective in keeping oneself safe, reinforcing the exact implicit theory. Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) suggest it is important to identify the elements that influence the creation, utilisation, strengthening and overcoming of implicit voice theories, with the perceived safety of voice being an important aspect of that. Research by Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) focused on how implicit theories form the decision to remain silent, and found that the earlier mentioned discomfort of bringing bad news up the hierarchy, the mum-effect, is not the only reason. They suggest it is also about the relational and social aspects of work, as communication, interaction and observation of/with others shape the perception of what can be discussed at work (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). As mentioned before, silence is a collective phenomenon as the choice to keep silent can be connected to the choices of others to do the same (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Besides the implicit voice theories that may be present within employees, they are also present in managers, possibly developing or reinforcing the climate of silence (Morrison

& Milliken, 2000). Seeing employees as self-interested, ill-informed, and unpredictable and therefore, untrustworthy, will contribute to organisational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

2.6 Change and Resistance

As stated in the introduction Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015) argue that we live in a moment of profound change, according to the majority of contemporary texts on change. This has led to a similarly increasing number of change models, steps, and concepts. Many scholars refer to Lewin's Unfreeze, Change and Refreeze steps as the fundamental approach to managing change (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown, 2016). Weick and Quinn (1999) argue that one should replace the focus on "change" with "changing", to emphasise that change is "never off" (p. 382). As they state, "change never starts because it never stops" (p. 381). Some change literature, therefore, suggests rethinking change as a continuous process rather than episodic (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). An important part of change, in order to create a new reality in the minds of organisational members, is language, argue Dunford and Jones (2000). Ford and Ford (1995) go as far as to argue that without communication, there is no intentional change. Ford and Ford (1995) continue by stating that producing change is, by communicating, bringing a new reality, or set of social structures into existence. They argue that communication is key to successful change, and the lack thereof can lead to uncertainty and resistance.

Organisational change can be met with reluctance from employees, which is commonly labelled as resistance (Watson, 1982). Resistance is a multifaceted concept that is difficult to define, but it represents a relationship with power and is characterised by dualisms such as "organized and unorganized, formal and informal, individual and collective" (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, p. 31). Lewin's (1952, cited in Piderit, 2000) definition of resistance characterises it as a restraining force moving in the direction of maintaining the status quo. The notion of resistance is often associated with negative connotations since employees who resist change are often perceived as disobedient (Piderit, 2000). However, Piderit (2000) emphasises that the success of the change depends on employees' support, which goes beyond simply overcoming resistance.

Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) point out a "change agent-centric view" prevalent in organisational change literature, where change agents are portrayed as "victims of the irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients" (p. 362). Maurer (1996, cited in Spencer, 1996) challenges this view and argues that resistance is an inevitable response to change, and it is the management's inability to work with the resistance that causes difficulties. Maurer (1996, cited in Spencer, 1996) states that managers often have default responses to resistance, such as use of power, killing the messenger, manipulation and force of reason. To broaden the understanding of resistance, Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) propose three ways. Firstly, should resistance be viewed as a label applied by change agents to explain the responses of change recipients to change attempts. Secondly, the agents' actions and inactions might contribute to the responses they identify as resistance, suggesting that resistance is a result of the nature of the interaction between agents and recipients, rather than an immediate or direct response to a change. Lastly, there are situations in which, what some people refer to as resistance, might help bring about change. The second proposition from Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) is linked to the notion of voice manifesting through social interaction (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), where the response of others plays a critical role (Withey & Cooper, 1989).

According to Bryant (2003), managers often view voice as an act of resistance, especially in response to organisational change, leading to contempt towards it. Fleming and Spicer (2007) consider voice as a form of resistance that aims to get access to power. However, by labelling voice as resistance, organisations miss the opportunity to provide compelling justifications that could increase support for the change among the recipients (Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008). Although the distinction between voice and resistance is not frequently discussed in management literature, Bryant (2006) argues that "employee concerns and justifications are not reflective of resistance to organisational change programmes" (p. 255). Despite this, it can be difficult to differentiate between voice as a constructive response and resistance to change (Bryant, 2003). Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) suggest that the word resistance loses its significance when attributed to all change recipients' actions, a point that aligns with Morrison's (2011) notion that ignoring variation in message type could lead to significant information loss. Additionally, this serves to underscore some of the different types of voice mentioned in the earlier literature.

2.7   Hierarchy and Culture

The mum effect is the reluctancy to be the messenger of bad news, as mentioned earlier. Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) argue that an hierarchical relationship between employee and manager reinforces this, because when speaking up about problems or concerns, employees are concerned about relational aspects. According to Magee and Galinsky (2008) is the function and form of hierarchy often taken for granted, since it is an essential and widespread aspect of all organisations. They define hierarchy as an "implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension" (p. 354) and organisational charts, job titles and reporting structures signal a hierarchy formalisation.

Magee and Galinsky (2008) further argue that hierarchy effectively organises working groups, by providing social order and fulfilling the human need for coordination within social groups. According to them, hierarchy fosters more rewarding workplace interactions and improves group performance. This because, unlike more egalitarian arrangements, hierarchy offers distinct lines of authority that optimise the coordination of many types of activities.

Magee and Galinsky (2008) also discuss social power within hierarchical structures, defining it as the "asymmetric control over valued resources in social relationships" (p. 361). They emphasise the significance of the term 'asymmetric,' highlighting that not everyone has access to this control over valued resources. According to the authors, individuals with high social power hold importance for those with lower power, as the latter depend on the former. However, Magee and Galinsky (2008) argue that when substitutes, such as access to other individuals with high power, become available to those with low power, the significance of the original person of high power diminishes. This is because the lower power person is no longer as dependent on their exclusive access. Furthermore, they continue establishing that the person with high social power becomes more important, the fewer substitutes available.

Kärreman, Sveningsson, and Alvesson (2002) argue that literature is moving away from bureaucratisation, with its emphasis on hierarchy, centralisation and standardisation, towards more flexible and organically structured organisations. Heckscher (1994) argues that bureaucracies have inherent limitations, making successful implementation challenging. A limitation is the segmentation of responsibilities which is the dividing of work into specific roles. This segmentation results in wasted employee capacity, due to specific lines of responsibility and authority, which may result in a "silo-mentality" where parts of the organisation are disconnected from others (Heckscher, 1994). The difficulty of coordinating a coherent team effort across boundaries, is seen as another limitation. Lastly, allows the bureaucratic structure mostly only the leadership to have a complete picture of the required changes. As Heckscher (1994) states, "management operates primarily through formal structure; change therefore almost always involves 'restructuring.'" (p. 23).

Wilkinson et al. (2014) add the limitation of a bureaucracy stifling employee involvement and voice. Despite the well-defined formal structure, the informal communication and voice systems are difficult to utilise in bureaucracies (Heckscher, 1994). According to Morrison (2011) employees are more likely to voice in non-bureaucratic organisational structures and also state that hierarchy can stifle upward communication. Research by Festinger (1950) also showed that the introduction of hierarchical structures hinders open communication, particularly communication aimed at those in higher positions. This in turn, increases the lateral cooperation, according to Heckscher (1994). Even when negative news is brought up in the hierarchy, this is done in a way that increases the likelihood of acceptance of the message (Millik & Lam, 2009).

The extent to which employees feel encouraged or discouraged to voice their concerns, may also depend on organisational culture (Dutton et al., 1997). Organisational culture, like voice, is another concept that has been difficult to define or find consensus on. For example, Schein (2004) defines organisational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 17). Knights and Willmott (1987) propose a more critical interpretation, revealing the presence of oppression within culture. Alvesson (1985) also addresses the tendency in research to conceptualize culture

as a shared system of values, norms, and symbols and with that fail to reveal the power dynamics existing in management and labour practices. Additionally, Alvesson argues that cultural studies often tend to focus on trivial aspects and insignificant factors "connected closely to the essence of the organisation" (p. 109). Alvesson (1985) stresses to consider the work practices being a crucial aspect of cultural analyses in organisations and work practices. Not only do they express the overall culture, but significantly impact various cultural aspects of organisations, such as beliefs, thought patterns and norms and values. The cultural characteristics of the workplace are affected by, for example, the complexity or level of discretion of the work content (Alvesson, 1985).

Willmott (1993) continues on the critical view of culture with the term corporate culturism, which "seeks to construct consensus by managing the culture through which employee values are acquired" (p. 524). According to Willmott (1993), this is presented as the solution to the criticism on bureaucracies. In bureaucracies, the emotional and irrational elements are removed, and corporate culture aims to recognise the unique abilities and contributions of each individual (Willmott, 1993). However, Willmott argues the differentiation of bureaucracy and corporate culturism to be misleading, as through the reinforcement of culture, space for expressing and pledging adherence to other norms or values is diminished and, ideally, eliminated. The underlying assumption that employees prioritise the organisation's core values during work hours, is based on the belief that employees' other values and priorities are weak and, therefore, changeable (Willmott, 1993).

Willmott (2003) implies that within corporate culturism, the organisation creates the impression that employees are self-determining individuals, whilst they are actually conforming to the organisation's creation of autonomy, which ultimately is a form of control. Fleming and Spicer (2003) state that although strengthening the culture has the aim to increase commitment (Willmott, 1993, 2003) and culture management does with many result in identification with the organisation, with some workers this results in cynicism and calculative compliance (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Willmott, 1993, 2003). This, Willmott (1993) argues because from an employee's perspective, culture management may be perceived as intrusive on their sense of self, causing resistance. Cynicism may be a way for employees to escape managerial influence by providing

an "inner 'free space'" (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p. 160), but it can also reproduce the power relations employees are trying to escape (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). As they further explain, even if employees keep an ironic distance and do not take things seriously, they are still participating in them, drawing on Žižek's (1989, cited in Fleming & Spicer, 2003) ideas.

2.8   Perceptions of voice in change

Despite the fact that organisations may change or improve their organisational structures or culture, Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) found that the perception of these is what usually shapes the decision to voice or stay silent. Much of the research on voice focuses on one perspective, that of the manager or of the employee. Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) argue that this is insufficient and can result in inconsistent arguments and findings. When only considering the speaker or the target of the voice, this neglects the importance of whether there is agreement that the verbal input is constructive and leads to positive changes. Where it is possible that there is agreement on the employees' input, employees' perception that they are speaking up, is not always perceived similarly by management (Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013), resulting in divergent perceptions. They continue by expanding on an overestimation of voice, that shows a perspective of high levels of speaking up, and an underestimation of voice, reporting less frequently speaking up.

Employees who overestimate their voice may continue ineffective behaviours due to their disregarding of criticism and feedback. Also, when employees overestimate their voice in comparison to their manager's perception, their comments may go unrecognised, leading to frustration. Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) continue by stating that employees who overestimate their voice may "simply have inflated self-assessment" (p. 24). These may lead to negative outcomes for the employee. Overestimation by employees of their level of voice in comparison to the managers perception, negatively impacts performance ratings and even are more likely to be involuntarily terminated. Underestimation of voice, however, resulted in better performance ratings. According to their research, agreement on display of high levels of voice by employees, resulted in favourable outcomes for the employee.

Where Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) focused on the effects and outcomes of the (dis)agreement, overestimation and underestimation of voice, they did not focus on the factors that contribute to the forming of this disagreement in perception. Building upon the understanding Where Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) focused on the effects and outcomes of the (dis)agreement, overestimation and underestimation of voice, they did not focus on the factors that contribute to the forming of this disagreement in perception.

Building upon the understanding of employee voice, divergent perceptions and its effects, it is important to consider contextual factors, such as organisational change. Significant to mention is a recent study from Li and Tangirala (2022), who combine the change and voice literature. According to their research, plays voice a crucial role in determining team success during times of change. Teams often experience dips in performance after in the immediate aftermath of changes, called the disruption stage. This disruption stage should be followed by the recovery stage, in which teams reach their original performance levels (Li & Tangirala, 2022). Their research found that prohibitive voice can be especially useful for teams at the disruption stage of change, where there is a need to reduce errors. Promotive voice, on the other hand, is more useful in the recovery stage, in which innovative ideas should be encouraged (Li & Tangirala, 2022). They continue to argue that both types of voice are necessary to team success in periods of change, whereas leaders tend to react more positive to promotive than to prohibitive voice, because the latter can be interpreted as criticism (Li & Tangirala, 2022).

3 Methodology

The objective of this chapter is to provide a clear account of the steps taken to arrive at an answer to our research question. Firstly, a comprehensive outline of our approach to the study is given, followed by a detailed explanation of our data collection and data analysis. Additionally, critical and ethical considerations concerning this research that should be acknowledged, are highlighted.

3.1 Research Approach

The topic of employee voice has captivated our interest. We had an inkling that voices were going unheard, but it remained unclear whether this stemmed from a lack of interest on the part of managers or a reluctance among employees to express their thoughts and concerns. Because of this vague feeling that we could not pinpoint, approaches such as the laissez-faire (Styhre, 2013), grounded theory (Alvehus, 2020) or inductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007) seemed to describe the process we imagined. These approaches all describe research starting with a sense of where to go but without a clear result in mind. However, as this research only has a limited duration and number of interviews, the inductive approach would not be suitable, and any theory derived from that number of interviews would be considered generalising (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Instead, the abductive approach starts with a mystery and seeks to explain it (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), aiming for insights into existing theories rather than creating an entirely new theory from scratch, which aligns better with the direction of our thesis.

Due to the limited duration and scope of our research, the inductive approach would not have been possible, as according to Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019) "no amount of empirical data will necessarily enable theory-building (p. 24). Rather than creating a new theory, the abductive approach seeks to provide further insights into existing theories, aligning with our aim for the

study. Further, the mystery approach (Alvehus, 2020; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) was adopted to question basic assumptions by focusing on impressions in the empirical material that contradict theoretical assumptions. As Alvehus (2020) states, the mystery approach is based on "systematically shifting between empirical and theoretical perspectives" (p. 20). This back-and-forth engagement with "the social world as an empirical source for theoretical ideas" is similarly involved in the abductive approach (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.24).

As the abductive research approach is considered pattern-finding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), it correlated well with our interest in the hidden conflicts in assumptions. This interest also placed us within the critical theory research tradition since this approach is especially interested in the implicit assumptions and processes that lead to specific outcomes, which correlates with our interest in employee voice and how it is affected by structures of power, interests, or conflicts. Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) state that critical theorists argue that the purpose of theorising is beyond understanding and extends towards emancipation. However, the scope of our research is too small to come to emancipatory conclusions or actions. Alvesson and Deetz (1996) state the expansion of the knowledge base, betterment of the decision process, growth and learning, and adaptability are more important to critical studies, which aligns with our aim for this research.

As our interest lies in providing further insights into the factors that contribute to divergent perceptions, it was clear to us that we wanted to conduct a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews. Flick, Kardoff and Steinke (2004) state that "qualitative research claims to describe life worlds 'from the inside out'" (p. 3), capturing the perspectives of participants, in our case, employees and managers. This aligns well with our choice of an abductive approach. At the same time, it allowed us to explore their experiences and, therefore, possible underlying assumptions as part of the critical theory tradition. However, as mentioned, the limitation of having a smaller set of interviewees resulted in empirical data not being enough to create generalisations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Despite that, it provided an insight into the perceptions of employee voice from employees and managers in an organisation undergoing multiple change projects. The semi-structured interviews will be discussed in more detail in the section on Data Collection.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Selection

The interviewees for this study were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The study population included employees and managers employed at Vista for at least one year to ensure they were familiar with the company's processes. First, a list of potential interviewees was obtained, comprising employees who voluntarily expressed their willingness to participate in an interview after seeing our message posted on Vista's intranet. From there, we selected employees and managers, which was essential to capture divergent perceptions. Furthermore, we wanted to avoid imposing additional burdens on overwhelmed employees or teams amidst the ongoing organisational changes. Instead, it presented an opportunity for those employees who felt they had the capacity to contribute. However, this selection process had limitations as the interviewees were geographically dispersed across the Nordic region and held different positions within the company. Therefore, it could not be assumed they shared a common language and terminology or familiarity with the same people and situations. Nevertheless, despite these differences, recurring themes emerged from the interviews, illustrating streaks of company culture strong enough to be recognised throughout the Nordic organisation. Thus, conducting the study across multiple countries and teams allowed the recognition of cultural patterns that would have remained unnoticed in a single-team or single-country study.

3.2.2 Interviews

From the list of possible interviewees, we reached out via the online platform Calendly, providing them with a calendar where they could book a timeslot. Here, they were informed about the topic, approval for voice recording was asked, and we asked them their preferred language for interviewing.

Before the interview, an initiating email was sent to establish a relationship before the meeting. After that, the interviews were conducted digitally via the platform Google Meet. Approximately

the first fifteen minutes were spent establishing a relationship, informing the interviewee that there were no right or wrong answers and checking if they still approved of the interview being recorded in voice. In most interviews, the following questions evolved from what was said in this initial talk. The duration of each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and was conducted by one of the researchers.

According to (Kvale, 1996), there are two types of interviewers, the Miner and the Traveller. The Miner sees knowledge as something valuable that is hidden, which is the interviewer's job to "dig it up". The Traveller, on the other hand, represents the interviewer as someone on a journey, wandering through landscapes and engaging in conversations with people they meet. In this approach, knowledge is constructed through conversations. In this study, the traveller approach was taken within our interviews.

The interviews were conducted semi-structured, focusing on dialogue with the research subject to understand their experiences and enabled us to improvise follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Employee voice is a topic that is very permeated with the individual's perception, experiences and understanding of the word. Reviewing the literature, it is a very vast topic and dependent on the discipline, resulting in varying definitions, which indicates that this could also be the case among individuals. Because of this, we chose to leave the term *voice* out of the interviews as much as possible. Both to avoid misunderstandings, but also to try and avoid the answers being coloured by the interviewee's view of the concept. By leaving the term *voice* out of the interviews as much as possible, we opened up the conversations and left room for mysteries to arise, as suggested by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007). Instead, we communicated our interest to be in the relationships in the workplace, which plays an important role in the likeliness of voice, as it manifests through social interactions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) as mentioned in the literature review. Therefore, the questions we asked were broad rather than defined. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) suggest, a degree of direction in a study is required, which is balanced with a capacity to expose ourselves to something unexpected.

In preparation for the interviews, an interview guide was made. The interview guide contained topics and suggested questions that could help introduce each topic to the discussion. The interview guide topics were: Organisational Changes; Relationships with colleagues; Managerial Relationships; Openness as a management quality; Stories told/Informal communication in the office; Regularity in meetings; and Voice Mechanisms. Often, the topics were explored intertwined through follow-up questions. The interviews aimed to understand how the interviewee described and reflected on their possible direct reports, relationships with their direct manager and the colleagues working closely with them, where the uncovering of their perceptions of employee voice was the primary focus.

3.2.3   Observations

DePoy and Gitlin (2016) state that interviews and observations are two primary approaches used within critical theory to gather data. We complemented our interview data by spending half a day at Vista headquarters. Our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the atmosphere at the office and to provide us with more context to our case. The day at the office started with an introduction from our contact person, who informed us about current events at Vista, possibly impacting the observation later that day. By immersing ourselves in the social setting of the office, we got a better picture of the descriptions provided to us by the interviewees.
Later that day, we performed our observation of the common room where employees had lunch, grabbed a coffee and where they had their shared "fika" in the afternoon. We did a non-participant observation of the social setting that evolved around the arranged get-together, where we adopted the role of outsiders and separated ourselves from taken-for-granted categorisations and assessments (Ciesielska, Boström & Öhlander, 2018).

3.3 Data Analysis

In a way, argue Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), involves all qualitative data analysis at least the three activities of sorting, reducing and arguing. Now, we will turn into more detail about how we have involved these three activities in our analysis, as they formed the path to our conclusions.

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) explain that "qualitative material is characterised by a certain amount of disorder" (p. 70), which is referred to as the problem of chaos. Although we used an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews, there was a level of disorder in the data deriving from there. Firstly, our interviews have been transcribed using Otter, a speech-to-transcription application using artificial intelligence. These transcriptions were manually corrected to take out transcription and spelling errors made by the application. By using Otter, we could first transcribe verbatim. The verbatim transcriptions allowed us to read through the detailed conversations, followed by in vivo, inductive coding as the second coding method. By reading the transcriptions in full, we could spend time with the material. Secondly, the online application Taguette was used to efficiently code and structure the transcripts. Although Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) describe that a strict coding procedure can minimise the researcher's subjectivity, using in vivo coding enabled us to create a common language for us as researchers when discussing the empirical material. In vivo codes are terms directly used by the interviewees, which include much local interpretative meaning (Strauss, 1987), such as "huge change", "leading up", and "wild west". Inductive coding is described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame" or our analytic preconceptions (p. 21).

By coding, according to Charmaz (2014), we defined what was going on in the material and started to understand its meaning. After sorting all interviews, the next step was reducing, whereas Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) argue that sorting coincides with reducing. As Kvale (1996) states, "the ideal interview is already analysed by the time the tape recorder is turned off" (p. 277). However, we noticed that the time spent with the material, also after the interviews took place, was valuable to reflect on. Kvale's (1996) advice is to choose categories suitable for

questioning dominant perceptions and finding breakdowns in understanding. As he suggest, we searched for those breakdowns, which "can't easily be accounted for by available theory" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1270). The material offered the interesting phenomenon explained in the introduction, and by spending time with it, we reduced what was irrelevant and put that aside (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Kvale (1996) addressed an additional important aspect of not reducing the texts to a mere collection of words but keeping the conversations alive instead of butchering them into fragmented quotes. Going back and forth to the material, we kept additional meanings open for exploration and development (Kvale, 1996). We reduced our material by composing a story based on the extensive empirical material we gathered, which provided the context for other material presented to shape the direction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This enabled a multi-layered analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

After sorting and reducing, the material became denser and less extensive, as Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) argue. The last step in the data analysis was arguing, which means theorising and the interplay between being creative and systematic results in interesting theorising (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As our study uses the abductive approach, which involves us selecting the 'best' explanation from interpretations of the data "to make the phenomenon less puzzling" (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.24) rather than create a new theory as the extent of our research does not enable us to make generalisations. By drawing on existing theories and building further on those, we put forth four contributing factors to divergent perceptions of employee voice, labelling voice as resistance to change, organisational restructuring, busyness of managers and socially acquired fear, which will be further elaborated upon in the discussion.

3.4 Critical Reflections

As part of the critical theory tradition, we acknowledge the absence of neutrality and that we, as researchers, hold biases. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) argue that empirical data is not a fact but a product of interpretation. Therefore, during the data collection, analysis and discussion, we were particularly mindful of our hidden assumptions and reflected on how they influenced our perception of the situation. We prepared for the interviews by reflecting on our biases and approaching them with an open mind, and listening to understand. Having the written transcriptions and the audio recordings helped us revisit the data and ensure our understanding remained true to the interviewee's account, preventing confirmation bias.

Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) emphasise the significance of observer attributions in voice studies, as the perceived motives affect how individuals interpret a certain situation. It is important to understand why an interviewee might explain someone else's act of voice or silence in a certain way and how our own biases might colour our interpretation of the shared situation. Therefore, we asked as many clarifying questions as possible to allow the interviewees to fully express themselves and avoid filling gaps with our interpretations. Further, we both analysed the transcriptions of the interviews individually, after which they were discussed together to identify unintended assumptions.

As addressed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018), it was crucial to apply reflexivity throughout our research. This includes a sensitivity to ourselves as researchers, our society and cultural traditions and the usage of language and narrative in the research context. Reflexivity can be defined as the interpretations of our interpretations of the empirical material, including how we constructed it. We showed reflexivity prior to, during and after the research, by which we acknowledge our role as researchers (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge some personal beliefs that we bring into this study. Firstly, we have been in the position of being an employee with valid concerns but without having the opportunity to have our voices heard. Secondly, we tend to prioritise people over profit, and finally, we view profit as a means to an end rather than as an ultimate goal within an organisation. We reflected and

requestioned these personal beliefs and remained aware throughout the process of how they may have influenced our interpretation of the data.

3.5   Ethical Reflections

Conducting a qualitative study on employee voice raises important ethical considerations that we must address. Firstly, we protected participants' confidentiality and privacy throughout the process. This included clearly explaining the purpose of the study, getting their consent for voice recording the interviews and assuring them of their right to withdraw at any given point. Additionally, we recognise the power dynamics inherent in studying employee voice, and it involves exploring possible sensitive topics related to employees' experiences and perspectives within their workplace.

As the topic of employee voice encompasses both the act of speaking up and the presence of silence within the organisational context, it is essential to acknowledge the sensitivity surrounding these issues. Participants may have shared perspectives and experiences during interviews they have chosen not to voice within the respective company. Consequently, ensuring complete anonymity for the interviewees was deemed significantly important.

To ensure the interviewees' anonymity, we replaced their names with pseudonyms and used gender-neutral references throughout the analysis. To address particular sensitive matters in the findings, we have opted to use an additional pseudonym. Further, we have generalised the job titles of interviewees, as their specific roles are of lesser significance. Instead, the presence or absence of direct reports brings more insights into the perspectives concerning our research. Therefore, interviewees will be explained as either employees or managers. Recognising that the different managers do not necessarily hold the same hierarchical level at Vista is important. Although we use the term top management in our findings, we had no interviewees in that category. The term "top management" is used to describe individuals with managerial positions that are closer to Vista's owners. It is important to note that we are not referring to a specific

position or a particular team. Additionally, it is important to highlight that not all individuals within the top management category fit the given description.

Employing a critical theory perspective throughout this research meant acknowledging and reflecting critically on the power imbalances stemming from the hierarchical nature of an employee-employer relationship. By interviewing both managers and employees, we considered the perspectives of both.

4   Findings

Alex strongly believes that people are more likely to express their true thoughts and concerns in smaller groups rather than in large settings. They express hope for a future where individuals feel comfortable airing their concerns, not meaning serious concerns, but "maybe more mundane things". According to Alex, serious concerns are unlikely to be voiced, and whistleblowing is "company bullshit" that "no one with any sense of self-preservation would ever do". While Alex states that "most people wouldn't dare open their mouth and say what they think", they claim to be voicing their opinions and concerns and even advocate for others who are not comfortable. However, Alex admits hesitation in some situations, stating that at their level, "you don't really have the power to influence that at all". Indicating a selective decision on when to voice concerns and when to choose silence.

Meanwhile, Sam reflects on their experience with their direct reports amidst all the changes at Vista. Sam Noticing a pattern of self-reliance until the employees reach a breaking point, "'Please help me', to say that to your manager, I don't know why that is so difficult". Referring to the history of sick leaves due to exhaustion in recent years. Sam continues by highlighting management's inability to notice signals of distress until it is too late and their struggle to encourage employees to openly discuss their troubles.

In the upcoming chapter, we will begin with a presentation of the Vista case, providing context and background information. Following that, we will delve into the findings, exploring the divergent perceptions about employee voice and examining the employees' experiences in the context of Vista's organisational changes. To ensure clarity and structure, we have organised the findings into four key themes: Acknowledging Voice, Organisational Restructuring, Busy Managers and Fear of Managers. Finally, we will conclude the chapter by summarising our findings in preparation for integrating them with existing theories in the discussion chapter.

4.1 The Case

The organisation, Vista, is a multinational company with a long-standing history of over a century, spanning several continents and a workforce exceeding over 20,000 employees in both blue- and white-collar positions. Our research focused on the Nordic region, where we interviewed ten white-collar employees from various countries and functions.

The organisation's current state results from several acquisitions of different brands over the years and the aftermath of significant changes aimed at promoting teamwork and improving efficiency. We identified three change projects relevant to this research as they provide historical context for Vista's present state. Firstly, each acquired brand came with its internal systems. Integrating these internal systems into one overarching system was one incredible change trajectory, requiring almost three years of planning and preparation. Whereas the scope and technical details of this implementation are not necessary for this research, it is evident that this specific change demanded, and still does, a lot of focus from management and employees alike. Secondly, Vista's overarching group management streamlined the legal entity structure to create a more straightforward corporate structure. This restructuring divided Vista into two core departments, sales and production. Lastly, the organisation transitioned into a regional structure. As a result, several country-localised departments were merged into bigger regional departments. With that, some departments are scattered over the region, with direct colleagues not working in proximity.

Simultaneously, Vista's overarching management tries to create a "new" company culture. Since the organisation comprises multiple brands, all with their history and culture, a cultural survey was conducted to identify the stronger aspects of each brand. This research into the "old" company cultures and values resulted in four new ones: taking action, leading by example, innovating and teamwork. However, despite these efforts, it was recognised that there was no time for full integration into daily work due to the magnitude of the other changes that demanded immediate attention. Therefore, the implementation of this values have been paused for the time being.

In summary, Vista's story is one of seemingly intense change. With a rich history, a multitude of changes and an aim to find a unified company culture, Vista presented a dynamic and interesting case study.

4.2   Acknowledging Voice

We began our findings chapter with Alex's perception of voice in the organisation. Now we will further explore how voices are acknowledged at Vista. The monthly employee meetings end with a session reserved for questions and answers. These are used by Robin, who states to raise awareness about concerns in the organisation, whereas the majority stays silent. Chris also experiences their colleagues choosing silence, "I'm the only one who has the courage to ask". they continued by explaining several instances where Chris raised unclarities later confirmed by colleagues who did not dare to say anything out of fear of appearing stupid or losing prestige. These statements suggest widespread silence. Yet, surprisingly, in all our ten interviews, we have heard numerous stories about people voicing different concerns, raising questions or sharing their views. Where this could be a matter of only brave people participating in our research, it could also be a matter of perception.

4.2.1   Silencing voice regarding areas that need to be improved

Rory described a situation where they researched and raised a concern, together with an action plan and possible solutions. Rory's concerns were valid, as there were more and more mentions of an increased workload due to the changes. However, the reception by their manager and other managers at similar levels was described as cold and uninterested. Rory had mentioned concerns before regarding another, a less serious issue in a different area and drew comparisons between the two responses from management. Surprisingly, the latter was taken more seriously, despite its insignificance compared to the former. Rory reflected on the possible reasons for that difference, and answered why, with "Because it affects their role and their success in their role? I think it shows that somebody failed in the process". Rory continued by expressing disappointment, "It does not make sense to me, it does not make sense to me. We are not taking care of our people".

During one of the interviews, another situation was described from before the organisational changes took place. Noah voiced concerns about the culture at the workplace, where employees failed to treat each other with respect. "I tried to talk to them. But first, the woman there said that

[…] You are not very good at this job". The described response not only gave Noah the sense of being undermined but also of the voice recipient to align with the individuals Noah voiced concerns about, which could be interpreted as a silencing technique.

4.2.2 Silencing voice that questions change

Other types of silencing behaviours are described in other interviews as well. For example, Noah describes their job and team as autonomous. "we have to do it ourselves. Yeah, we can't just wait till somebody tells us how to do it". What is interesting about this quote is the notion of their work as autonomous, where they have to make decisions as they go and take actions without anyone directing them. To be able to do this, it could be assumed that they possess great knowledge about their area of expertise. Thus, implementing a new change within this team could be a great opportunity for the top management team to exercise the value of diversity of opinions. However, this is not how Noah experienced the initiation of this change:

> The first time I remember when the Danish group came here, all they said, all the time, was, "this is a business decision", "this is a business decision", "this is a business decision". They weren't very good at processes. They didn't know the process or how it goes, but they just told us that everything is a business decision […] nobody asked me anything during this big change.

Noah expressed frustration over the situation where change leaders come in with, according to them, incomplete solutions for processes. In addition, Noah and their team were silenced when they questioned the new processes and ways of working by hiding behind the phrase, "this is a business decision". As interpreted by Noah, this phrase downplays the questioning individual's expertise as it indicates that a business decision is something beyond their level and unworthy of discussing the reasoning behind said business decision.

Rory was met with a similar response when raising concerns about the emerging siloed culture, as will be further described in the "hierarchies" subchapter. Rory questioned implementing the new organisational structure that divided the company into sales and production and raised concerns about different departments becoming too divided. Management told the organisation that collaboration and teamwork were key to Vista's success. Still, Rory worried that a silo culture was forming, contradicting the desired goal of enhanced collaboration and teamwork.

However, their response to Rory was that the decision had been made to divide the company this way, implying a dismissal of their concerns.

Given Vista's changes, a stronger emphasis was placed on change management for employees in managerial roles to deal with resistance. Andy expressed gratitude for the training provided by Vista, where they learned "how you manage change resistance, all people have change resistance […] you go through certain steps". However, Andy continued that this training did not receive a proper follow up "How well we are following up that people are using these tools, that's a different story". Despite the training, Andy acknowledges resistance being more present:

> I feel it. I feel it nowadays much more. People are not openly [admitting] "actually I have a change resistance," because people don't want to admit that, but I sense it, and I understand why.

Andy continues by saying that they understand it and actually see the positive side of people being a bit stubborn and then having to act as a manager:

> We might have to make changes that we do not believe in, to work with that and say, "Hey, okay, from my point of view, this doesn't have to happen, but from the whole Vista point of view, yes this probably makes sense" […] "I know this is crazy, but from a Vista point of view… I think it's useful for Vista".

When comparing this statement to the response Rory got on their concerns regarding the loss of collaboration, it can be interpreted that "people being a bit stubborn" is seen as something that can be resolved by simply stating that the change is good for the business.

Kim states to have chosen Vista as an employer deliberately because of the magnitude of changes. However, recognises that it sometimes can be a bit much:

> I wanted to do something different. And every day, Vista is something different because we are changing a lot. So, I kind of got what I asked for. Some days, it's too much, but it's what I wanted, so I should not complain, then I'm lying to myself.

As part of a big change project team, Kim is well aware of the changes' impact on some of the teams and also touches upon management's inattentiveness to suggestions. A template was made for a demanding implementation, which was shared with teams as the new way to work:

> It's been hard for people to like the plant managers and so on when they see the template coming down. We press down on their organisation. They can see that "well, this will not fit" because it is difficult for them to find a place where to discuss to have changes. You cannot, of course, change everything. But at least when it's "This will not work". This is important. You have to listen.

This statement shows an instance of voiced concerns regarding the new template, and Kim emphasises the importance of listening to those. When asked what the response or follow-up was, Kim stated, "They never approved any, or not enough changes to the template", implying the follow-up by management was not as expected.

4.3 Organisational Restructuring

Relating to the change into a regional structure, the new path to decision making was described as longer than before, including more hierarchy and complicated decision flows. The frustration regarding decision making is more prominently expressed in the following statement made by Robin:

> That's a very difficult question. But the culture is that now, it's a longer way to the decision. Top management of decisions. There's a lot of hierarchy, and there's a lot of decisions, complicated decision flows […] we cannot make any decisions ourselves unless it's approved in three steps or so. And so, so we try to look nice at the surface, I think, but underneath, it's not that nice.

The difficulties of coping with this change in the decision making process were reflected upon by Kim: "Could be a big difference for someone that [has worked here since before the changes] now it's so many layers to change something". Further, Kim said they thought it was easier for them to comply as they did not have as long of a history within the company. Noah expressed frustration in response to the changed way of working. They highlighted they were not consulted prior to the implementation of the change projects. Furthermore, when they voiced concerns about potential risks associated with the new process, the response they received was perceived as dismissive, stating, "This is a business decision", as explained earlier. This response intensified the frustration and conveyed that their opinions and expertise were not valued or considered.

4.3.1 New levels of structure

Kim highlighted the challenge of communication levels between the top management and the plants and suggested that the plant manager rarely had contact with higher management. This hierarchical structure meant important messages were often filtered through several layers, resulting in a lack of direct communication and understanding. Andy added a similar comment and stated:

> I think it's more like a way of working that has sometimes been upsetting people, or people have reacted that it's so different. […] I think the way our decisions are made, how they're made, how they're communicated and as local management, you can say, "Sorry, […] we are just passing the message here".

This quote acknowledges that local management acts as messengers and that some have expressed difficulties with the new structures. When being explained the changes Vista went through, interviewees highlighted the challenges posed by the organisational restructuring. Where departments were structured country-wise in the past, this now changed to a regional structure. "It takes time to work out the trust and the confidence in your position when you reorganise everything", stated Sam. Significant changes occurred in roles and responsibilities as the company transitioned from a country-focused structure to a regional one. This required employees to navigate new positions and adjustment to a different organisational hierarchy. Ellis confirmed this statement: " sometimes people are struggling, how to solve things that they don't know how to reach out to, or who to reach out to". As the organisation had grown, Ellis expressed difficulties with knowing whom to reach out to, having lost the overview of who was knowledgeable in what.

Many interviewees also referred to the difference in national cultures, as with the new regional structure, they were now having more interactions with colleagues from different countries within the region. In some instances, this resulted in stereotypes regarding the nationalities. For example, Kim "I think normally when you have an American or English guy in the same room, Swedes will not speak up for themselves in that context". These national cultural differences seem to have become more apparent with the new organisational structure, as is portrayed in this example:

> And also, it's a Nordic organisation with many people from England, you know, and they have another hierarchy than we in the Nordic are used to. We are used to talking to each other, discussing and then making a decision, and then we have a rather nice way of addressing each other, but the high higher up versus the English people, they are more like a hierarchy. They show the whole hand. "Do that". And then you just say, "Yes, sir". I'm not used to that. So that's new for us […] We handle it because we understand why it is like that […] I understand that we kind of had the old-fashioned way of hugging each other. And you know, it's not the way it's supposed to be at the moment, so it's just accept it and do your job.

This excerpt shows that Chris accepts that this is the new way of working but that this is not something they were used to. This outspoken acceptance shows that Chris decides to comply with the new direction because they see the value of complying. It is not entirely clear if Chris is basing the compliance on having more important things that they need to take care of, or if they comply because they believe this way of working to be more appropriate. Besides the national differences, there were multiple instances where different departments were compared in terms of "the finance people" or the "technical department" and how these differences resulted in being taken less seriously or seen as less people-oriented.

> I think there is a cultural difference […] Vista is a finance company, they will not respect maybe if something comes from the technical departments, "This is how it works, these are the man-hours, this is the cost and so on". If that information comes from technical departments, it does not have the same value as it is coming from a financial manager saying this.

With this statement, Kim suggests a difference in how information is perceived and valued, depending on where it comes from in the organisation. For example, would the same information have come from a finance manager, it would have carried more weight. Even though this is not a formal hierarchy, there seems to be an informal, assumed hierarchy.

4.3.2   Trust

Despite these changes in structure and colleagues, many interviewees talked about trust within their teams and feeling generally safe and supported by their managers. "Yeah, you can always reach out for support. Absolutely". In the interview, Ellis appeared calm and confident when

stating this, and we could not sense any hesitation. The trust was also illustrated concerning diversity in opinions by Nico:

> We have a management team where I think each individual I like very much. I think they're great people. Then I think we might have... We do not always pull in the same direction, […] But otherwise, I have to say that I enjoy working with them very well. So I also think that's a security and comfort.

This quote answered, "How would you describe the relationship in the team you belong to?" The answer acknowledges that trust and disagreement can exist simultaneously, as you might not always agree on certain things. The openness about the team pulling in different directions could also show there is enough trust to air diverging views without being ridiculed for not sharing the same opinion as the rest of the team. The trust among colleagues sometimes resulted in asking them for help instead of their boss, as explained by Chris:

> It's much easier for me to reach out to someone I have trust in. Of course, I have trust in my boss, […] so it's the feeling that you want to grab a colleague and discuss sometimes, but I know that my boss wants us to have a really good working together. And he says, "You can always reach out to me", and I often do that. I reach out to him, of course

Chris explains that there are great levels of trust within the team, both with their managers and colleagues, but that "grabbing a colleague" is sometimes easier. Further, Sam described the importance of trust in a team to make work joyful. "That's one of the things that I like most about work, I think. We have built up trust in the team". Sam describes their team's trust as one of the best parts of their work. The trust that Sam describes here was also observed in our observations. The team that Sam belonged to showed noticeable levels of caring for each other in the acts of kindness and how they spoke to each other.

Even in cases where Robin did not feel trust within their official team, they described finding that trust within an unofficial group of colleagues they felt comfortable talking with. Thus, high trust and support were found through official or unofficial groups and teams.

4.3.3   Loss of collaboration

As described in the case, there has been a simplification of the legal entity within Vista, resulting in a separation of sales and production. The separation aimed at supporting several functions, such as sales, of which employees previously worked within three different cultures and collective agreements. To Noah and Chris, the change clarified expectations and rules. However, others described the organisational structure as decreasing cooperation between different functions.

Chris is one of the employees who experienced how the project simplifying the legal entity within Vista affected the level of cooperation between different functions. As Chris has been working in Vista for many years, they noted a clear difference after this change. Before the change, they could work with many different teams, so they have established good relationships with many colleagues in different functions. However, Chris' experiences work differently now:

> They sometimes say that "No, that's not your area. You should not provide [production] with that help. No, you shall not provide [customer service] with that information. It's their area to know".

Chris described being corrected when doing their job as they used to, which included cross-collaboration to solve big problems that spanned different function borders. They expressed frustration with these limitations, as they enjoyed helping and collaborating with other departments. This decrease in cross-departmental collaboration is also described as problematic by Robin. They note that the production team lacks the resources to effectively solve specific problems. This results in short-term fixes when issues arise without resolving the core of the problem. When asked for a solution, Robin proposed reintroducing the cross-departmental collaboration, closely aligning with Chris' description of their past working methods. Further, Robin reflected on the outcome of the recent organisational changes.

> Something is falling down between the two chairs [...] some people are just taking care of their own job because they think now "I do not have to take care of this. I will just concentrate on this, in my silo", So, not taking care of the other things in the job.

In light of Chris' experience, where they were corrected for going above their expected duties by helping others, Robin perceives that colleagues working within their respective "silos" simply adhere to Vista's expectations. However, according to Robin, this leads to tasks "falling between

chairs, " indicating that the lack of discretionary behaviour seems to result in forgotten or neglected responsibilities. Andy made a similar observation. However, Andy attributed this neglect to Vista being a matrix organisation. They noticed this, especially during the change from the local to the regional structure. An example given was when the international function took over responsibility from the local operations, where information was lost about contracts that needed to be closed. At the same time, the local function was dismissed when raising this issue, being told that this was no longer their concern.

While employees Noah, Chris and Robin, and manager Andy talked about concerns and situations that resulted in a loss of cross-departmental collaboration, Sam, also a manager, thought that the in-department collaboration had improved after the change. This opposing view could be seen as an outlier to how others experience the situation. However, Noah, Ellis and Chris also mentioned a recent increased focus on teamwork made by management. Chris said their manager promoted that the team should work together: "Please, we are here for you, and please, a team is not as good as its weakest chain". The manager was described as really encouraging team members to reach out for help and support each other. So did Ellis describe the communication by a higher level manager that recently joined the company:

> [They] has already said that a lot of times, "teamwork, teamwork, teamwork". So say [they] doesn't, you know, care so much about if you're in whatever your procurement, IT or supply chain. [They] see it more like we are a team. So yeah, I think that's quite a nice, nice approach, actually.

The description of the focus of the new high-level manager is to get the teams to engage in cross-departmental collaboration. This differs from the acts of corrections that Noah and Chris were exposed to when trying to engage across team borders. Despite the claimed focus on teamwork by managers, Ellis ended our interview with the following remark:

> It's a tough cookie to tell how to improve your teamwork. But that I think it's a key thing […] Yeah, teamwork is important, but how to get better at it? Yeah. Maybe not so easy.

While it is important to promote teamwork and collaborate as a team, they also say it can be difficult to implement and improve. This quote could indicate that, even though managers promote teamwork, it is not necessarily practised in the organisation.

4.4 Busy Managers

As discussed above, many interviewees talked about trust within their teams and feeling safe and supported by their managers. However, despite the described feeling of support, the managers were also often described as very busy, as stated by Chris: "I can easily connect with my boss also to have a private meeting with them as well, but they're really occupied […] it's difficult to find a slot". Ambivalence regarding the connection with their managers can be spotted in some of the interviewees. While they describe it as "easy" to connect with their managers, they simultaneously describe it as difficult. While we found it surprising and slightly confusing at first, when asked, most interviewees attributed this busyness to be related to the organisational changes. Thus, when an interviewee expressed to connect easily, this may refer to a time before the organisational changes consumed a significant portion of the managers' time and attention. One example of how this new, temporary managerial busyness was experienced was shown in the description of meetings. They had to be noticeably shorter, "to the point" and focused only on the agenda. Other concerns had to be postponed to another meeting, which had to be scheduled. Further, busyness was also experienced in the presence of the manager in the employees' daily work, as explained by Noah:

> [The manager] is not able to be in daily work. Because of this system change, [they are] totally tied to that. All the meetings every day, a lot of meetings and all the challenges and issues that there are. It's taking all of [their] time, has taken now, for one year.

In general, the interviewees showed great understanding and support towards the demands placed on their managers. Chris explained that their manager and the manager's manager are also struggling. Explaining the overwhelming feelings that the managers had expressed to the team, where they talked about pressure coming from above, which resulted in the managers putting pressure on Chris and their colleagues. Concerning this, Chris expressed comfort in the managers being this open about their struggles, as Chris now also felt more comfortable reaching out to any of them with their struggles or concerns.

Together with a shared perception of the busy manager, the interviewees also seem to share the idea of what it means to be a "good employee". A "good employee" 's most prominent quality

was considered to be finding the solution on your own. Charlie, for instance, described their manager as relatively new to the organisation. Despite experiencing challenging times, like many others during the period of change, Charlie expressed reluctance to approach their manager for support. They explained: "I know they're busy, and then I don't think I would address them with my issues". Despite acknowledging the manager's newness, the hesitation in reaching out mainly came from perceiving the manager's busyness as a higher priority than their own support needs. In other words, Charlie evaluated their problems as less significant than the manager's responsibilities. Chris expressed a similar thought, yet, later in the interview, they stated that their manager always is very quick at responding whenever they reach out, which could mean that the manager evaluates the need for support as a higher priority than the interviewees do themselves.

Building upon earlier findings, it is notable that some employees prefer reaching out to colleagues rather than burdening managers with concerns. This suggests that interviewees conclude: by resolving issues independently or with support from non-managerial colleagues, they perceive themselves as helpful and considerate of their managers' time.

4.4.1   Prioritisation

With many tasks and responsibilities comes the need to prioritise. Among the managers, we observed variations in how they prioritise their tasks and responsibilities in their leadership roles. For instance, Andy described a deep understanding and awareness of the challenges and issues their direct reports face about their work tasks and responsibilities. However, Andy also maintained a deliberate level of distance regarding personal problems.

Another interviewee, Nico, expressed concerns about the frequency of 1:1 meetings and their main focus on personal development. The concern arose from observing the current fast-paced environment at Vista, stating it would be more beneficial to allocate time more frequently, so employees could speak up about concerns when they arise. Nico described that they try to schedule time for casual conversations without an agenda, with every employee at least every six

weeks. Although they acknowledged that these conversations sometimes revolved around topics like weekend plans, they intended to build a stronger relationship with their direct reports.

Nico's perspective differs slightly from Andy's regarding their relationship and responsibilities towards their direct reports.

> And then it's at the same time, we can, of course, share any concerns and discuss things, but it's very much task oriented. It's straight to the point, no-nonsense talk […] of course, sometimes when people have personal problems, maybe they don't open up to me that they keep a distance, but at least when it comes to the professional work tasks, then I think I'm pretty well informed and aware.

Andy emphasises efficiency when describing their relationship with their direct reports and labels it task oriented. However, it is important to note that a manager's expressed view on responsibility may not always reflect their actions. Nevertheless, we consider their emphasis when discussing their responsibilities and priorities to indicate how they approach their daily tasks. From this perspective, it could be argued that Andy prioritises "hard" values, such as tasks and efficiency, over "soft" values of people, relations, and emotions. Contrastingly, Nico's description suggests a different priority, soft values over hard ones. However, Nico also recognised that their ability to receive voiced concerns in a good and curious manner was sometimes limited. This was often due to stressful situations or when they had much on their mind.

Some interviewees described the busyness of their managers as affecting the meetings they had scheduled with them. For example, Kim and Chris both mentioned that their managers had, on different occasions, cancelled their planned meeting in favour of other priorities. Here, the interviewees said they had little choice but to try and schedule another meeting. Especially when the interviewee had booked a 1:1 with their manager to voice concerns or ask for support.

The differences in prioritisation could be described from the newness of the organisation as the result of multiple company mergers. In addition, the big changes at Vista currently take up a huge amount of time and energy for everyone involved. Alex explained the focus of last year: "We need to get here and make things work," and Sam, "We were only working with the structure system, not culture, taking care of employees at all". These quotes describe that there is

not much room left for aligning organisational values, as Vista is facing some struggles from customer-facing change initiatives. According to Ellis, some of these issues aggravated customers as they are said to leave comments such as "clean up your mess, and then maybe we'll come back". Alex later continued by describing a shift in focus when discussing internal strategies. While they earlier described the focus to be on happy customers, this is now replaced by focusing on the question of "how can we make money?" While upset about this change, Alex clarifies that they acknowledge the importance of money and revenue, but that it cannot be the biggest motivator for a company. This change of focus, as just described, was also acknowledged by Chris when sharing their first impression of a new top manager. "My first impression was that [the manager] does not even care about the people and [is] just here for the money", further underpinning the indicators of a shift in organisational priorities.

While the organisation holds values that are to be shared across Vista, most interviewees cannot recite them back when asked, which could be interpreted as an indication that the values are not being used to guide the employees in their daily professional lives. Sam also acknowledges this. "Yeah, I think we have a journey there because we hadn't been working so much with the values". As mentioned earlier, the current focus on customer-facing change initiatives is also underpinned by Sam. They continue by reflecting on the changes taking up time and energy for everyone involved, leaving little to no space to be open for listening and understanding new values.

Prioritizing these huge change processes without having an aligned culture and values that people could rely on could be interpreted as prioritising hard values over soft values, relating to how Andy relates to their responsibilities rather than how Nico does. Sam also stated that there are difficulties in getting managers to prioritise the well-being of their direct employees because they are so focused on the big changes and the issues these have brought.

4.4.2 Softer ways to voice concerns

When going back and looking over the stories of voice told the way of voicing concern was not always described as strong and could potentially be overlooked if people were not paying

attention. For example, Charlie described holding back on voice due to their new direct manager wanting to avoid making their first period in the organisation extra stressful. However, once they felt compelled enough to raise the concern anyway, they described their way of voicing as "softer".

> I mean, maybe […] I haven't been super... I haven't been that strict. It's not like I put the foot down and like, "listen up", you know, so I have maybe taken a bit of light on it. […] If there are too many tasks, then maybe some other person could take those tasks.

The described way of voice might be interpreted more as politely asking for other ways to solve the situation rather than setting boundaries around their limitations. Similarly, Robin described raising questions in monthly meetings, hoping that it would shed light on their concerns and struggles rather than directly pointing them out. We do not intend to evaluate whether different voice strategies or tactics are good or bad. Still, we find it interesting that there are many stories about voice, some of which could be interpreted as indirectly voicing a concern or suggestion. At the same time, there is a widespread view among both employees and managers that most employees are silent. We think they could be linked and that it is not always easy to recognise or identify voices.

4.5   Fear of Managers

While top management is described by some as great at what they do, in the sense that they have "streamlined" the organisation, they are also described as providing poor leadership. The interviewees differentiated between being a manager and being a leader, where the manager was considered highly proficient at meeting objectives and contributing to increases in revenue. The leader was supposed to be inspirational and people-oriented. Further, the role of manager was considered a job title, and the role of the leader was described as a discretionary act that only some managers displayed. When asked to define what the interviewees meant by 'poor leadership,' the interviewees delineated power games, sudden bursts of anger resulting in shouting in professional meetings, and lack of rationality in discussions.

The interviewees seemed to hold a certain degree of fear of the top management based on their described feelings, and we noticed a shift in the interviews when talking about the different situations and definitions. Further, most employees described their way of coping with this as keeping their distance. The fear is more clearly illustrated in the following quote from Rory:

> Otherwise, me personally, I would be really stressed if [top management] attended a meeting. In every meeting, I would be really, really stressed […] Absolutely. Now, we are working together. Now we can laugh, and we can make jokes. And now we can, you know, feel much more relaxed than we did last year in the meetings. We started to know each other now, and we can be almost ourselves. But it's huge if [they] attend. No, no, no. No, no, no. It's like, I don't think no one on the planet would like that. No one […] would dare to say anything.

This was the response to the question, "Can you think of a way for how the top management could show more support for the work your team does? Is there a way that comes to mind?". While the ways Rory could think about were not specified, they immediately started reflecting on the possibility of top management participating in regular team meetings. Rory stated the stress this would cause them, and the thought of it appeared to provide stress already. This could be seen in stating "no, no, no, no" repeatedly, which deviated from Rory's behaviour during the rest of the interview.

Some interviewees had personally experienced these "poor leadership" instances, while others attributed them to someone they knew who had witnessed it. The interviewee, who actively avoided top management and these acts of "poor leadership", confessed to not having personally experienced this behaviour but heard about it from others. However, they stated that many others in the company were frustrated with this behaviour, indicating that it was widely discussed and well-known in some social circles.

This fear appeared to spread also beyond top management. For instance, when talking about their manager, Alex initially expressed a positive relationship, despite the manager being new. However, later in the interview, after expressing some concerns regarding the new direction, Alex was asked if they felt they had a place to bring attention to these concerns. They answered that they did not think anyone would listen to them. "At my level, you don't really have the power to influence that at all".

Demonstrating the hierarchical distinction highlights the notion that expressing personal opinions or worries may be futile beyond a certain level, as their level is perceived to lack significant influence. Even though this statement did not come with an expression of fear, there was an expression of giving up. This could result from the belief that top management cannot engage in rational discussions about employee concerns. The avoidance could be interpreted as acknowledging that the risk of voicing such a concern could trigger a sudden burst of anger.

While this reflects some employees, most managers we talked with considered themselves and the rest of the management team to regularly encourage and promote employees to voice concerns and risks they notice. However, this could indicate that the fear of top management is preventing the managerial encouragement from reaching the employees.

4.5.1 Leading up

The term "leading up" emerged in one of the interviews. Someone leading upward was described as not wanting to signal issues further up the chain of command due to the reluctance to admit to failures. More so than ensuring that they cared for the people reporting to them by ensuring that they felt "seen".

More interviewees mention the feeling of not being seen. For example, Chris states: "We are absolutely important for the business. We know that we understand that. But I think that many people have lost that feeling that they are seen". This quote connects to the concept of leading upwards as it was described that top management would rather look and focus their attention upwards, which sometimes leads to failure in "seeing" the individuals who report to them. An example of this was Rory, who had encountered something they found worrying regarding the employee workload. Rory prepared possible solutions to present when addressing the concern they were voicing. When it was time to voice their concern, Rory met with top management. After the presentation, Rory perceived the response and act of top management as an attempt to silence them by undermining the importance of voiced concerns. Rory's assumption on motivation for this act of silencing was that:

> They did not want to signalise upwards in the system that we have a lot of problems
> […] Because it affects their role and their success in their role? I think it shows that
> somebody failed.

Rory expressed experiencing top management not "seeing" them and their concerns. At the same time, Rory also acknowledged that the reason for not being "seen" was that top management focused on keeping appearances upwards. This tendency to keep appearance upward shows similarities to what Andy described as a culture of "Hey, let's stay positive. Let's look at the good things". Andy noticed shortcomings in the implementation plans. Out of concern for the organisation, they voiced these shortcomings to top management. Instead of being "seen", Andy received feedback for being cynical. They reflect further on this experience and the overall culture of Vista:

> What I see maybe as a concern is that when you should be so constructive and
> positive […] issues are not raised, which are quite big and important for the company

Andy reflects on their experience and names the culture as focusing on being constructive and positive. However, they also say that while it can be nice and important to be constructive and positive, it can also pose challenges when you are required to be like this all the time, as it creates obstacles for addressing issues important for the organisation to be aware of.

Furthermore, Andy emphasised the consequences of being named negative or cynical. They recounted a situation where a colleague who, like Andy, also identified flaws and shortcomings in the upcoming processes and changes attempted to express their concerns and seek clarification about the initiatives. The colleague received a similar response and was labelled as cynical. The culture at Vista emphasised constructivism and positivity, making cynicism frowned upon. Simultaneously, Vista was undergoing personnel changes, described by other interviewees as removing individuals who did not align with the new culture. Being aware of the necessity to conform to this new culture and direction resulted in Andy's colleague suppressing their concerns. Andy continued to explain that this façade of pretending everything was fine eventually led to the colleague taking sick leave.

Keeping up this façade also contradicts the statement by Rory, "If you're an employee working too much, it's also your own responsibility to reach out for help to say 'Stop. I can't do

anymore'". This statement suggests that employees are expected to reach out themselves when they have a concern, like working too much. However, this can be challenging when feeling this culture of constructivism and positivity is not receptive to messages that do not fit that description.

Occasionally, the dynamic of positivity was said to also play out in posts shared on the intranet. However, it was noticed that these posts always highlight success stories and enthusiasm rather than acknowledging collective challenges the organisation is facing. Robin shares frustration regarding this, as the "lower part of the company […] they are not so excited". Thus, the excitement of top management comes across as quite ignorant for the people struggling. Further, they reflect on the culture of excitement and positivity:

> I'm not really sure that the American owners know about the situation at sites or the feeling of the company at lower levels because only success stories are sold to the owners

It appeared that the organisational culture places significant emphasis on employees maintaining a constructive and positive outlook, leading to a "leading up" management behaviour. Consequently, employees perceive that this filters the reality and prevents it from reaching the owners.

4.5.2 Lateral Voice

The high levels of trust, as presented in "organisational restructuring", showed that employees sometimes felt more comfortable "grabbing a colleague". Further, the situation with Rory concerning being silenced to avoid the portrayal of failings, which was mentioned in both "Acknowledging voice" and "leading up", also provided an interesting storyline regarding the outcomes of the silencing and the culture of positivity. As already mentioned, Rory was disappointed that their constructively voiced concerns were met with silencing. Despite the disappointment, with the help of trusted colleagues, they decided to implement the proposed solutions. This was done without informing management because of the fear of being silenced again. Thus, Rory changed to lateral voicing strategies due to the fear of being silenced.

4.6 Conclusions from the findings

In this chapter, we have examined various aspects related to voice within the context of Vista, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the introduced phenomenon. Our research has shed light on the complexities surrounding the acknowledgement and reception of voice within the organisation.

One key finding from our exploration of "acknowledging voice" is the existence of divergent perceptions regarding voicing. Despite instances where employees expressed their opinions and concerns, there was a prevalent belief among individuals that all others remained silent. This discrepancy highlights the need to examine the dynamics at play in voicing situations. For example, we have presented examples of employees who voiced their opinions to improve the work environment, only to be dismissed or overlooked. Similarly, concerns about the direction of change initiatives were voiced but not adequately addressed. These findings reveal a tendency within Vista to label certain voices as resistance, overlooking the multifaceted nature of employee voice.

Our closer look into "organisational restructuring" has provided insights into the outcomes of the implemented changes. We observed that these changes introduced additional filters in communication, resulting in the loss of valuable information. Moreover, the decision making process became more layered, potentially hindering efficiency and agility. Informal hierarchical structures were also identified, impacting collaboration and teamwork within the organisation. However, amidst these challenges, we found a noteworthy level of trust among employees, often manifested outside immediate teams with trusted colleagues. This finding displays the complexity of voice in a changing organisation.

Delving into the phenomenon of "busy managers," we explored the perceived busyness of managers at Vista as a consequence of the organisational changes. Employees described their managers as highly occupied, concluding that solving issues independently was a way to respect their managers' limited time. Furthermore, this busyness seemed to influence managerial priorities, sometimes overshadowing employees' needs and concerns. We also discovered a

softer approach to expressing voice, which employees adopted to navigate the challenges posed by their busy managers. These findings highlight the impact of managerial busyness on the availability and accessibility of managers to their direct reports.

Lastly, our "fear of managers" examination shed light on employees' shared feelings of apprehension towards top management. This fear created a culture that emphasised constructive and positive viewpoints, often disregarding alternative perspectives as cynicism. This culture also gave rise to the "leading up" behaviour, resulting in employees feeling more comfortable reaching out to their colleagues than their managers. The outcome of this fear-driven environment led to a significant disconnect between employees and managers, impacting communication and collaboration.

In conclusion, our research has revealed several key insights into Vista's voice dynamics. Divergent perceptions of voicing, the outcomes of organisational restructuring, the challenges posed by busy managers, and the culture of fear towards top management have all been explored. In the next chapter, these findings will be further discussed and explored in relation to existing theories.

5 Discussion

This discussion chapter will bring our findings together by apply them to the existing literature to try and make sense of the phenomenon of "no one voicing concerns, yet everyone claims they do", also known as the phenomenon of divergent perceptions about voice (Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013). Our aim with this discussion is to reflect on the meaning and implications of our findings and shed light on what contributes to the divergent perceptions of voice, so in the concluding chapter, we can provide an answer to our research question: What factors contribute to divergent perceptions of employee voice within changing organisations? Our aim will be met by discussing each of the following factors separately; labelling voice as resistance to change, organisational restructuring, busyness of managers, and socially acquired fear. We will end the chapter with a synopsis of these points in relation to the research of Burris, Detert and Romney (2013).

5.1 Labelling Voice as Resistance to Change

Some of our findings challenge the notion of Lewin's (1952, cited in Piderit, 2000) definition of resistance as a restraining force moving towards maintaining the status quo and Fleming and Spicer's (2007) assumption that employee voice during organisational change is motivated by challenging power for personal gain. This is also challenged by Piderit (2000), who notes that employees who speak up and offer suggestions often do so because they care deeply about the organisation and want to see it thrive. After examining Morrison's (2011) definition of voice, which encompasses sharing ideas, suggestions, concerns, and opinions, it becomes apparent that various types of voice are essential for driving change efforts. Although situations from our case, such as reminiscing about past times, may be viewed as a desire to maintain the status quo and, thus, resist the changes, interviewees mentioning the loss simultaneously acknowledge the need

for the change. These contradicting feelings can be present simultaneously, as per research from Piderit (2000), further illustrating the nuance of voice in change.

As research by Li and Tangirala (2022) suggests, teams often experience lapses in performance after in the immediate aftermath of changes, called the disruption stage. This disruption stage should be followed by the recovery stage, in which teams reach their original performance levels (Li & Tangirala, 2022). Our findings showed there were difficulties within the customer-facing change initiatives, that resulted in customers leaving and employees having difficulties coping with the amount of complaints, leaving us wondering in which stage Vista is currently in. The types of voice that Li and Tangirala (2022) suggest to work best in each stage, the prohibitive voice in the disruption stage and the promotive voice within the recovery stage, do not seem to be recognized by the management. However, we could identify strong tendencies of management preferring promotive voice, due to the culture of constructivism and positivity.

In much of the literature, a change agent-centric view is taken (Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008), where change agents are seen as the "undeserving victims of irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients" (p. 362). Further, the view of resistance or resisters as things to overcome is present (Piderit, 2000). However, recent literature focuses more on the usability of resistance (Bryant, 2006, p.200; Ford & Ford, 1995; Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Piderit, 2000), and Piderit (2000) emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and valuing the good intentions behind individuals' responses to change, rather than dismissing them as resistant. This involves "efforts to downplay the invalidating aspect of labelling such responses as resistant" (Piderit, 2000, p. 785). Our findings also found tendencies to label responses to change as resistant, as the emphasis on constructive and positive opinions concerning the changes, limited employees whereas managers considered themselves to be encouraging voice.

Despite Bryant's (2003) notion that it can be difficult to differentiate between voice as a constructive response and resistance to change, management's tendency to label voice as resistance was proven when concerns were addressed to higher management and met with power usage by stating, "This is what has been decided". This response is also used by management who meet resistance (Maurer, 1996 cited in Spencer, 1996). As stated by Ford, Ford & D'Amelio

(2008), resistance should be understood as a result of complex dynamics of the interaction between change agents and change recipients. We argue that taking a change agent-centric approach in organisational change can lead to a neglect of voice as a co-created phenomenon. It is essential to recognise that voice emerges through the combined impact of words and actions from both parties involved (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Withey & Cooper, 1989). By focusing solely on the change agent's perspective, the organisation risks overlooking the collaborative nature of voice, where the contributions of all stakeholders shape the ultimate outcome.

5.2   Organisational Restructuring

As written in the case description, the restructuring was an extensive part of Vista's organisational changes. Hierarchical and centralised decision making structures have benefits (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and drawbacks (Heckscher, 1994). In the case of Vista, the topic of hierarchy was addressed on numerous occasions, as a shift in both formal and informal structures was described after the organisational changes, which somehow ended up creating silos and tasks falling between chairs in the organisation.

The clear distinctions of responsibility that come with the hierarchical structure are subject to diverse opinions. Magee and Galinsky (2008) highlight the helpfulness of these clear distinctions, especially for big and complex organisations. In our study, it was clear that this is also something that some of the employees valued. On the other hand, Heckscher (1994) emphasises that this distinction of responsibilities can lead to a silo culture and result in wasted employee capacity. This was also present in our study, as several employees witnessed a loss in collaboration and even used the word "silo" to describe the situation at Vista.

Further, another dimension of hierarchy is the aspect of social power. As Magee and Galinsky (2008) define social power as an "asymmetric control over valued resources in social relationships" (p. 361), they claim that the importance lies in the word *asymmetric,* where control over valued resources is not available to all. Furthermore, they continue establishing that the person with high social power becomes more important, the fewer substitutes available. In the

situation of Vista, where the organisation was perceived as divided more or less into siloes, the employees are expected to have fewer high-power people to turn to. In other words, the available substitutes for one person with high social power should be low. This indication becomes increasingly important as we discuss the concept of voice. As mentioned earlier, voice is dependent on reception (Withey & Cooper, 1989), and numerous outcomes are affected by who the voicer voices too, as well as how the recipient receives the voice.

In the case of Vista, there seem to be few substitutes for people with high social power. If the company contains managers that do not prioritise employee voice and the factors that facilitate voice, employees will have higher obstacles to voicing their concerns. This is supported by Festinger (1950), whose study revealed that the mere introduction of hierarchies in a group decreased open communication, also stated by Morrison (2011), who argues that hierarchy and status differences stifle employee voice.

Morrison (2011) builds further on the importance of the organisational context when reviewing employee voice by addressing centralised decision making as a factor that creates discomfort in employees to voice issues. Even though management might think they provide opportunities to speak up, the decision not to is shaped by the perception of a closed organisational structure or culture not receptive of voice (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). With Vista's highly centralised organisational structure, management could unconsciously add to the reluctance to share bad news up the hierarchy. This aligns with the literature on the mum effect, an uncomfortable feeling present as the messenger of bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970).

While hierarchy is often implemented to provide clarity and optimise coordination (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), there are also limitations to the hierarchical structure (Festinger, 1950; Heckscher, 1994; Morrison, 2011). In the case of Vista, we could see tendencies of both. However, when it comes to voice in hierarchies, we argue that the hierarchical structure causes more hinders than facilitates the act of voicing concerns. This brings further nuance to Magee and Galinksy's (2008) notion that hierarchy results in more rewarding workplace interactions, as the restructuring also resulted in stifled voice to top management and loss of collaboration within Vista.

5.3   Busyness of Managers

Welsh et al. (2022) argue that voice reception is crucial in the voice act. The reaction of the receiver, often the manager, plays a vital role in determining the outcomes for the voiced concern, individual employees and the organisation as a whole. When managers' resources are lower than usual and they reach a state of depletion, fewer cognitive efforts are used to process voice (Li et al., 2019). Constraints on managers' time and attention could lead to not listening or brusque responses (Ashford, Sutcliffe & Christianson, 2009). Our findings reflect this through the perceived busyness of the manager, who was perceived as preoccupied due to the ongoing changes.

We argue that this lack of ability to receive voice also results in the manager not realising that the voicer is trying to engage in voice. If managerial busyness leads to the manager's engagement in negative voice reception, as discussed by Welsh et al. (2022), it signifies an unwelcoming environment for voice. When employees perceive managers as being unwelcome to voice, one outcome could be silence and not sharing significant work-related problems with individuals who can address them (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, based on our study's findings, employees do not necessarily have to resort to silence. Instead, they described softer ways to voice concerns. We argue that this aimed to mitigate the challenges posed by power dynamics and increase the likelihood of message acceptance, aligning with the insights on voice in hierarchical structures discussed by (Millik & Lam, 2009). Detert and Edmondson (2011) noted that the voicer often bears the risks from voice alone. How the message of voice is formulated and delivered as part of the employee's tactic is considered before voicing concerns (Morrison, 2011).

Nevertheless, considering the softer presentation of voicing concerns and its interaction with the cognitive limitations of busy managers, we argue that this contributes to a misconception of events and results in divergent perceptions about the frequency of voice.

5.4 Socially Acquired Fear

The fear of top management, and the fear of voicing concerns and opinions to them, can come from socially acquired beliefs, as supported by research from Detert and Edmondson (2011). Our findings represented this when asking for examples of situations signalling that voice is unwelcome. The interviewees mainly sourced it to situations others had witnessed. It appears the hierarchy and the socially acquired beliefs inhibit voice to top management. According to research by Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) implicit theories combined with concerns about relational aspects can shape the decision to remain silent.

Research by Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggests that socially acquired beliefs and second-hand experiences can cause a climate of silence. While the socially shared beliefs about the risks or expected receptions of voice hold truth for some managers at Vista, it does not necessarily mirror all of them correctly. Our study showed us traces of opposing managerial behaviours. For example, some managers were described as "leading upwards", and around these managers, there seemed to be an inhibiting fear. However, we also saw descriptions of managers that behaved oppositely, valuing and encouraging the voice of the employees. Both employees and managers attested to this genuine interest, which could be a sign that the shared beliefs had not yet become overgeneralised. However, according to Detert and Edmondson (2011), there is a tendency for shared beliefs about the risks and dangers associated with voicing concerns to permeate an organisation. Our research found strong traces of shared beliefs across various layers of the organisation. As a result, there is a risk for Vista that these beliefs may be wrongly attributed to managers who do not display such behaviours. Consequently, the initial fear among employees may be targeted towards specific managers. However, over time, it could spread to others who do not deserve that.

Together with the socially acquired beliefs of the risks of voicing, a freeze in action was noticed with the interviewees, who expressed that they instead turned to colleagues for voicing concerns. This aligns with what Heckscher (1994) argues that the stifling of upward voice results in lateral voice. Morrison and Milliken (2000) found that shared beliefs about voicing being dangerous, are likely to become exaggerated and overgeneralised. Our findings suggest that the confusion

resulting from the organisational changes, coupled with an over-generalisation of the risks of voicing, hinders employees from voicing to top management. Instead, employees resorted to lateral voice, voicing to colleagues.

Liu, Zhu & Yang (2010) found that employees voice to whomever they identify with, and with the presence of socially acquired fear of voice to managers, our findings showed that they mainly identified with colleagues. While lateral voice may give the voicer the feeling of speaking up regularly, the voiced concerns will most likely rarely reach the upper management, affecting the managers' perception of voice to be lower than the employees', causing a divergence in perception.

5.5   Summary of Discussion

As written in the literature review, employee voice is multifaceted and complex, and the perception and reception of it also. In the discussion chapter, we aimed to shed light on the factors contributing to the divergent perceptions of employee voice within changing organisations. Our findings suggest the labelling voice as resistance to change, organisational restructuring, busyness of managers, and socially acquired fear, contribute to divergent perceptions of both employees and managers.

Labelling voice as resistance to change can lead to divergent perceptions of voice in changing organisations. When all voices are categorised as resistance, it overlooks the diverse nature of the concept. Additionally, adopting a change agent-centric view neglects the co-created nature of the concept of voice and the impact that change agents have on the interaction that is possibly causing resistance. The restructuring of the organisation resulted in a centralised, more hierarchical, regional structure which for some created clarity and for others created more barriers to voice. As a result of this restructuring, employees may feel silenced or discouraged from voice. In contrast, for managers, the perception is present that voicing has not been impacted by these new structures. This leads to divergent perceptions of the frequency and

effectiveness of voice within the organisation. The lack of ability for managers to receive employee voice due to their busyness is another contributing factor to divergent perceptions.

The overwhelming workload causes failure to recognise or address voiced concerns. The busyness can impact the reception and, therewith, perception of voice in two ways. Firstly, the manager remains unaware of a voice attempt by the employee. Secondly, the manager inadvertently sends negative signals, making employees more cautious about voicing their concerns in the future. Lastly, the fear of top management stifles upward voice directed at higher management and instead turns into lateral voice towards colleagues. Even though this gives employees the illusion that they are voicing concerns, it does often not reach the decision-makers who possess the power. Consequently, managers are unaware of the extent of voice behaviours, leading to divergent perceptions regarding employee voice.

To extend our exploration of the divergent perceptions of employee voice, we return to the research from Burris, Detert and Romney (2013), which focuses on the outcomes of the divergent perceptions. Employees who overestimate their voice compared to their managers receive worse performance ratings, which increases the possibility of involuntary termination. Conversely, employees are considered better workers and are at a lower risk of involuntary termination when they engage less in voice and downplay their voice levels. The study emphasises the value of correct voice assessment and the consequences of exceeding or underestimating. While it is not the focus of their study, Burris, Detert and Romney (2013) reflect briefly on the reasons why an overestimation presents itself. Our findings are related to the divergent perceptions due to unacknowledged voice, more specifically, why voice is not recognised during organisational change. We found two factors that affect the ability to recognise the voice: dismissal of voice during change by labelling it as resistance and the busyness of managers due to increased responsibilities during change, which leads to poorer reception of voice. Furthermore, we argue that two factors restrict the clarity and reception of raised concerns: the introduction of new hierarchical structures prevents the rise of concerns higher in the organisation, and socially acquired fear of managers tends to direct the employee to lateral voice rather than to managers, which is reinforced by managers signalling busyness.

While the phenomenon described in the introduction pictured the situation in Vista as black and white, either a person voices or is silent, our findings and discussion show that employee voice is not as simple as that. Employees can voice their concerns or opinions differently, with different strategies. In the same way, managers can understand and interpret voice in different ways or completely overlook them. This chapter discussed the findings presented in the previous chapter in relation to existing literature. We argue that the four factors are relevant to understand the origin of divergent perceptions about voice between manager and employee during times of organisational change.

6   Conclusion

As presented in the introduction, previous research on divergent perceptions (Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013) focused on the outcomes and pointed to a gap in understanding how these develop. Our aim with this study was to provide further insights into that theoretical gap in understanding how divergent perceptions about employee voice originate. We did this by answering the research question: What factors contribute to divergent perceptions of employee voice within changing organisations? Our case study at Vista brought us to four factors contributing to divergent perceptions of employee voice.

Our contribution to the pre-existing research on voice is the insight into four factors that we believe contribute to employee voice not being recognised in times of organisational change. The labelling of voice as resistance to change and the managers' busyness were two factors that led to poorer reception of voice. The other two factors, the introduction of new hierarchical structures and socially acquired fear of managers, are believed to restrict the clarity of raised concerns. The combination of poor voice reception and lack of clarity in raised concerns, leads to divergent perceptions about voice.

This contribution provides valuable insights that complement existing studies, such as the study of Burris, Detert and Romney (2013). Additionally, our findings benefitted from the unique context at Vista, characterised by its ongoing changes. This context provided a valuable opportunity to dive deeper into the phenomenon of divergent perceptions of employee voice, considering the added complexity shaped by organisational changes. This can help changing organisations create a more supportive environment for voicing concerns, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for both employees and the organisation.

6.1   Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into perceptions of employee voice, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Due to the sample size of interviews conducted, we will avoid generalisations, and the findings should primarily be viewed as an inspiration to further studies rather than truth. We aimed to interview five managers and five employees to provide a balanced picture of the perceptions. During some of the interviews with managerial roles, it became apparent that some did not have any direct reports despite their managerial job titles. Therefore, their contributions could only be shown from an employee perspective. This resulted in more insights into employee perceptions than managerial perceptions.

Additionally, the abductive approach was chosen because of limitations in time and scope for this study. However, we believe that a study on this topic using the inductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007) to perform an interpretative study on the contributing factors of divergent perceptions about employee voice could provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. By spending more time within the organisation to observe the relationship between the manager and the employee during the change process, even more nuances could be detected on the contributing factors of divergent perceptions. This could also contribute to a more realistic insight into the employees' perspectives due to the possibility of establishing better bonds with the interviewed employees. Also, since the topic of voice is sensitive, and the voicer carries the risk of voicing (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), we acknowledge the possibility that interviewees may not have shared the complete truth, in order to protect themselves.

In conclusion, while our study presents insights into the contributing factors of divergent perceptions of employee voice, we also acknowledge limitations. Therefore, further research and theorising are required to establish the offered insights.

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