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The silent potential:
A study of coworkers' voicing in workplace meetings

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Abstract

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Much of contemporary organisational life is enacted in meetings. Yet, our understanding of meetings and coworkers' role in them remains limited and influenced by the dominant functionalist and linear perspectives on communication. Such an approach is, however, problematic as it obscures the constitutive role of coworker's voicing in meetings and how it produces and reproduces work teams, organisations, and societies. Thus, this thesis explores the dynamics of voicing from the communication-centric and coworkers' perspectives, along with the social, cultural, and organisational norms that guide it. It aims to understand how coworkers engage in voicing and how meetings can activate or in contrast silence their performances. The qualitative study is based on empirical material collected through 11 observations and 16 semi-structured interviews at a Swedish multinational corporation within the transportation and infrastructure sector. It uses Goffman's dramaturgy approach to understand how coworkers perform voicing on the stages of internal work meetings. The results indicate a significant rupture between organisational theories and collected material: work meetings remain largely silent even though coworkers perceive their workplace as safe, open, and transparent. Coworker's voicing is therefore postponed or transformed into a form of pseudo-communication, influenced by a discourse of productivity, effectivity, and efficiency, hybrid ways of organising, and both enabling and constraining character of a meeting structure. Additionally, the study uncovers a new form of unobtrusive managerial control, i.e. wellbeing talk, which pushes coworkers further toward blending their personal and professional identities. Taken together, the thesis presents coworker's voicing as a complex communication process, influenced by a variety of social, cultural, organisational, individual, and team-based norms. Finally, it stresses the importance of nuanced research, which does not overplay one aspect of the voicing dynamic over others and does not view voicing and silence as mutually opposing concepts.

Keywords: meetings, coworker communication, voicing, employee voice, coworkership, internal communication, silence, control, communicative organization, performance

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Introduction

> *I can show you my calendar [laughing]. Right now, it's a lot. I would say I'm in meetings most of the days now from at least from 9:00 till 15:00. It's terrible.*
> - Katia

> *Sometimes I don't even say anything in the meeting and just say 'Hey'. And then I say 'Goodbye'. But maybe it could be ten minutes of information that is useful for me.*
> - Emmanuel

Jumping on a call, scheduling a catch-up, or, in the worst scenario, getting stuck in yet another meeting that could have been an email. What many workers worldwide experience on a daily basis can be understood as an increasing *meetingisation* of society (van Vree, 2011), a long-term social process in which people more and more decide on power, status, and capital in and through meetings. Yet, they are commonly complained about, despised, and perceived as a waste of time (Lindquist et al., 2020; Schwartzman, 2017), illustrating how pervasive and omnipresent meetings have become. However, in complaining about meetings' ineffectiveness and searching for solutions, guides, and fixes, we have stopped considering why organisations hold meetings in the first place. Nevertheless, it is through communication that meetings structure, form, and constitute organisational realities and reify social and cultural contexts (Schwartzman, 1989; Scott et al., 2015). They thus play a key role in shaping work lives, creating spaces for coworker participation, collaboration, sensemaking, organisational learning, and overall influence organising (e.g., Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023; Beck et al., 2015). As such, they can facilitate establishing and maintaining a communicative organisation (Heide et al., 2019), with a polyphony of coworkers' voices. In return, the organisation can gain a competitive advantage in the contemporary volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) marketplace. Hence, communication can be understood as a key competency for organisations to survive and succeed (Alvesson, 2004), constituting both the organisation itself and the capital (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). As a result, all coworkers - not just managers or leaders - coauthor organisational realities in their daily interactions (Andersson et al., 2023; Andersson & Rademacher, 2021), essentially becoming co-responsible for the organisation's success and

survival (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Therefore, organisations do not exist without coworkers' communication (Heide, 2024).

Nonetheless, the key arena where coworkers can interact - i.e. work meetings - is commonly taken for granted by communication research (Scott et al., 2015). It is surprising given the fact that meetings were identified as strategic activities by organisational members (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). Instead, contemporary scholarship focuses on exploring phenomena enabled by meetings and voice, such as brand ambassadorship, workplace democracy, and/or coworker engagement. Strategic communication research on organisational meetings is thus almost nonexistent, with the only notable exceptions being studies by Aggerholm and Thomsen (2012) and Aggerholm and Asmuß (2016). Consequently, we know very little about the dynamics of coworkers voicing, i.e. performing voice, and the norms and values that govern it. This is, however, problematic as it is through voice and communication that meetings produce organisations and thus affect coworkers, organisations, and societies. Moreover, voicing is not the default option for coworkers in meetings - silence is (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023; Morrison, 2014). As a result, organisations may miss out on the benefits of coworker's voice, including its contribution to better decision-making, innovation, creativity, higher productivity, and employee retention. Coworkers meanwhile might experience tensions between taking communication responsibility and silencing their voice, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction, a sense of futility, and burnout. Arguably, it also contributes to the perception of meetings as a waste of time or a barrier to "real" work (see Åkerström et al., 2020; Schwartzman, 2017).

More broadly, the disregard for voice within internal communication research implies the persisting dominance of the managerial and functionalist perspective on coworker communication, instead of embracing its constitutive character and acknowledging the active roles coworkers play in organising. This could be illustrated by the omission of coworker's voice and voicing from indexes of major organisational communication textbooks, including recent ones by Putnam and Mumby (2014), Miller (2015) and even a critically-oriented work by Mumby and Kuhn (2019). It perpetuates the view of managers as responsible for strategising with communication being a tool within the organisation's boundaries. Similarly, meetings are perceived as mere representations of organisational culture and values, and sites where information is disseminated and decisions are announced. I thus argue that coworker's voice has been left behind by both academics and communication professionals, even though organisations nowadays describe themselves as flatter, team-based, and open.

Therefore, research should foreground the active, communicative, and constitutive processes of meeting and voicing. As Scott et al. (2015) pointed out, not considering the constituting role of meetings and how they reify institutional and social contexts means that studies reinforce the idea that organisations and coworkers are already in an organised shape, rather than highlighting the active and never complete process of organising. By uncovering how coworkers voice and what norms guide it, we can understand more about the tensions and challenges they face and the forces shaping their interactions. Additionally, both voicing and meetings have an inherent inclination toward democracy, dialogue, and fairness (Tracy & Dimock, 2004), which in turn could have positive impacts on individual's wellbeing and society at large.

To highlight the performative and constitutive character of voice, the thesis draws on Goffman's (1959/1990) dramaturgical framework, rooted in the interpretive tradition based on social constructionism. It highlights the dynamics of voicing on the front stage during a team meeting and explores coworkers' impression management techniques. It also investigates the perceptions and sensemaking ongoing on the performer's backstage while acknowledging the influence of social norms. Moreover, the Goffmanian approach allows to study power in mundane, everyday work interactions. It therefore assists in unmasking the expectations and taken-for-granted assumptions regarding coworker's voicing.

The study is conducted in a Swedish multinational corporation within the transportation and infrastructure sector. The organisation is actively working to promote communicative leadership and coworker engagement. As such, it is a promising environment for collecting rich empirical material on voicing. Observations are used as the primary method since the thesis focuses on voicing processes and how coworkers do voicing in internal meetings. To enrich the analysis with coworker's perceptions and experiences, semi-structured qualitative interviews are also conducted. This approach is in line with the need for strategic communication research to better understand how coworkers do organising through communication on a micro-level, and how they cocreate organisational realities (Andersson, 2020). The thesis thus directly contributes to the scholarly debate by studying how individuals communicate at their workplaces by raising - or silencing - their voice.

Taking the perspective of coworkers and examining the process of voicing from a communication-centric perspective has the potential to highlight the challenges and tensions between voicing, communication responsibility, coworkers' identities, and organisational, societal, and cultural norms. It showcases how these intertwined processes constitute work teams and organisations while also spotlighting power dynamics in meetings. By

acknowledging the value of voicing in meetings, organisations can become more communicative, better informed, innovative, and creative, and therefore equipped to face the challenges of the VUCA marketplace.

Research aim and research questions

This thesis aims to increase the understanding of how coworkers perform voice (i.e. *do voicing*) in internal meetings while embedding the phenomenon in wider organisational and social contexts. It answers the following research questions:

1. *How do coworkers perform voicing in team meetings at an organisation in the manufacturing and transportation sector?*
2. *How do coworkers experience voicing in meetings?*

The thesis departs from understanding organisations as communicatively constituted (CCO - e.g., Heide et al., 2018; Schoeneborn et al., 2019), problematising the linear views on voice, meetings, and organisational communication at large. It views meetings as communicative events constituting through voicing the organisation, its culture, and power structures (see Schwartzman, 1989; Scott et al., 2015). As such, the study contributes to strategic communication research by advancing the understanding of coworker's voice and exploring the process of voicing, which is situated, performative, constrained, and directly tied to the success and survival of the organisation. From a practical viewpoint, the thesis can serve as an encouraging bedrock for managers and communication professionals to help facilitate coworker's voicing and create a meeting environment supportive of dialogue, polyphony, and coworkership. As a result, meetings could become spaces for constituting more communicative, innovative, and collaborative organisations.

On meetings

This chapter discusses the thesis' conceptual framework and explores the scholarship on meetings and coworker's voice. I view these concepts as *repertoires of lenses* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), applied as guiding principles throughout the study. Hence, this chapter is best understood as both a literature review and a theoretical framework. Such an approach helps to outline the interconnected relationships between paradigms, frameworks, vocabularies, and contexts. It also mirrors the research process undertaken in this study, which is open, iterative, and reflexive. The first section introduces work meetings as communicative phenomena to situate the research. Then, I explore coworker's voice from various academic perspectives, which are subsequently problematised.

Work meetings

On average, workers spend 23% of their time in meetings, with an additional 19% in online meeting chats (Microsoft, 2023). This corresponds to about 11-15 meetings per week (Nizio, 2021, as cited in Kreamer & Rogelberg, 2024) with the time increasing with the position (Chen, 2020). These statistics exclude time and resources spent on preparation for meetings and sensemaking afterwards. It is thus safe to conclude that meetings are omnipresent in organisational life. They are a universal social and cultural form (Schwartzman, 1989), experienced by all coworkers and company types. Their presence further increased with the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of hybrid and remote forms of organising, bringing additional challenges to coworkers' participation, engagement, and interaction (Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023). Nevertheless, meetings are commonly held as a waste of time (Schwartzman, 2017) and an interruption from "real" work (Kreamer & Rogelberg, 2024). The perceived meaninglessness has become so widespread across organisations and cultures that Åkerström et al. (2020) spoke of a *meeting critique discourse*, essentially associating meetings as synonymous with inaction. In practice, several companies, such as Shopify, NPR, and Calendly, have experimented with cancelling meetings altogether (Strachan, 2023).

Yet, meetings play a key role in shaping coworkers' work lives, organisational functioning, sensemaking, collaboration, and overall contribute to business success (Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023; Beck et al., 2015; Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023). They impact organisational culture and community (Allen et al., 2014) and are crucial for strategising (Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023). More broadly, meetings have been described as *communicative microcosms* (Schwartzman, 1989), where individual and structural forces interact to produce, reproduce, and negotiate organisational realities (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023). However, meetings have been continuously understudied for decades (Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023; Schwartzman, 1989). The scarcity of studies thus prevents gaining a deeper understanding of organisational behaviours. Furthermore, within existing research, meetings are often perceived as *reflecting* and not *constituting* organisational and communication phenomena (Scott et al., 2015). It could be explained by the lack of strategic communication research, even though meetings were previously highlighted as *micro-level strategic communication praxes* (Aggerholm & Asmuß, 2016; Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2012) and *focal points for strategic activities* (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). The focus of this subchapter is thus to summarise the understanding of meetings from a communication perspective.

The first scholar to fully embrace meetings not as mere arenas for information transmission and problem-solving but as *communicative phenomena* was Helen Schwartzman. Her seminal work The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities conceptualised a meeting as a "communicative event that organises interaction in distinctive ways" (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 61). The scholar stressed the role of meetings as sense-makers and cultural and status validators, generating and maintaining an organisation. Furthermore, understanding meetings as focused interactions in sociocultural systems foregrounded the role of power and control. In meetings, members accept, create, and negotiate relationships and thus hierarchies and structures. As such, meetings can both produce and resist social order (Schwartzman, 2017). Finally, Schwartzman proposed that meetings reproduce themselves since they generate the perception that rational reasoning and logical processes are behind organisational decision-making. While actually, they are about relationship negotiations and power struggles (Schwartzman, 1989). They are thus a particularly suitable environment for studying coworker communication as both phenomena are power-laden with social norms and cultural values "bred into" them (Randon et al., 1980, as cited in Schwartzman, 2017).

Beck et al. (2015) also studied meetings from a communication standpoint. They proposed that communication is *the substance* creating meetings. They further advanced

Schwartzman's conceptualisation by outlining that all meeting interactions are inherently strategic. Their reasoning revolves around messages and their strategicness. Members always consciously or subconsciously adapt meeting messages to accomplish their different goals while factoring in historical, cultural, and organisational restraints.

Following a similar line of thinking - i.e. meetings having a *performative* and *ritualistic* character - Szkudlarek and Alvesson (2023) identified them as spaces for voice activation. However, they warned meetings could also generate organisational silence, and thus be used as a form of domination. One participant in Szkudlarek and Alvesson's (2023) qualitative study described the feeling of being watched during a roundtable meeting, which subsequently led to her silence: "The round setup feels like everyone's exposure is what is more pronounced. If you say something, all eyes are on you" (p. 6). Such an observation points to the importance and influence of meeting layout and the various symbolic powers at play. It also highlights that meetings are a collective phenomenon in which members affect each other.

From a more critical perspective, Deetz (1992) also outlined the ritual aspect of meetings, viewing them as "routines of control, that conceal the control" (p. 320). He maintained the most crucial decisions are rarely risked in meetings and that full coworker participation is an illusion. Instead, he proposed that voices are only valued if they are perceived as building upon what has been previously said, essentially reinforcing dominant lines of organisational thinking and the status quo.

More traditional communication research focused on examining language and how meaning is established in and around a meeting (see Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023). An example of such research could be an observational study by Åkerström et al. (2020) of an international police project. Their study illustrates the negative sentiment commonly associated with work meetings and the power of discursive repositioning. Nonetheless, the common division between "real work" and "meetings" highlighted by Åkerström et al. (2020) brings up a paradoxical question of why members do not raise their voices if formal meetings are perceived as meaningless and thus arguably with low consequences and stakes.

There are also other theoretical issues with communication research presented in Allen and Lehmann-Willenbrock's (2023) review. Communication is viewed in a linear and limited manner, with the research focusing on studying flows between individuals rather than understanding it holistically. Another problematic aspect is perceiving complaining as a negative phenomenon, which ought to be limited, managed or prevented (cf. Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2016; Schulte et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, meetings play a central role in shaping coworkers' work lives and contribute to organisational success (Allen & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2023). They thus need to be seen not just as an arena for information-sharing, problem-solving or decision-making but as a process that constitutes the organisation and coworkers' social identities. Formal meetings are also among the most important sites for exercising voice (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023), and hence a space where members would be expected to take communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019). The underlying phenomenon that brings meetings and organisations into being is therefore coworker communication; more specifically, a coworker's voice. It is through the process of voicing that coworkers express their opinions, ideas, and identities, therefore continuously constituting and negotiating organisational realities. Analysing voicing in meetings can thus lead to understanding how members define who they are as individuals, groups, and organisations, as well as identifying whose voices are missing or were not invited to the ongoing sense and meaning-making in the first place. In addition, it can highlight contemporary forms of control and shed light on power dynamics at workplaces.

Coworker's voice

Expressing disagreement, providing feedback, and speaking up are among the cornerstones of successful organising. Communication is central to these organising processes, with coworkers co-responsible for the organisation's success and survival (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Economic value production no longer depends on the product, but instead has a "fundamentally communicative" character (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 170). It is therefore surprising that voice has not been extensively examined from a communication perspective, as evidenced by the approach missing from major reviews of voice scholarship, including recent ones such as by Zhan (2020). In contrast, voice is a well-established concept in human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB) literature.

Voice has predominantly been viewed as a response to job dissatisfaction (Morisson, 2014). The widely shared definition of voice (Morrison, 2011; Morrison, 2014; Zhan, 2020) understood the phenomenon as "employees' informal, discretionary, and change-oriented communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information, or opinions about work-related issues" (Zhan, 2020, p. 273). It rendered voice as a reactive, outcome-focused communicative expression, a "tool" for addressing work-related problems. However, such understanding is strongly influenced by normative managerial thinking. It implied that organisations are

containers for communication standing apart from society and that societal or individual issues do not shape work processes. Furthermore, it assumed that coworkers' opinions and voices were relevant only if they directly benefited the organisation, suggesting all members share the same corporate goal.

The dominant organisational behaviour scholarship, from which the above-quoted definition stems, thus mainly focused on studying voice as an individual-level act. It examined the various micro-level factors that motivate or prohibit the coworker from speaking up. It was centred on the benefits to organisational performance, without considering wider power structures. Overall, voice in this paradigm was understood as a form of a pro-social, extra-role behaviour of a voluntary nature, aimed upward at managers, and intended to bring about positive change for the organisation (e.g., Dempsey, 2017; Detert et al., 2013; Morrison, 2014; Tangirala et al., 2013; Van Dyne & Le Pine, 1998). Morisson (2011; 2014) further argued coworkers' voices are crucial for organisational survival and performance. To strengthen this behaviour, she recommended simulating a sense of voice obligation among members and fostering a strong desire to speak up. However, such a perspective assumes that coworkers wish to help their organisation and should do so in all cases. It obscures the role of control, power, and other barriers to voicing. Moreover, the constructive intent of voice highlighted in the OB literature may prohibit creative free-flowing discussions, which could lead to innovations and new ideas generation. It points to the influence of positivism and dataism in contemporary organisations. Coworkers often believe they need hard data or tangible proof for their opinions, as illustrated by Detert and Edmondson (2011). Finally, the OB scholarship supposed coworkers should always voice in a non-emotional and professional manner, unaffected by their individual experiences outside work.

The second major stream of literature - employment relations and HRM - identified the roots of coworker's voice in formal mechanisms and structures, such as unions and collective bargaining. For example, Freeman and Medoff (1984) conceptualised voice as "providing workers as a group with *a means of communicating* with management" [emphasis added] (p. 8). Simply put, for HRM scholars, voice equalled an "opportunity to have a say" (Mowbray et al., 2015, p. 385). It tied voice to decision-making, hence intertwining it with concepts such as workplace democracy and participation. A similar viewpoint was expressed by political scientists studying voice, for instance Budd (2004), for whom coworker's voice was related to human rights, legal protection, and the ability to provide decision-making input. Inspired by Habermas and workplace democracy, Selvaraj and Joseph (2020) enriched the

understanding of voice with deliberative elements, stressing the need for trust, transparency, and accountability in organisations.

As argued earlier, communication scholars have not extensively engaged with the concept of coworker's voice. Most attention has been paid to voice with underlying elements of critique or disagreement, which could be perceived as voice's subconcepts. These are for instance whistle-blowing, issue selling, dissent, or boat rocking (for an overview of main assumptions and authors see Appendix 1). Nevertheless, these concepts too share the shortcoming of perceiving communication as an information transmission, which does not reflect the complex nature of contemporary post-bureaucratic organisations.

Pulling the research streams together, Bashshur and Oc (2015) developed a synthesised conceptualisation of the coworker's voice, which has since been frequently reprinted. The two authors defined voice as:

> *The discretionary or formal expression of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or alternative approaches directed to a specific target inside or outside of the organization with the intent to change an objectionable state of affairs and to improve the current functioning of the organization, group, or individual.* (Bashshur & Oc, 2015, p. 1531)

Their review strengthened the dominance of the managerial perspective in voice scholarship as it did not consider the experiences of voicers nor their constituting role. In line with functionalist thinking, Bashshur and Oc (2015) maintained voice is "problem focused, change oriented, and constructive" (p. 1531), essentially discrediting other forms of voicing. Nonetheless, venting or "merely criticising" (LePine & van Dyne, 1998) might reveal deeper issues and hence is also a valuable part of organising. As Andersson et al. (2023) argued, voicing has an inherent value, even if it deviates from the official, united, corporate organisational voice.

The voice scholarship also makes a sharp distinction between voice and silence. Typically, they are perceived as two opposing phenomena (e.g., Morrison, 2011). However, such a linear understanding is limiting since silence also communicates. One should therefore understand coworker's voice as being present at all times. Additionally, as Tourish (2014) argued, "any attempt to abstain from communication itself becomes a form of communication" (p. 125). Silence is thus performative and has a dynamic, constituting character with both constructive and oppressive elements (Vu & Fan, 2022). Coworkers might voice in one meeting and remain silent in the next one, pointing toward the fact that

coworker's silence and voice do not have solid boundaries or are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, previous research assumed coworkers are capable of making a free, discretionary, and rational choice between voicing and staying silent. For example, Morrison (2011) argued that "individuals choose whether or not to engage in this behaviour at any particular moment in time" (p. 375) and Van Dyne et al. (2003) saw voice as an "intentional expression" (p. 1370). Nonetheless, such conceptualisations essentially obscure the influence of norms, routines, and scripts.

Similarly, it is important to note that not all coworkers have an equal opportunity to voice. Organisational members were treated as a homogeneous mass by researchers, obscuring the fact that voice is influenced by the voicer's gender, race, sexual orientation, economic situation, and personal perceptions (Wilkinson et al., 2018). In addition, there are many structural, hierarchical, cultural, and managerial curbs, controls, and norms in place to discipline voicing, as illustrated by Christensen (2023). She demonstrated that unconstrained voicing is impossible due to many forms of unobtrusive control, alongside self-interest identity motives highlighted in Szkudlarek and Alvesson's (2023) work on silence.

All in all, the underlying notion behind these voice and silence conceptualisations is the view of communication as a transmission and of voice as either a tool that coworkers have at their disposal or an event occurring within organisations. As such, extant research has failed to consider voice as an active, multidimensional process, influenced by more than the individual's cognitive processes and the organisational context. While it provided valuable insights in terms of predictors of voice, the inhibiting and promoting factors, motives and outcomes - see for example Bashshur and Oc's (2015) VENPIL model - it did not study voice in depth from the coworker's perspective. It also underestimated the role of power relations, culture, and social norms. Such an understanding of a coworker's voice is, however, unfit for the current fast-changing, networked, and complex work environments. Thus, there is a great need to move toward understanding voice as an active process of voicing.

From voice to voicing

Despite the lack of communication-centred research on coworker's voice, several scholars have started to conceptualise the phenomena as *voicing*, i.e. focusing on its active and performative character (see e.g., Andersson et al., 2023; Christensen, 2023; Christensen & Christensen, 2022). This research highlighted the socially constructed nature of voicing, its non-voluntary character, and various forms of unobtrusive control stemming from peers,

desired identities, societal norms, and the invisible audience effect, combined with more traditional disciplinary forms such as social media policies. Yet, the majority of the CCO research studied external voicing practices on social media, in which coworkers perform brand ambassador roles (e.g., Andersson et al., 2023; Cassinger & Thelander, 2020; Christensen, 2023; Sossini & Heide, 2024). There is a significant lack of attention toward internal voicing and its dilemmas and paradoxes, despite its utmost importance for organising, coworkers' wellbeing, and the society at large. Nonetheless, since the boundaries between external and internal communication have become blurred and organisations are unable to contain or separate communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018), the abovementioned studies still provide useful insights and showcase the CCO perspective's value.

Cassinger and Thelander (2020) were among the first to turn the focus toward understanding coworker's voice as an active process and practice, shaped by both the individual and the collective. Using Goffman's dramaturgy to analyse coworkers' posts on Instagram, they showcased voicing was scripted according to pre-established rules and norms related to the organisation's hierarchy and culture. The results demonstrated that different coworker groups voiced the organisation in diverse ways, highlighting the polyphonic nature of contemporary organisations. Similar findings were reported in a study of voicing of the Swedish Police on social media by Andersson et al. (2023). The authors explained the multiple voicing positions by the different levels of identification with the organisation, while for Cassinger and Thelander (2020) the variations in voicing were more about the individual's status and position. These studies are consistent with Szkudlarek and Alvesson (2023), who called for more attention to the situational context in any analysis of voicing and silence. Their model illustrated that the decision to voice or remain silent is a result of interacting structural, cultural, and individual elements (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023).

Building on this knowledge, Christensen and Christensen (2022) suggested social norms and voicing mutually impact on and shape each other. Looking at external voicing when organisations "nominate" members to speak on their behalf, they argued that the process not only re-constitutes social order but also the voicers themselves. Put differently, voicing is a socially constituted practice. It always stems from social norms first, with social structures and expectations being "inescapable starting points" (Christensen & Christensen, 2022, p. 501). As a result, organisations cannot have unique voices since what is being reconstituted when coworkers voice is primarily social norms. Similarly, Sossini and Heide (2024) demonstrated that disciplinary power influencing coworkers' communication largely stems from the external environment, not from within the organisation. Christensen (2023) went

even further in her conceptual paper, proposing that voicing is always constrained and thus never fully voluntary.

Recent studies also closely linked voicing to identity, defining the phenomenon as an *identity performance* (Christensen, 2023) and *situated identity expressions* (Andersson et al., 2023). The identities of both the voicer and the organisation are being re-negotiated in voicing just as they are also shaping the voicing itself, essentially functioning as both a resource and a form of discipline. Christensen (2023) identified three main sources of identity materials for voicing: management-approved and designed identities; the identities desired by the voicer themselves; and those acknowledged by others. Yet, these can also function as sources of voice control, as highlighted by Andersson et al. (2023). Voicing is therefore a cocktail of intertwined identities, values, and interests, likely creating tensions and dilemmas for the voicer. This has, as Christensen (2023) argued, significant consequences for the voicer and their life in and outside work. Some researchers have already highlighted the disappearing boundaries between work and leisure time, and professional and private life (Christensen, 2023; Müller, 2017). It affects the member's other identities such as of a partner, parent, and society member. Christensen (2023) proposed voicing might thus lead to a *perpetually deferred self* (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005), in which non-work concerns and identities are continuously postponed.

Collectively, these recent studies highlighted the need to study voice as a performative, situated, and constrained *process of voicing*, influenced by a variety of competing forces and interests, and consider its consequences on the voicer.

Balancing opportunities and risks

Although the aforementioned research streams offered a diverse way of perceiving coworker's voicing, three common clusters of benefits emerged: organisational success and survival; individual's wellbeing; and the development of a democratic society. Unsurprisingly, the main attention to voicing outcomes was paid from the organisation's perspective. Research maintained voicing is crucial for progress and fulfilment of the organisation's agenda (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023; Tourish, 2005; Van Dyne et al., 2003). It was linked to business effectiveness (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Morrison 2014; Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023), improved decision-making (Dempsey, 2017; Edmonson & Lei, 2014; Morrison, 2011; Tourish, 2005), and fostering a creative and innovative work environment (Garner, 2019; Selvaraj & Joseph, 2020; Zhan, 2020). It makes organisations stand apart from their

competitors, gaining a valuable competitive edge. Likewise, such organisations are more likely to detect and potentially prevent crises in advance (Morrison, 2014) since voice can bring attention to problems (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Edmonson & Lei, 2014; Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023; Zhan, 2020). Studying voice from an HR perspective, scholars highlighted its importance for employee retention (Mohammad et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016) and countering decreasing morals, alienation, and cynicism (Smith et al., 2022; Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023; Zhan, 2020). Being able to exercise voice might also lead to higher levels of trust, engagement, and job satisfaction (Garner, 2017; Heide & Simonsson, 2018; Rees et al., 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2020). It provides coworkers with a sense of control and facilitates participation and workplace democracy (Selvaraj & Joseph, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Finally, voice has been highlighted as a factor in improving collaboration and teamwork (Morrison, 2011; Selvaraj & Joseph, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020), which are essential for effective post-bureaucratic organising. Considered together, the benefits of voice could be seen across all organisational structures and sizes (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023).

Zooming in on the benefits for individuals, research demonstrated that coworkers value having their voices heard (Garner, 2019), pointing toward the importance of listening leadership (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). Studies identified voice as a positive factor influencing both coworkers' mental and economic wellbeing (Brooks & Wilkinson, 2022; Edmonson & Lei, 2014; Gilek, 2023; Loudon et al., 2020). It may also alleviate stress and prevent burnout (Morrison, 2011). Moreover, voicing helps members align their identity with action and thus enhances the individual's self-image (Morisson, 2014). Lastly, scholars stressed that voice leads to better relationships (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Selvaraj & Joseph, 2020).

The macro perspective on voice has been largely disregarded in the extant literature. A few studies identified it as a part of "healthy functioning" institutions and society, able to question power structures and practices (Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018, p. 178). Dempsey (2017) and Budd and Zagelmeyer (2010) argued voicing has implications for the quality of democracy as it improves trust in authorities, their legitimacy, and the perception of justice. It is tied to ethics and upholding the basic human right of freedom of expression, dignity, and integrity (Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018).

Despite these benefits, coworkers often remain silent or choose to self-censor. Scholars argued it is due to voicing being risky and creating dilemmas for coworkers (Milliken et al., 2003; Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018; Tourish & Robson, 2006). As Detert and Edmondson (2011) outlined, benefits from voicing are largely collective, i.e. on the

organisational level, while individuals typically bear the costs. Moreover, managers can restrict or suppress critical voices, both intentionally or otherwise (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Voicing is thus a tension-filled practice because power is being contested and renegotiated. On one hand, voicers might fear repercussions, while on the other, managers are afraid to lose control. All members are thus engaged in constant negotiations between seeing voicing as an opportunity and a risk.

Extant research supported this conclusion, with social and material concerns being repeatedly highlighted as the major reason for individuals to restrict or withhold their voice. Coworkers might be afraid of financial repercussions, lower performance ratings, loss of status and respect, damage to career prospects, and being labelled as troublemakers or complainers (Jing et al., 2023; Milliken et al., 2003). Coworkers in teams with close relationships often want to protect colleagues and preserve a harmonious work climate (Jing et al., 2023; Morisson, 2011) - or at least its appearance. These findings are consistent with the seminal work on silence by Milliken et al. (2003), who discovered that a colleague's and boss' performance and competence are issues most likely to be self-censored. Contrary to the studies identifying fear and futility as major factors of withholding voice, Detert and Edmondson (2011) argued that a stronger prohibitor is the feeling of being inappropriate. Therefore, silence might stem from triggered internalised beliefs rather than following a conscious conclusion. Nonetheless, what unites the studies is the perception of voicing as carrying high risk but attracting low rewards (e.g., Tourish & Robson, 2006).

At the same time, organisations typically aim to manage and control what coworkers say, despite contemporary approaches advocating for seeing all organisational members as partners in communication. Christensen (2023) described the managerial struggle of balancing restraint and encouragement of coworker's voicing. For example, by creating open climates which are at the same time regulated with ambiguous policies. Likewise, Dahle (2024) warned that a positive, open, and opportunistic view of organising is unrealistic in practice. Many organisations adopt restrictions or sanctions to protect their reputation due to voicing's unpredictability (Dahle, 2024; Waeraas & Dahle, 2020). Several studies exploring the muzzling effect of various coercive HRM practices supported this line of thinking (Dahle, 2023; Wæraas, & Dahle, 2020).

Managers usually perceive those who publicly voice as misinformed or not having the best interests of the company in mind, essentially seeing them as enemies to be conquered rather than listened to (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Garner (2016) spoke of the *paradox of openness,* in which managers know about the importance of an open communication climate

and critical feedback, yet they rarely act upon coworker's voicing. This arguably creates ambiguity within the organisation, resulting in *discursive closures* (Deetz, 1992). Similarly, Cheney et al. (2011) viewed organisations as influenced by the *paradox of homogeneity* since consensus and agreement are privileged even when managers preach about the role of critical feedback and diversity of opinions. Tourish and Robson (2006) arrived at the same conclusion, arguing that a supportive voice is often rewarded - and therefore reinforced - while more critical feedback is suppressed with its value downplayed (Tourish, 2014). Organisations thus have more positive information available, resulting in "serious distortions" (Milliken et al., 2003, p. 1472). They are further propelled by the *ingratiation effect* (Tourish, 2005) since people tend to exaggerate how much they agree with their superiors. The adverse position toward voicing might be motivated by the prevalence of old corporate logic, which stressed the importance of appearing united and acting with one voice. At large, however, it is a symptom of a power struggle. For this reason, it is necessary to study voicing from the coworker's and communication perspectives.

Organisations as dramas

The thesis' theoretical framework draws on Erving Goffman's dramaturgy approach (1959/1990), specifically his first book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. It conceptualises coworker's voicing as a staged performance enacted on the front and back stages of organisational social life. As a sociologist, Goffman was among the scholars laying the foundation for the social ontology of the self; i.e. looking at how individuals relate to and interact with others and the world around them. Manning (2008) summarised the key takeaway of Goffman's dramaturgy as individuals being "performers in the interest of order" (p. 679). The dramaturgical paradigm thus examines how people *interact* with others in social situations. It views social life as a theatrical performance, with individuals being its playwrights, actors, directors, and the audience. People first provide themselves with a script to guide them through social interactions, which is rehearsed in their imagination, to be occasionally performed in front of the audience (Prasad, 2018).

Goffman was interested in examining the social construction and *presentation of self* and social reality through an investigation of the mundane, everyday *interactions* between people (Winkin & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013). Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz (2013) put it simply: Goffman wanted to know what happens when people communicate with others. Hence, it is unsurprising that his work focused on micro-level analysis of social interactions, building on the thinking of symbolic interactionists, such as George Hermed Mead and Georg Simmel (Prasad, 2018). A crucial tenet of Goffman's dramaturgy is the concept of the *performance* of a specific version of the self in an encounter with others ("presentation of self" - Goffman, 1959/1990). Goffman (1959/1990) understood performance as an "activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 26). The presentation of self to others thus involves the practices of *scripting*, *staging*, *performing,* and *interpreting* (Benford & Hunt, 1992). However, performances are not freely created by the acting individuals. Instead, they follow a pre-established pattern of socially acceptable action, which Goffman (1959/1990) termed *a part,* or *a routine*. Such a conceptualisation implies a strong influence of social and cultural rules and norms. Performances thus tend to be enacted according to social values. These values are then exemplified, in a process Goffman (1959/1990) coined the *socialisation of performance*. The

influence of social norms on performances is clear already in the production phase of the organisational drama, in which individuals create a *script* for their performance.

Scripts are typically routinised, learned, and shaped by cultural norms. In other words, they are emergent guides for action and as such outline expected behaviours (Benford & Hunt, 1992). In terms of voicing, scripts for example provide voicers with information on the topics they can speak about and the ideal form. During the staging phase, the voicer then establishes *fronts,* according to what they perceive as a proper setting, appearance, and manner. Goffman (1959/1990) argued fronts operate in a fixed fashion to help the audience define the situation. According to Benford and Hunt (1992), staging could be both analysed from material and symbolic perspectives.

Performers then attempt to steer and control their performances by using *impression management* techniques (Goffman, 1959/1990). Shulman (2017) explained that performers usually know what to do and what is expected of them. It means that interactions are ordered and entwined with social structures. In practice, this coupling between an individual's performance and social rules could be unravelled by analysing three key elements of impression management, defined by Goffman (1959/1990). Firstly, performers are expected to keep *dramaturgical loyalty* by performing appropriately, consistently, and according to the group's morals. Further, they have to maintain *dramaturgical discipline* by appearing composed, ready, and rational so that they do not cross the group's affective boundaries. In other words, performers should retain control over the act. For example, they might choose certain vocabularies or align their voicings to dominant organisational messages. Lastly, they should adhere to *dramaturgical circumspection*, meaning they need to plan their performance strategically, consider how the audience would interpret it, and anticipate reactions and consequences. They also need to adapt to changing circumstances during the interaction. A major tension thus arises in connection with impression management: individuals are expected to perform consistently, essentially pushing aside their emotions and subjectivities. In other words, "a certain *bureaucratisation of the spirit* is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time" (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 64). This means there is an inherent curbing force placed upon actors and their performances. The fragility of performances also renders *trust* the crucial felicity condition for interaction (Manning, 2008).

Another key dynamic of Goffman's performance theory is the division between front and back stages. According to the rules of impression management, the separation needs to be maintained throughout the performance. The *frontstage* is the social world (in the case of the

thesis a work meeting), where coworkers perform different roles in front of the audience of their managers, peers, and themselves. It is there individuals attempt to define and influence the social situation by communicating a certain personality (Prasad, 2018) - or in Goffman's (1959/1990) terms, by engaging in *face work*. In contrast, the *backstage* could be understood as the individual's protected safe space. It is the realm of the more 'authentic' self, which when revealed would lead to stigmatisation or embarrassment (Prasad, 2018). It is here that actors prepare for the performances and practice their scripts (Goffman, 1959/1990). Yet, despite Goffman's warnings not to break the division between the stages, recent research found it increasingly difficult. Our professional and private lives have become intertwined and hence boundaries between them are often blurred (see Roderick & Allen Collinson, 2020). The division and tensions between the two fronts can therefore provide a rich source of insights for micro-social research. This thesis thus investigates how individual coworkers perform voice on the frontstage in a meeting as well as what happens on the backstage and how the performers perceive the whole process.

Apart from social norms, interactions are also shaped by organisational forces. Organisations place structural, cultural, material, and ecological constraints on performances, and subsequently produce response and resistance (Manning, 2008). In his writing, Goffman (1959/1990) highlighted the active process of organising - seeing it as co-participants' relational processes - and viewed organisational actions as socially defined and sustained. Further highlighting the importance of cocreation, Manning (2008) described Goffman's understanding of a social interaction as "a communicative dance based on trust and reciprocity" (p. 686). Researchers in the dramaturgy tradition hence aim to unmask the prevailing social order and uncover hidden agendas, identity tensions, and other beyond-the-surface dynamics of organisational life (Prasad, 2018). It is important to underline that although interactions are ordered and socially influenced, individuals do not always perform exactly to the norm. This is due to their self-interests, sense of agency, and emerging resistance (Shulman, 2017). Hence, there is flexibility within interactions, creating potential for change. As Shulman (2017) put it, "order sometimes bends if not breaks" (p. 87). Finally, this acknowledgement of the individual's agency can help to understand Goffman's overall epistemological position: while reality is socially constructed, it is individually defined (Persson, 2019).

Implied in this conceptualisation of performance is thus the role of power and how it influences everyday social interactions, even if Goffman did not specifically attend to power in his work. Instead, Rogers (1977) was the first scholar to outline the potential of using

Goffman's dramaturgy as a conceptual framework of power, influence, and control. She proposed that by focusing on the mundane, research could illustrate how pervasive power is in our everyday life. Similarly, Benford and Hunt (1992) proposed that performing is about "the demonstration and enactment of power" (p. 45). In contrast to other power theorists such as Foucault, Goffman did not focus on macro-perspectives or totalising discourses. Instead, he viewed power in terms of *micro-physics* between ends and means, and tactics and manoeuvres between the individual, their persona, self, the organisation, and norms which produce, enable, and limit one another (Leib, 2022). In this sense, Leib (2022) argued Goffman is compatible with Foucault as they both viewed individuals as influenced by forces which were not of their making. Furthermore, one cannot separate the role performance from the social system it is embedded in (Manning, 2008). In other words, one could view organising and meetings as constrained interactions.

Lastly, prominent in Goffman's (1959/1990) writing is the stress on consensus and by implication also cooperation in or with disadvantage. He argued that within members of a team, certain unwritten agreements develop regarding acceptable levels of opposition. Members subsequently use techniques for *saving the show* when there are disruptions (Goffman, 1959/1990). Jenkins (2008) further outlined that cooperation with and in a disadvantage is the norm in social interactions. He proposed that the fear of real or imagined costs serves as a brake on protest and other forms of collective action. Arguably, this sheds light on the widespread silence within organisations and the scarcity of critical voicing. Secondly, it provides another link to Foucault (1977) if one considers the concepts of *self-surveillance* and *self-censorship*. Finally, in Goffman's (1959/1990) work the sense of self-control is also tied to impression management, under which "agreement is stressed and opposition is underplayed" (p. 231). It might also point to the presence of concertive and normative forms of control within the work team (see Barker, 1993; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Müller, 2017).

Taken from the perspective of Deetz (1992), the suppression of opposition and conflict is indicative of *discursive closure* happening in the meeting interactions. Several discursive closure processes could be identified when coworkers perform voicing, including *pacification*, *topical avoidance*, *legitimation*, *neutralisation*, and *naturalisation*, all leading to distorted communication (Deetz, 1992). For example, potentially conflictual interactions are diverted in pacification by portraying the issue as unworthy of the effort, unsolvable, or beyond the abilities of the participants. Similarly, values tend to be hidden, and activities and positions are treated as value-free and apolitical in neutralisation processes. In addition, these potentially

conflict areas are often being discouraged from discussing for the sake of order and harmony - even if these topics are in the greatest need of dialogue. Finally, organisations use higher-order motives such as calls for productivity and innovation to motivate commitment and action that benefits certain groups. As Deetz (1992) pointed out, they render organisational decisions as rational, legitimate, and acceptable. I thus consider these processes when analysing the performances as they point toward dominant social and cultural norms guiding voicing.

Overall, the dramaturgy paradigm was deemed suitable as it allows for conceptualising voicing as a dynamic and socially enacted process enacted in interactions between the performer and the audience, influenced by overarching norms as well as shared understandings. Goffman's concepts of scripting, staging, and performing can be useful for shedding light on how coworkers construct their scripts, how voicing unravels during a meeting, how coworkers navigate the dynamics of front and back stages, what impression management techniques are used, and also what norms are guiding voicing behaviour. The thesis also takes into consideration the micro-physics of power, Foucault's notion of self-censorship, and Deetz's discursive closure processes to further analyse coworker's voicing. Overall, these theoretical lenses help to portray coworker's voice as an active performance, which is affected by collective order, organisational structures and culture, and also self-perceptions.

Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative study conducted in the dramaturgy tradition using a Goffmanian approach, based on social constructionism. It aims to increase understanding of how coworkers perform voicing in work meetings while embedding the phenomenon in wider organisational and social contexts governed by norms and power dynamics. The thesis' methodological and analytical approach was inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) call to engage in a *critical dialogue* between theoretical framework and empirical material, and perceive research as solving a mystery through working with breakdowns. With such an approach to the research process, it is unsurprising the thesis' epistemology is deeply rooted in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Observations and interviews were chosen as the most suitable empirical material collection methods due to the study's dramaturgy underpinning. Details of the material collection and a description of the analytical approach are described below as well as sub-chapters on ethical considerations and reflexivity.

Overall, the thesis is in line with scholars arguing for *analytical generalisability* of qualitative research (e.g., Halkier, 2011; Flyvberg, 2006), achieved by enlarging empirical material with theoretical concepts to gain a more general perspective on the context-bound study (Halkier, 2011). In contrast to quantitative generalisability, analytical generalisability does not seek to find universal truths - instead it proposes *context-bound typicality* (Halkier, 2011). The cases are unique yet typical, dynamic, complex, and fluid. As such, analytical generalisability is in harmony with the reflexive constructionist approach of this study, which seeks to combine theory and empirical material in disciplined imagination (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

Social constructionism

Social constructionism is a theoretical orientation stemming from the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1967). It highlights the centrality of language for sense-making and understanding of the world, with language being constitutive and interpretive of our reality. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) explained, language forces into patterns and as such is "the most important sign system of human society" (p. 53). Another key tenet of constructionist

research is the constructed nature of knowledge and theories. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) put it simply: "We must invent the world we are trying to understand" (p. 38). Constructionism thus puts theories, language, and scholars themselves into the centre of the whole research process. It highlights the role of *reflexivity*, *dialectical interrogation* (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), and *de-familiarisation* with pre-existing concepts and ideas for new theory development (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Another crucial process is the *unmasking of taken-for-granted assumptions* (Schütz, 1967), and revealing what is forgotten or not paid attention to (Czarniawska, 2003). The more taken-for-granted our behaviour is, the more predictable and controllable it becomes (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As a result, a constructionist approach allows for organisational research with a critical edge (Burr, 2015). Last but not least, constructionism shifts the site of knowledge from individual minds to the relationship between people (Gergen, 1994). In other words, meanings are developed collectively (Heide, 2024). Social order is thus a product of a continuous human activity, which becomes *habitualised*, embedded into *routines*, and eventually taken for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). For the purpose of this study, I therefore paraphrase Berger and Luckmann's theorising and posit that a work meeting is a coworkers' product, the meeting is perceived as an objective reality by coworkers, and coworkers in turn are the meeting's products.

Empirical material collection

For a successful work within the dramaturgy paradigm, researchers must accept the theatricality of social life, argued Prasad (2018), and through observations paint vivid pictures of performance dynamics. I thus used a combination of internal meeting observations with qualitative interviews to gain a richer and more holistic understanding of voicing. Such an approach also allowed me to compare between respondents' talk and action. After the first observation, I started conducting semi-structured interviews with coworkers who attended the observed meetings, and ran these two collection methods in parallel. While the observations served as the thesis' primary method, the interviews were used to further probe into coworkers' experiences and understand their motivations and perceptions of voicing. This material collection strategy is common within dramaturgy (Prasad, 2018).

Case study approach

To gain a nuanced understanding of coworker's voicing dynamics, it was necessary to conduct observations and interviews in the same context, i.e. based on a single case study. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argued, case studies are particularly suitable methods for learning and gaining in-depth insights. Additionally, they are well-positioned to develop new understandings and reject preconceived notions. He further proposed that fieldwork and case studies are results in itself. As such, the case study method is in line with the social constructionist and reflexive foundations of this thesis.

To create boundaries for the case study and ensure it provides rich insights, I developed several criteria. The case study organisation had to a) hold regular team meetings; b) have English as its operational language; c) be a private company with an international workforce; d) be operational for more than three years and have over ten employees. These criteria were chosen to ensure the organisation would be complex, requiring collaboration and teamwork, and with established structures and processes. The private context meant the organisation would face the challenges of the global VUCA marketplace. The criterion of an international workforce was established to mitigate the potential effects of a national culture on voicing.

After reaching out through several contact persons, I gained access to a Swedish multinational corporation within the transportation and infrastructure sector (further referred to as the "Corporation"). Within its code of conduct, the organisation stresses the need for transparent and responsible communication, and mentions the importance of teamwork and open dialogue. Elsewhere in its corporate documents publicly available online, the Corporation celebrates diversity and what it calls the climate of support and respect. Informal conversations with managers subsequently revealed the Corporation's active work with communicative leadership, by organising workshops and training for managers on coaching and communicating. The division I was allowed to enter employs educated coworkers for office positions, in which they are required to communicate, present, collaborate, and work in agile ways. The accessed division has about 35,000 coworkers, of varying professional backgrounds, nationalities, years of experience, genders, and ages. In addition, due to its size and active work with communication, the Corporation as a whole could be perceived as a manufacturing industry leader and trend-setter. As such, it was deemed as an interesting research setting for studying coworker's voicing, with a potential for collecting rich empirical

material. For more details on negotiating access and its impact on the research process, refer to Appendix 2.

Observations

Many strategic communication studies focus on interviewing communication practitioners or pursuing quantitative methodologies (e.g., Andersson, 2019; Falkheimer et al., 2016; Heide et al., 2018). However, these approaches cannot offer an interpretation of what is happening on the ground, resulting in research becoming dissociated from organisational realities. In line with this reasoning, Andersson (2020) called for more observation-based research as a fruitful method for studying strategic communication. Similarly, Heide et al. (2018) recommended examining what coworkers actually do in terms of communication.

From a theoretical perspective, observation is a method that allows for discovering routine, normalised, taken-for-granted phenomena, acts seen as embarrassing and/or performed unconsciously (Guest et al., 2013; Tracy, 2020). As Neyland (2008) argued, observation spotlights the social, cultural, and political issues, allowing for an in-depth, highly contextual, and detailed picture of the studied organisation and its members. Lastly, observation can provide insights into what people are not saying or doing (Tracy, 2020), which is particularly valuable for coworker's voicing and uncovering its governing discourses and norms. I witnessed firsthand how voicing was practised on the micro-level of meetings and hence how coworkers' communication contributed to organising at large.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the criticism of observation as a method, which often stems from a misunderstanding of the situated and constructed nature of all research. In qualitative works, it is the scholar who is the primary instrument for empirical material collection and subsequent interpretation (Tracy, 2020). Another common criticism is that the observer affects what they are witnessing. However, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued, it is not about the effects on what is observed, but rather how they are accounted for in the analytical stages. Unequal power relations between the observer and participants are inherent and unavoidable, which is why I discuss their potential impacts in the reflexivity and ethical considerations sub-chapters. Finally, the thesis also bears in mind that participants behave in more socially acceptable ways when being observed. Still, these behavioural adjustments tend to fade away with trust (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), along with the fact that individuals at work have other more important agendas to attend to (Czarniawska, 2008).

Overall, I conducted 11 observations of meetings in seven different teams (see Appendix 3). Four meetings were observed digitally; this was either due to the team having

the majority of participants joining remotely or due to the researcher's resource constraints. The benefit of the in-person observation was that I could also gain insights into informal coworker communication outside of the meeting setting, and form more trustful relationships with the participants. On the other hand, for a significant portion of the Corporation's workforce, digital meetings represent the only platform for voicing. Hence, I argue the study is strengthened by the fact I observed meetings both online and in person.

Qualitative interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of the coworker's experience with voicing, 16 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted following the first observation. They served as the thesis' secondary collection method due to their ability to let the researcher see the interviewees' unique perspectives on the studied phenomenon, how they make sense of it, and how they expressed it (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). However, it is important to note that interview statements are an outcome of identity work, script application, and overall political action, rather than an account of an authentic experience (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Interview participants are therefore "authored authors" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3) influenced by power, discourses, and norms.

To remain focused during the interaction with participants, I created an interview guide (Appendix 4) with more and less structured questions. They allowed for a flexibility and natural flow of conversation. It also meant the interviews could shift toward what participants perceived as most relevant, important, and interesting concerning voicing. All interviews nevertheless touched upon three major theme areas: a) meetings as communicative microcosms, b) the participant's experience with voicing, and, c) silence episodes. In each interview, I also discussed scenarios that traditional research does not fully acknowledge, such as instances of venting, complaining, and/or providing constructive criticism.

I used purposeful sampling to secure the interviews due to access and time restrictions. Managers of the observed teams proposed coworkers to me whom I was free to contact and arrange the interviews. While such a method raised concerns over potential bias and managerial control, I considered it inevitable to gain access to the team. Additionally, I mitigated the risks by asking the managers to recommend a varied group by including both introverted and extroverted coworkers; female and male team members; and striving for diversity in experience and seniority. It is important to note that while these diverse characteristics were aimed for as a bias and control mitigation tactic, they did not play a role in the subsequent analysis. I interviewed the coworkers face-to-face on location or via Teams

digital meeting, with the interviews lasting between 32 and 73 minutes (for more details see Appendix 5). All interviews were audio recorded on a mobile phone and subsequently transcribed by me no later than 72 hours after I conducted them.

Empirical material analysis

The analysis process began after the first observation and interview at the beginning of April. As I continued collecting material, I was simultaneously reading and re-reading my field notes, interview transcripts, and consulting previous research. The process was inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's approach to research (2007; 2011), which calls for *reflexivity* and establishing a *critical dialogue* with the material and theory. As a result, the process was *cyclical*, going back and forth between concepts and material. I was interested in problematising the dominant thinking on voice, attempting to provide novel understandings and insights. The active engagement with material and iterative research process mirrors the *abductive approach*, in which knowledge is built both from the bottom-up and top-down (Tracy, 2020). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argued, abduction is a particularly suitable method for a dynamic setting, which is the case of the Corporation.

During each observation, I took both descriptive and reflective notes, which were expanded into field notes no longer than 48 hours after each observation. The tight timeframe ensured that the notes were detailed and captured my immediate impressions and perceptions. Similarly, I wrote research memos after each interview, which captured my first interpretations. During the analytical stage, I merged all materials together and kept adding insights from the newer interviews and observations. I then searched for surprises, contradictions, and tensions. I did not follow any rigid coding frames at the early stages, instead used coding as a loose framework to spark curiosity. Such an approach is in line with what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) termed a *bricolage technique*, in which the researcher is "moving freely between analytical techniques and concepts" (p. 267). Upon identifying a major rupture between theory and the material, I started looking for potential explanations within the material and derived five areas of inquiry, which were then further expanded. Since I was interested in dynamic processes and was not limited to a rigid coding frame, I was able to uncover novel lines of insights, namely a new form of managerial control and an influential discourse.

Ethical considerations

Considering potential ethical dilemmas and issues makes qualitative studies trustworthy and credible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is especially true for research on sensitive topics, such as this thesis on coworker's voicing. Hence, I followed the ethical research framework proposed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). It highlighted four ethical issues for consideration: a) *ensuring informed consent*; b) *safeguarding confidentiality*; c) *reflecting on consequences*; and d) *assessing the researcher's role*.

With both observations and interviews being sensitive material collection methods, I focused on developing relationships with participants and establishing trust despite the short timeframe of the study. It not only assisted in securing richer material but also facilitated participants' psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) explained, it is the researcher who is in control of the setting, direction, and interpretation of the interview. As this thesis studies voicing, it was important that participants felt they could express all their thoughts, that they were actively listened to, acknowledged, and heard, and that knowledge was co-created through a reciprocal research relationship. All interviewees were thus sent an information sheet explaining the study, its purpose, design, and their role in it (Appendix 6). They were required to sign a consent form before the beginning of the interview (Appendix 7) and were informed both in writing and verbally that they could withdraw at any point.

Since the coworker's voicing - especially its upward-aimed critical forms - may lead to professional repercussions for the participants, ensuring confidentiality was crucial. It was key that participants would not be identifiable and become targets for their stances. I thus collapsed the material in a way which prevented identification and did not use the participants' real names, instead opting for pseudonyms. The recorded materials, including hand-written notes, are to be destroyed when the thesis is submitted for examination. In the meantime, the interview audio recordings are stored on a password-protected laptop.

As for the observations, my main goal was to remain as unobtrusive as possible during both in-person and online meetings. I asked managers to share with the members that I would be joining the team to ensure that nobody would be taken by surprise by my presence and had a chance to refuse participation. When I observed each team for the first time, I also gave a brief speech outlining the research topic, purpose, and method, and thanked them for their participation. However, I did not collect individual written consent forms, due to the number

of participants in the meetings and short timespans. Arguably, such an approach - i.e. making my role as a researcher clear to others - is an ethical research practice. It falls under the *implied consent* area, as explained by Guest et al. (2013).

Reflexivity statement

The researcher's reflexivity forms a part of ethical qualitative research (Tracy, 2020) and helps to engage in open dialogues (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The key dynamic I contemplated was the power asymmetry inherent in the research process. My presence could influence the meetings, making the participants feel watched, leading to their conscious and also subconscious self-censorship. On the other hand, I also reflected upon participants potentially being overly theatrical in their voicing performances, overdoing their engagement. To mitigate these effects, I aimed to have as many informal conversations with coworkers as possible, for example during coffee and lunch breaks. It helped me to gauge whether the observations resembled their typical experiences. The in-depth interviews then served as another layer in which I had the opportunity to discuss and review the observed meetings.

I also examined my positioning and the insider/outsider dynamic, recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). I originally entered the Corporation as an outsider, with no direct experience of its work culture and daily operations. It meant I had to build rapport and relationships from the ground up. On the other hand, I was not burdened by previous encounters or relationships with participants. However, during the team meetings, I noticed I had become an insider due to my previous experiences with employment and hybrid organising. I could relate to the dynamics, which allowed me to partially fit in and participate in informal jokes and small talk about technological difficulties or the Swedish weather. Yet, I sometimes felt uncomfortable in the observer position. This was particularly prevalent in meetings which generated emotions, such as when I observed a meeting in which a coworker announced they would be leaving the team or when coworkers celebrated a colleague's birthday. Nonetheless, these experiences helped me become closer to coworkers and understand the dynamic, everchanging, and subjective nature of organisational realities.

Analysis

I first focus on a more descriptive analysis of meetings and voicing at the Corporation before delving into the paradox of an open communication environment and coworker's tendency to stay quiet. As such, the initial section of the analysis answers the first research question regarding voicing processes and dynamics. The subsequent parts turn to coworkers' experiences, relating to the second research question. Following the reflexive abductive approach, I also conceptualise five factors that influence voicing and identify new emerging communication phenomena.

Meetings and voicing performances

The first section of the analysis focuses on how coworkers perform voicing in their work meetings. Stemming from observed meetings and further elaborated on from interviews was the normalisation of hybrid ways of working, organising, and communicating across the Corporation. The practice of booking a conference room - typically a small office space with no windows, a large table, and a TV screen - alongside sending a Teams invite was fully integrated, expected, and therefore taken for granted. It was both a necessity due to the observed teams having members dispersed around Sweden, Europe, and the U.S., and a shift enabled by the Coronavirus pandemic. Another norm observed across teams was the taken-for-granted meetingisation (cf. van Vree, 2011) and the prevalence of hybrid meetings as the major forum for information-sharing, planning, decision-making, and relationship-building. The interviewed coworkers did not question meetings and their importance, even though they reported attending up to 30 meetings per week on a regular basis. In contrast to previous research and popular media (e.g., Kreamer & Rogelberg, 2024; Perlow et al., 2017), they did not view meetings as a negative phenomenon to complain about. Rather, they took them as a normalised practice, which had a stable place in their workday.

While the meetings varied in length and purpose - I observed both daily "stand up" meetings, less frequent "pulse" check-ins and weekly or bi-weekly "department" meetings - they were usually conducted and perceived as information sessions. It corresponds to the mainly tool-based approach to voice in the extant scholarship. The analysis also indicates that

the second major function of meetings at the Corporation was their social aspect. Previous research has highlighted meetings as important sites for forming social bonds and shaping a community (e.g., Allen et al., 2014; Schwartzman, 2017). Arguably, with coworkers increasingly working independently from their team - with one member describing it as "our own box that we work in" - meetings became even more important, being a rare social occasion of coming together. The perceived significance of a department meeting can have varying effects on voicing. On one hand, it might serve as *an activation trigger for voicing*. On the other, it might lead to *silencing* as team members might not have established the trust needed for the interaction. A common issue stemming from interviews was the fact that many coworkers did not feel they belonged to a specific team or group.

When it came to voicing, meetings tended to be quiet, without much interaction or discussion. Coworker's voicing - when it was performed - was mostly information-delivery focused. It was performed upon direct request from the manager or a coworker, meaning voicing was no longer voluntary or free. Similarly to what Christensen and Christensen (2022) described as being *interpellated*, coworker's voicing in a meeting was often nominated from above and had to adhere to the interaction order and norms of the given meeting, in contrast to extant research highlighting its voluntary character (cf. Detert et al., 2013; Morrison, 2014). The analysis also revealed a strong voicing pattern, requiring the intervention of a proactive team member to break the silence following the invitation. Upon being prompted from the position of power, the performer takes the stage, which may stimulate further voicing by other, previously silent, audience members. Voicing is therefore a collaborative and collective effort. However, voicing performances usually engaged only two or three members, while the remaining participants stayed silent.

Therefore, silence was still the dominant form of coworker's voicing in the observed meetings. Efforts to promote voicing by managers were also minimal, usually not extending beyond "Any questions, comments" utterances. While it marked the end of almost every meeting interaction I observed, it rarely led to any further voicing. Lawrence questioned the silence which follows the "Any questions, comments" utterance, proposing that the audience usually has thoughts or concerns: "Say that we have 100 people and we have some kind of information meeting and we can ask questions. Then sometimes there are no questions. So everything is crystal clear? Or is it?" Since the questions are unvoiced, it makes it seem that all organisational members are agreeing with the proposition or information. As such, the "Any questions" utterance became a symbolic way, a ritual, to transition from one agenda point to another. It is a repetitive and expected micropractice (Deetz, 1992) which leads to the

topic being discursively closed, even if it was originally used in good faith. Managers' efforts to promote voicing were also limited, rarely engaging beyond the "Any questions" utterance. In contrast, if meeting chairs asked sharper questions related to the topic or information, they would role model active participation and engagement and showcase they are actively listening (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). Performing listening and asking stimulating questions would then signal to coworkers that voicing performances are valuable and seen, while also rendering the managers more trustworthy.

Analysing the interaction from the micro-power perspective, the utterance by those in control signals that contributions are welcomed, but simultaneously implies that it is only as they have been allowed. As such, voicing is likely to be self-censored and constructed according to values and norms of the team and organisation due to dramaturgical loyalty and discipline. It therefore contributes to the paradox of openness, in which managers and also coworkers say they welcome and invite feedback, but rarely take it on board or develop into practice. As a result, participants did not see themselves as constituting the team and organisation through their communication. Instead, as one coworker put it, voicing was a "chance to speak". Therefore, coworkers were allowed to comment but their active communication agency was downplayed, as evident in the following comment regarding a changed meeting structure:

> *It's already more than one year ago that we started with this [meeting]. It was of course shown - OK, we will work like this now and we will look into these KPIs. They could comment, but not really discuss. No.* - Paula

The implication of reactively commenting rather than actively discussing and creating solutions means strategy and decisions are likely to be under a strong, top-down influence. While coworkers can speak up, their constituting agency is being denied. Two potential explanations can be given, linked to the unpredictability of voicing: *fear of change* and *fear of being criticised* (cf. Waeraas & Dahle, 2020). Emmanuel described the nature of discussions within his team as an interaction in which he is expected to come prepared with answers:

> *In that meeting, there is a point: 'OK, Emmanuel, any comments from the last meeting?' And then I go, 'Yeah, we had this and now I have this answer'. So it's a question and answer, question and answer, and usually like that.* - Emmanuel

As such, voicing served more as a way to comment on what a coworker or manager said, rather than driving discussions, being creative, strategic or innovative. One possible explanation could be the fact that the front for the voicing performance has already been pre-constructed for the coworker and they thus need to uphold it in an expected fashion (Goffman, 1959/1990) Arguably, it is also easier for the coworker as they are not required to voice their original ideas or opinions, they are thus not stepping on the stage themselves. Many topics for discussion were thus neutralised and voices were pacified. It results in coworkers and managers engaging in a pretend voicing show of dialogue and coworkership. However, through pacification, discussions are diverted or subverted and thus closed (Deetz, 1992). A possible interpretation is that the invitation for comments is used as a controlling narrative that a discussion with a potential opposition could have taken place, but it was prevented by the fact that no participant wanted to engage in it. Instead, they chose to briefly comment or resist by not voicing, hence participating in a certain power negotiation chain. In other words, this form of pseudo-voicing provides an excuse for silence.

Silence might also be caused by habitualisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) - the audience has been socialised into being asked, and indeed expects the question. Managers, on the other hand, are habitualised into not receiving any answers and are thus not proactive in facilitating voicing. The question itself thus becomes a power-loaded silencing rhetoric device, taken for granted by all participants and resulting in the constitution of pseudo-communicative teams and organisations. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) explained, habitualisation inevitably leads to narrowing down perceived choices into one, lowering psychological pressure, and providing the individual with comfort and stability. Hence, the communicative dance (Manning, 2008) performed by managers and coworkers makes it become a routine part of meetings and exerts control over the involved parties to remain silent.

It is important to highlight that despite the frequent pseudo-communication, not all meetings at the Corporation were silent or discursively closed. In one meeting where voicing was not performed solely upon request, I observed coworkers engaging in communicative behaviour close to those of managers and leaders. The members were voicing support, validating, and acknowledging other voicers, offering advice, recommendations, and proposing solutions. Put differently, they performed job tasks previously associated solely with the managerial function. Heide et al. (2018) proposed that the communication tasks of line managers are to “translate, inform, make sense, support, and give feedback to employees”

(p. 461). Arguably, such voicing constituted a more egalitarian team culture and helped to negotiate the identity of coworkers as self-leaders rather than dependent employees.

The paradox of voicing in an open communication environment

Strangely, while the organisation is perceived by coworkers to be safe and open, they tend to remain silent and do not voice. This happens even despite the Corporation's agile ways of working and promoting communicative leadership. As Terrence put it, "the natural way is to be silent" while Yvonne said her meetings were "quite quiet most of the times". Some managers shared they find it challenging to get their coworkers to share ideas and opinions. Finally, Marianna estimated her colleagues remain quiet roughly 30 per cent of the time a more complex question is discussed. It could therefore be argued the Corporation has an issue with meetings being more about coworker's silence than voicing.

Yet, coworkers described their work environment as open, safe, with satisfactory levels of transparency. Most importantly, they agreed they feel safe speaking up on any topic. Openness, psychological safety, and transparency are significant stimulators and preconditions of voicing (cf. Edmondson, 2019; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Liang et al., 2012; Morrison, 2011; Mowbray et al., 2015). However, they do not fully explain the organisational reality at the Corporation.

Moreover, dominant research explanations for coworker's silence - fear or futility (cf. Milliken et al., 2003) - do not match everyday experiences at the Corporation. Coworkers do not seem to perceive voicing as risky or making them face serious repercussions. Typically, the coworkers would initially mention individual traits as determining whether the person would perform voicing. However, upon further probing they spoke about broader discourses influencing their decisions. These wider organisational, cultural, and societal influences are thus more likely impacting the voicing dynamics. This argument can be supported by the fact that even coworkers identifying themselves as introverts mentioned they still feel they could voice their concerns. Hence, after analysing interview transcripts and field notes, I identify five factors driving the paradox between communication theory and the empirical material. The five factors are further elaborated in the following section.

Dislocated staging

The hybrid ways of organising at the Corporation had a major impact on voicing performances. In the past, work meetings provided a suitable environment for voicing, in

which coworkers could see, hear, and witness performances. Nowadays, the issues of staging and subsequent impression management are more complex, due to the effects of *dislocated staging* caused by hybrid organising. When the stage becomes dislocated, it stops being visible and defined and is therefore unable to provide the context and a common frame of reference. As a result, the audience also becomes problematic to locate and address for the voicer.

The silencing effects of dislocated staging were particularly prominent when coworkers did not turn on their cameras during hybrid meetings. On several occasions, voicers were observed to perform to a void of digital black screens or in contrast be an audience to a performance enacted on an invisible stage. Subsequently, voicers described issues with judging the audience's body language and responses, which are essential parts of social interaction. Without these cues, coworkers had difficulties with impression management - especially with dramaturgical circumspection - as they could not adjust and adapt to the audience. Yvonne mentioned she questioned the effectiveness of her voicing because she could not see the audience's reactions due to sharing a presentation on her laptop screen: "[D]id you really have the buy in or not?" Therefore, the effects of dislocated staging and hidden audience fuelled self-surveillance and consequently drove silence at the observed meetings.

The dislocated staging also impacted engagement since voicing was performed much less frequently by online meeting attendees. It may be harder to know when to enter the stage, or as Lawrence suggested, it might be because it is easier to do multiple jobs and not fully pay attention. Subsequently, voicers on location had to invest more energy and effort into keeping the interaction ongoing. In several cases, coworkers also felt co-responsible for setting stages for others and promoting their voicing. For instance, Terence admitted to having a personal goal of making a joke in every meeting he joins to improve the communication climate and "lay the scene" for others.

However, the additional responsibilities and dislocated staging made voicing more challenging in already silent teams since voicers struggled to receive the affirmation they were seeking. One interviewee said she felt her work was not as important to the rest of the team because her voicing was not followed up or acknowledged by comments or feedback. It therefore shows the importance of voicing for coworker's wellbeing and puts into the spotlight the dangerous implications of silent organisations, such as low job satisfaction, low motivation, widespread burnout, and quick turnover (Morisson, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2020). It also corroborates previous research highlighting the influence of voicing on one's identity

work (Christensen, 2023; Morrison, 2014). In summary, the dislocated staging placed additional requirements on both voicers and the audience, essentially extending their work responsibilities without specifying the new communication expectations and how to fulfil them.

Effects of structure on coworker's voicing

Having an agenda, which was typically sent out ahead of time, was seen as the usual and most effective way of conducting a meeting at the Corporation. The observations revealed that the department meetings featured three distinct parts (1) the *socialising section*, usually marking the start and end of a meeting, with a few minutes for small talk; typically about the weather or technical difficulties related to setting up the hybrid meeting or booking a suitable room. The (2) *information sharing section*, in which predominantly managers voiced information top-down. Finally, a version of a (3) *round table,* which involved participants briefing the rest of the team on their tasks, reviewing key performance indicators, or sharing their wellbeing status. It is therefore easy to see the strong influence of ritualisation (Deetz, 1992) and institualisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) on meetings.

The different but regularly appearing agenda points created pre-established scripts for meeting participants to follow. It provided a brief period of predictability, a sense of control, and a moment of stability in the Corporation's fast-changing and agile work environment. As such, it gave coworkers a sense of safety, which nonetheless also led to conformity and perpetuation of the status quo. On the other hand, Phineas mentioned the recurring structure made voicing sensitive topics easier because coworkers learnt to expect the performance and it thus "becomes more natural that you always go into this". The facilitating effect of the structure is further enlarged when coworkers become responsible for creating the agenda, note-taking or time-tracking. The routinely-performed meeting can therefore result both in the inhibition and promotion of coworker's voicing.

However, a predetermined structure also constrained coworker's voicing at the Corporation, with participants mentioning the importance of keeping meetings on time, thus curbing their performances:

> *We always plan 15 minutes. So sometimes we do not have any escalations, then it is good. Sometimes if you would like to bring something, then you put it there, the topic, and you know that you have 15 minutes*. - Marianna

In one observed meeting, a team member was chosen to be the timekeeper, ensuring that other performers did not go over the pre-determined time limit. At one point, his alarm clock went off and indeed the team moved on and agreed to continue discussing the issue at an unspecified future date. It leads to postponement of voicing with no guarantees that it will be picked up again. Discussions also end prematurely if they reach the time limit, preventing others from participating. The most important part is thus to ritually tick the agenda box of the meeting, move on, and finish on time. It results in the development of *postponed voicing*, a form of unreflected strategic behaviour, which serves to prevent potential conflict and keep up the appearance of progress and decision-making. Even if the only decision was to postpone. Hence, postponed voicing perpetuates rationalisations and managerial thinking by making it seem that reason and logical processes have guided the decisions through the chains of meetings, which themselves generate future meetings (see Schwartzmann, 1989). The postponement also benefits the coworker's identity work as they can continue perceiving themselves as having a say, working toward a target, and feeling their time was productively used. Therefore, postponed voicing in meetings is more about negotiating, managing, and commenting on relationships with coworkers rather than focused strategising, which reflects Schwartmann's (1989) theorising.

The meeting structure also predetermines the voicing content. Mathilda explained that a more structured meeting leads to less "if", "what", and "how" questions. Instead, she added, such meetings provide coworkers with an outlined script: "[T]his is how it is, this is the issue, we can solve it like this and this and this." It can therefore be argued that agenda and meeting structures are positioned as superior over coworker's voicing. It is the coworkers' ability to follow the structure which determines the meeting's effectiveness, not whether it leads to discussions or improvements. As such, it is a form of *functional stupidity* (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), in which team members stop being reflexive and instead choose the certainty and safety that the meeting structure provides. Hence, they perpetuate established patterns of thinking and behaving. The superiority of structure thus prevents voicing from occurring as illustrated by Yvonne's experience: "Sometimes you don't want to take the time into the meeting because you have an agenda and some of the discussions or clarifications or thoughts that you are having [...] maybe shouldn't be brought up in the meeting".

These interpretations go in line with Deetz's (1992) criticism of meetings being viewed as the organisation's commitment to workplace democracy since "rarely are meetings participatory, and rarely are critical decisions risked in that context" (p. 319). In some cases, the agenda directly prevents coworker's voicing, while in other instances it may lead to

pseudo-voicing, a specific form of pseudo-communication. The ritualisation of a meeting structure means that the agenda and time have to be filled every time, no matter whether participants have something to discuss.

Analysing meeting structure and agendas from the perspective of micro-power, it is clear that meetings constitute and reaffirm power dynamics at the Corporation. For example, when agendas were jointly put together, participants were more likely to take centre stage. The allocation of roles also differed. In one team, roles were distributed by random chance using an online spinning wheel software, reducing managerial influence. In that meeting, coworkers were more proactive, communicative, and the manager attended the meeting as if she were a regular participant. When read from the ritual perspective (Deetz, 1992), such a meeting signifies to a participant that they are expected to perform voicing; it is a ritual of coming together and discussing. Conversely, when the agenda is strictly followed and arranged by the manager, voicing is inherently curbed. In those cases, the author of the meeting structure positioned themselves as the scriptwriter and director of the upcoming performance, with coworkers being mere actors - even if they would be allowed to speak. The effects of power and hierarchy were also evident in coworkers having to ask managers to include a certain topic on the agenda, as illustrated by the following account from a coworker with managerial responsibilities:

> *They also suggest topics, especially if they want to get some inputs from the team. For example, we had a team meeting yesterday where one of the members asked me the week before if they could bring a topic for 10 minutes to get some input.* - Phineas

While it may be perceived as participatory, having to ask permission for voicing reifies existing workplace hierarchies. Additionally, power relations are indexical, stemming from the specific meeting situations and not the formal organisation (Manning, 2008). In other words, even if the Corporation wishes to work with transparency and communicative leadership, it is difficult to implement them in practice should meetings be formally structured with pre-established agendas solely scripted by individuals in formal positions of power.

Expectations on coworker's voicing

A dominant force shaping coworker's voicing at the Corporation was the need to preserve harmony during the interaction. The observed meetings did not feature an open

disagreement between coworkers, nor a heated debate. Visible questioning of a decision or a constructive discussion were scarce during my observation at the Corporation. Instead, as Marianna put it, the disagreements "will be taken care of afterwards or already before that meeting", meaning that critical voicing is not performed on the front stage and is individual, rather than co-created. Similarly, Brad mentioned he would ask for individual clarification ahead of the scheduled meeting if he developed significant doubts or questions regarding the meeting topic or materials. These suppressions of voicing in situ fuel the development of postponed voicing at the Corporation, in which coworkers choose to stay silent during the meeting and instead postpone voicing for later. It mirrors the experience I had when witnessing a rare exchange of critical voicing between a coworker and her new manager, following a presentation about a team contract.

The team contract was based on a collective workshop of all members. Nonetheless, the final version was written by the manager and presented during a department meeting. The coworkers could comment, but the fact that the topic was discursively closed became quickly apparent after a coworker voiced her criticism toward the text, followed by supportive voicings from her colleagues. However, it did not lead to any changes, instead the topic was pacified by the manager, and further voicing was postponed to a future meeting. The interaction thus ended in the most outspoken coworker eventually withdrawing her engagement for the rest of the meeting. It supports Goffman's (1959/1990) theorising that in interactions, agreement is promoted while opposition is underplayed.

The need to appear in harmony also emerged from the interviews, with coworkers denying the existence of disagreement within their teams. For example, Mathilda struggled to recall a single incident of argument or critique. However, it does not mean there would not be frustrations or tensions at the Corporation. In contrast, it points to the strength of the normative cultural ideal of not publicly expressing disagreement or one's deviating opinion. Terrence for example likened his coworkers to a "silent herd", further eleborating: "You don't know if they have fallen asleep or died during the meeting, if they think that it is not interesting, or if they have not understood anything...you don't know because they are dead silent." A common reasoning for why coworkers choose to perform silence is linked to the protection of their backstage. Coworkers considered it more appropriate to voice stronger opinions laterally and outside the official meeting setting.

Under these conditions, postponed voicing flourishes. Common forms of postponed voicing at the Corporation were informal chats in which members would "talk like mad", separate one-to-one meetings behind closed doors, or conformity and subsequent inaction

leading to silence. What unites all forms of postponed voicing is their functioning as a barrier to coworkership and collective sense and meaning making. When exchanges of opinions happen only in private meetings, there is little room for collective action, shared organisational learning, and innovation. Instead, meetings under the curtain of harmony are prone to groupthink, pseudo-communication, suppression of conflict, and perpetuation of the status quo.

Another common constraining norm on voicing was the respect for authorities and seniority. A coworker with managerial experience recalled a meeting in which he stayed silent even though he knew his superior did not provide accurate information:

> *Maybe in those meetings also his manager or the headquarters are there, so it is more like respect to him, to not make him look like he's not, you know, entirely informed or that kind of thing. Respect the person. And then afterwards take him on the side and you say: 'OK, this, this, and this wasn't correct, maybe we could change storytelling a bit'.* - Phineas

Another member expressed she could not "go and say to my SVP it is a bad job", instead choosing to use other communication techniques to signal a disagreement. She described using her soft skills to persuade colleagues to take action on a team level, to subsequently use it as a case example when lobbying for change. A different example of coworkers strategising their performance would be in scripting it as constructive or building upon prior knowledge. Coworkers therefore protect themselves from being labelled as complaining or unhelpful.

Hence, the analysis suggests that voicing performances are socialised into a certain form across the Corporation's teams. Coworkers seem to have developed unwritten rules on how much opposition is allowed and expected so that they interact in accord with each other (Goffman, 1959/1990). For example, some coworkers mentioned they expect others to behave "as adults" when being criticised, offered feedback, or asked for opinions. For these members, being an adult was the only defining boundary for voicing, with Maria elaborating that because of it, she knows "what to say and what not to say". It implies that voicing is strongly curtailed by dominant social-cultural norms with coworkers having a perception of what voicing should look like when performed in team meetings.

Discourses of Productivity, Effectivity and Efficiency

Since voicing is founded on social norms (Christensen & Christensen, 2022), it is not surprising societal discourses shaped performances at the Corporation. A dominant discourse which emerged from the collected material was that of productivity, effectivity, and efficiency. Already in the 1990s, Deetz (1992) argued that "moral fictions" of effectiveness, excellence, and expertise lead to benefits for certain groups and perpetuate discursive closures through the process of legitimation. The influence of this discourse - or in Deetz's terms moral fiction - was also evident at the Corporation, with coworkers admitting to staying silent because they perceived their voicing as being wasteful and unproductive, especially when it would divert from the previously set agenda. Emmanuel admitted he stays silent "quite often", especially when he thought his contribution would not be of significant importance:

> *We will spend so much time discussing it if I raise it and it will not add any value really. It's okay if the solution is what they have. That could be cases when I don't speak up, so to say. I don't recall a specific moment, I mean it just happens.* - Emmanuel

When coworkers conform to "what they have", the Corporation loses on the innovative and creative potential of voicing, hampering co-creational teamwork processes and organisational learning.

Apart from voicing having to be perceived of value, the analysis also revealed that coworkers need to view their performance as relevant to the discussed topic. Lawrence for example mentioned he did not "need to take the room" if he thought he did not have a "relevant" contribution. However, such an approach raises a question about what participants perceive as relevant and to whom. It also promotes the perception of meetings and discussions as having to lead to a result, not as constituting teams and organisations. Describing a hypothetical voicing scenario, Emmanuel mentioned his performance would likely engage only a limited number of audience members, while others "just sit there and listen." His perception thus points to the underlying assumption of the audience being inherently silent. It means silence has been naturalised, but not due to fear or futility factors as previously proposed by researchers. Instead, it is the discourse of productivity and efficiency which drives silence in the Corporation's meetings.

Coworkers also spoke about staying silent due to a perceived limited knowledge on the discussed topic. Tied to the efficiency discourse, they mentioned a preference for staying

quiet rather than exploring solutions together and potentially discovering new angles and perspectives. Arguably, silence due to a knowledge gap is an easy and convenient excuse for coworkers. It could be illustrated by Maria's statement, in which she questioned her ability to do voicing: "I don't understand it properly and how will I talk about it? [...] I just want to stay quiet." However, voicing and silence are not value-free and by not challenging seniority and suppressing voice, coworkers unintentionally discursively close their meetings. As a result, discussions are not held. Moreover, by silencing when faced with a knowledge or experience gap, established ways of working remain unquestioned, new perspectives are self-censored, and instead the dominant meaning, existing power relations, and hierarchy get re-established.

In summary, the societal expectations of being productive and efficient at work perpetuated self-censorship of voicing and promoted silence at the Corporation. In the long-term, it may lead to significant tensions for coworkers due to the dissonance between the need to be more productive while simultaneously being influenced by corporate messaging of teamwork, work-life balance, and wellbeing, which is another prominent discourse elaborated in the following subchapter.

Blurring boundaries

Loosely tied to the dominant discourse of productivity and efficiency is the establishment of new managerial unobtrusive control: *wellbeing talk*. During the wellbeing talk, a version of corporate wellness was enacted at the Corporation. Usually at the start of the meeting, coworkers were asked to voice their wellbeing status, either by sharing colour (green-orange-red), number (one to five, one being very relaxed and five extremely stressed), or voicing a verbal statement. It implies a coworker's wellbeing and emotional state is of matter to the organisation, pushing the coworker to bring their whole selves to work, including their emotions, mental states, and private life events.

However, the observation analysis showed that the wellbeing talk strained the meeting interaction. The requirement to share emotions goes directly against the traditional dramaturgical discipline, which in the past required coworkers to appear composed and rational. Goffman (1959/1990) explained that performers must appear intellectually and emotionally involved in the activity they are presenting, while making sure they do not get carried away. This implies strict self-control and self-management on the coworker's part. Indeed, Goffman (1959/1990) spoke of concealing actual affective reactions. He proposed that performers instead display affective responses which are considered appropriate and follow the "expressive status-quo, established by his team's performance" (p. 211). Coworkers

themselves questioned the value of the information collected through wellbeing talk. Nina for instance perceived the wellbeing data as not entirely sensitive. Peter agreed, highlighting the unreliability of coworker's voicing: "[F]or some people, you can have the tendency to say a number - I'm at this level - while in reality, that's not the case." Mathilda shared a similar view: "I don't think people who would feel bad would put it in the spreadsheet that they feel bad."

Thus, the quantifiable and measurable way of expressing wellbeing is less about coworkers' actual emotional states and more about maintaining an appropriate performance of corporate care. By performing wellbeing checks, the manager plays the part of a caring figure, representing a responsible business. They use a script stemming from the Corporation's value statements and code of conduct. The script is thus shaped by what would be perceived as expected and therefore influenced by the idealisation process (Goffman, 1959/1990). As a result, the managers' idealised performances tend to stress caring values more than their actual behaviour. Hence, it may be interpreted that managers are not truly interested and engaged in enacting wellbeing talk, offering a more cynical and critical view of the interaction. Coworkers, at the same time, participate in the act by voicing affectively appropriate scores, without providing much detail about their actual psychological states as it could endanger the expected expressive status quo. The wellbeing talk could thus be seen as a new form of managerial, brand-centered, neo-normative control (Müller, 2017). It can be illustrated by Paula's experience, who considered it a must-do agenda item, adding she thinks the team would appreciate it if they stopped the practice. Hence, the wellbeing voicing is arguably in place for managers to have a new metric to measure and steer the performance of their coworkers and for the top management to then evaluate the teams.

However, with power and control comes resistance. I noticed the teams' scores for wellbeing were usually exactly on average, with coworkers not reporting any significant changes in their wellbeing for several months. They therefore resisted the control by not providing a fully honest answer while adhering to the voicing requirement. As one critical participant expressed, coworkers "just give a three because then they don't need to comment on everything, three is OK". Mathilda, whose team was the only observed one without wellbeing talk, mentioned she would also participate in acts of resistance: "I think I would go in the middle all the time because I don't know what would be the purpose of me rating how bad I feel or how super happy I feel." Arguably, the sterile, quantifiable way of discussing a potentially sensitive topic, i.e. one's emotions, work-related stress, or burnout, leads to the normalisation of not actually speaking out about emotions in a team meeting. Simply put, it is

a tactic for talking about emotions without emotions themselves, making the experiences less affective and more predictable. According to Goffman (1959/1990), everyday performances must pass a test of aptness, propriety, and decorum. Therefore, emotions and wellbeing were bureaucratised into what could be perceived as less powerful numerical expressions. It left coworker's experiences out, making it a systematically distorted form of voicing.

When coworkers voiced a number higher than average, managers in the observed meetings followed up by asking how the team could support, help, or otherwise mitigate the potentially threatening situation for teamwork and operations. What might have stemmed from a genuine place of care, has turned into a measure of performance. Hence, the control extended over managers themselves as they were too required to report the wellbeing scores of their team, according to Paula. It is therefore not surprising that wellbeing talk is based on an assumption that coworker's mental health has to be addressed and "fixed", as explained by one interviewee with managerial responsibilities:

> *Of course for me it is a good exercise to bring to the one-to-ones. If I see someone say that they are yellow or red, then I know that maybe I should talk to that person in the next one-to-one. When we are just meeting that person, see if they want to open up more, how they feel and how we should fix that going forward.* - Phineas

However, some interviewees also saw benefits in voicing their wellbeing through generalised symbolic expressions such as colours or numbers. For instance, Nina described it as "a way of distancing yourself to uncomfortable topics". Such understanding paradoxically defies the given managerial explanations for the purpose of wellbening talk, illustrating the effects of normative control.

Hence, it is important to highlight the negative consequences stemming from wellbeing talk. As Deetz (1992) proposed, topical avoidance removes the responsibility or accountability from corporations: "their hidden quality makes them the employee's problem even if they result from work-related experiences" (p. 192). Instead of speaking about stress, problems at home, or any other causes of emotional discomfort, wellbeing talk goes around it. Furthermore, in several meeting observations, wellbeing talk was equated to the amount of work, disregarding any other potential employment-related causes. It links to the larger productivity discourse and suggests that the individual coworker is the organisation's member first, and a member of a family and society second. It further implies that companies should

receive sterile and measurable information when their coworkers feel unwell so that they can predict and prevent any impacts on value production. Therefore, coworkers might self-censor their actual state to avoid feeling ostracised, as explained by Peter:

> *For some it's difficult to say 'I'm at one', 'I'm at five' - I can consider if I say that, they will see me. Should I be able to handle this? Maybe my workload is not that high - even if it is for me, it is too much - but should I say I'm overloaded or should I say I'm at three? It's difficult. Also when you hear the team say: 'I'm at three', 'I'm at three', 'I'm at three', 'Everything is okay', and you, just to bring 'No, I'm not, I'm at five. I'm overloaded'. Is it correct to say that?* - Peter

Although coworkers perceived themselves as free to decide how much or little they share during the wellbeing talk, the performances in a team meeting exacerbate the ongoing societal shift toward blurring boundaries between private and professional identities. An individual's backstage is brought into the spotlight, without guidance on how to navigate the paradox between having to adhere to the expressive status quo and dramaturgical discipline, and being required to voice on private matters of one's wellbeing. The tensions were particularly pronounced for coworkers whose teams did not use a neutralised way of performing wellbeing talk, but were required to voice their experience more directly without using numbers or other symbols.

> *I'm not comfortable that much about very specific and personal topics with my colleagues. You know that they will mean no harm, but I also make the distinction between my colleagues being super friendly and my friends, which is something that is important for me to keep some boundaries around […] I don't want to overshare. If my colleagues sometimes share and may overshare some things I'm not against it at all, but I'm also remembering that I'm still in the office, and if a person needs some support, we can take it separately or we can find a solution. But I like boundaries as well.* - Courtney

Since communication constitutes organising, the tensions then extended beyond the meeting interaction. Courtney found it challenging to navigate her boundaries in less formal settings at the office and during coffee breaks, where the division between front and back stages becomes less visible. She perceived her personal life as "not everyone's office

business", which made the interactions uncomfortable for her.

Nonetheless, there are also clear advantages emerging from wellbeing talk, especially when it is co-negotiated and co-defined by all team members and founded on trust. One observed team has indeed developed such a form of wellbeing talk. In their meetings, wellbeing and teambuilding performances took a significant portion of the time and agenda, hence walking the wellbeing talk. Furthermore, these meetings were not chaired by the manager. Instead, the manager's involvement was largely subdued; when it was required, she had the final say in decisions. Otherwise, she sat among her coworkers, participating in an undistinguishable way from them. As a result, voicing appeared to be less influenced by status or years of experience. Nevertheless, such a wellbeing talk performance also requires more responsibility and additional work from all team members. However, it is important to note that while coworker's voicing was witnessed more frequently in this meeting, it was still performed unequally among the participants. It therefore again highlights the paradox of open communication cultures and lack of coworker's voicing.

Concluding discussion

The final chapter offers a concluding discussion in relation to the field of strategic communication, presents the thesis' theoretical contributions, proposes directions for future research, and highlights areas of interest for communication professionals and managers. The study departed from the fact that work meetings, i.e. everyday organisational communicative events, are commonly taken for granted by strategic communication researchers, who overlook their importance for coworker's voicing and silence, and how these processes in turn affect organising at large. It also problematises the current dominant scholarship on voice, which is strongly influenced by normative managerial thinking and a limited understanding of communication since it perceives voice as being voluntary, rational, and reactive. This study therefore takes the perspective of coworkers. It investigates how they do voicing in work meetings, while embedding the phenomenon in organisational, cultural, and social contexts, governed by norms and power dynamics. The study is conducted in a Swedish multinational corporation within the transportation and infrastructure sector, using observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The analysis, inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007; 2011) critical dialogue approach, reveals a rupture between voice theories and empirical material. Despite what was described and observed as open, collaborative, and safe environment at the studied organisation, coworkers did not perform voicing and instead tended to stay silent. In contrast to extant research, which has portrayed voicing as risky with silence being motivated by fear and futility (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2011; Zhan, 2020), coworkers at the Corporation perceived themselves as safe to speak up. A clear problem thus emerged: coworkers choose to stay silent even if they are not afraid to engage in voicing. Upon further analysis, I propose five factors influencing the paradoxical situation at the Corporation. The five factors are:

- Dislocated staging
- Meeting structures
- Cultural and social expectations

- Discourse of productivity, effectivity and efficiency
- Blurring boundaries.

I also conceptualise new communicative phenomena emerging out of open and safe organisational contexts, specifically:

- Postponed voicing
- Pseudo-voicing
- Wellbeing talk.

The first paradox is *dislocated staging*, stemming from the hybrid ways of organising. It places additional requirements on both voicers and their audience to keep the meeting interaction ongoing. The associated self-surveillance and added work responsibilities then strain the interaction and drive silence. Secondly, coworker's voicing can be seen as both catalysed through and prohibited by *a meeting structure*. It contributes to the ritualisation of meetings, the perpetuation of existing power dynamics, and results in postponed voicing. The third factor is *cultural and social expectations*, in particular preserving agreement and harmony. The fourth factor impacting voicing is the overarching *discourse of productivity, effectivity, and efficiency*, which silences voicings that are perceived by coworkers as irrelevant or of low value. They do not seem to be aware that voicing - thus also silence - are constitutive of the very organisation in which they remain quiet. The fifth factor is *the blurred boundaries* between voicer's front and back stages, sped up by the requirement to bring whole emotional selves to work. It implies that coworker's wellbeing and emotions are of use to the organisation. It has led to the development of wellbeing talk, a new form of unobtrusive managerial control enacted in meetings.

Finally, emerging out of the study is the fact that coworker's voicing is still largely limited, performed on request, and predominantly focused on day-to-day operational activities even in an open organisation. Meetings too are mainly concentrated on information-sharing and relationship-building, rather than being the sites of voice activation, dialogue, and coworkership. As a result, strategising remains a top-down process, with limited coworker participation. Without acknowledging the constitutive role of meetings and coworker's communication, organisations miss out on the positive effects of voicing such as organisational learning, innovation, and creativity. It is thus necessary for organisations to view coworkers *as voices,* i.e. with an agency as co-authors and co-creators of organisational realities, instead of them *having* a voice similar to a tool they could consciously switch on and

off.

However, the results also raise several practical issues to address within work teams such as who has the responsibility over facilitating coworker's voicing and what is reasonable for managers to expect. Some members' silence might not mean they are unsatisfied or suppressing their voicing - instead they might need more time to reflect and perform voicing after a pause. Managers should therefore review their meetings, how they gather feedback, promote voicing, and what other tools they might use to create tailored stages for all coworkers, facilitating ideal conditions for voicing. It is also necessary to mention that meetings have different forms and functions; the goal is not to develop a chattering organisation (Heide et al., 2019), but one in which coworkers have the right opportunity, motivation, and agency to perform voicing. Ideally, voicing becomes a habitualised practice, replacing the currently normalised silence.

Communication professionals should thus act as close advisors to managers. They can further work with communicative leadership, explaining the importance of openness and vulnerability - in particular with wellbeing talk - the value of asking sharp questions, and strategically listening. In addition, they should be careful not to overestimate the role of psychological safety and corporate culture. While it is of course necessary to continuously nurture and develop the feeling of psychological safety among team members, it is equally as important to coach coworkers on developing communication skills, and focus on demonstrating the value of voicing. These topics are best addressed in workshops between coworkers and their managers to ensure all members are aware of expectations, benefits, and requirements regarding voicing. As such, voicing and meetings should be of immense interest to the field of strategic communication.

Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contribution of this thesis to strategic communication scholarship is threefold: (1) identification and exploration of new communicative phenomena emerging in open and transparent organisations; (2) problematisation of silence and voice theories, including the proposal to abandon the dichotomic conceptualisation of voicing as a conscious decision between voice or silence; and, (3) challenging the theoretical assumption that open organisational environments, psychological safety, and transparency automatically result in coworker's voicing.

An overarching insight stemming from observations, interviews, and the analysis is the need for organisations to embrace the fact that coworkers can do both voicing and silencing, sometimes in a single work meeting. While organisations should strive to facilitate voicing, it is inevitable that coworkers will sometimes choose to remain silent. The two phenomena should thus not be viewed as an opposing dichotomy since silence also communicates. This understanding mirrors the proposition by Dobusch and Dobusch (2019) to abandon the programmatic approach to openness and closure as being mutually exclusive and in opposition. Instead, they suggested viewing strategy as a combination of opening and closing processes, which could also be applied to coworker's voicing. Moreover, the thesis points to the fact that fear and futility as reasons for coworker's silence do not fully apply in contemporary organisations. I therefore propose a more nuanced understanding, in which silence is motivated by higher-purpose discourses such as being relevant and efficient. It thus corroborates Vu and Fan's (2022) research, which conceptualised silence as an evolving, reflexive, and active process.

The necessity to have a wide-encompassing understanding of voicing can be illustrated by new communicative phenomena emerging in open and transparent organisations. Often, coworkers engage in *postponed voicing* when they situationally self-censor their performances and essentially reschedule voicing to an unspecified future meeting. Therefore, coworkers do not engage in a productive dialogue with their peers but often opt for voicing opinions and differences behind closed doors. As a result, communication processes get constrained and muted for the rest of the audience. Postponed voicing could be seen as an unreflected strategy, which nonetheless leads to the reconstitution of dominant lines of thinking and existing power dynamics. It also helps to create the appearance that decisions were co-created and achieved since postponed voicing often leads to more meetings, supporting Schwartzman's (1989) theorising.

Another phenomenon appearing in open but silent organisations is *pseudo-voicing*, a distinct part of pseudo-communication. When coworkers engage in pseudo-voicing, they generate the appearance they are speaking up and participating in meetings, while in fact they are conforming to dominant narratives. Their performances follow predetermined scripts in a commenting style, which upholds the interaction order. For example, coworkers can comment on decisions or organisational news, but their voicing is not expected to drive the decisions or lead to a significant change. However, the orientation to preserving harmony is problematic. It can encourage informal whining and gossiping, resulting in not implementing the decisions and straining relationships due to the play-pretend nature of pseudo-voicing (see Edmondson,

2019). In other instances, coworkers artificially create topics to talk about to fill meeting agendas and adhere to their structure.

The thesis also identifies and analyses a new form of managerial control, which I conceptualise as *wellbeing talk*. It extends the previous unobtrusive forms of control, such as cultural and brand-centred control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Müller, 2017). Under the influence of wellbeing talk, coworkers are now required to also share their mental states and emotions, which strains the meeting interaction. It further blurs the boundaries between coworkers' professional and personal lives and serves to safeguard value production. However, the bureaucratised forms of wellbeing talk also lead to new forms of coworker's resistance.

In summary, these examples demonstrate the necessity for a dynamic, active, socially-embedded, and contextual understanding of coworker's voicing - and thus also silence. It should not be perceived as a coworker's rational choice, rather a complex interplay between various situational, structural, social, cultural, and team-based influences.

Practical contributions

The micro-level approach of the thesis means it is well-positioned to offer practical recommendations. The analysis shows that teams with shared responsibility over meetings are more polyphonic, with coworkers actively voicing rather than remaining silent. It means teams should negotiate and clarify meeting responsibilities to catalyse voicing. Furthermore, meeting chairs should pay attention to participants joining remotely and actively try to bring them in by mentioning their name, giving them a priority in round-table discussions, and asking them directly for feedback by referencing their expertise or experience. It would signal their voicing is relevant and of value. It is also crucial that managers start role modelling voicing by building upon what is communicated during the meeting, asking sharp questions beyond "Any comments?" utterances, and participating in wellbeing talk.

In teams with members who belong to multiple teams or have different tasks from each other, managers should reflect upon what unites the team and which parts of the meeting are beneficial for everyone. Leaders should also ensure that meetings have varied structures to allow for the participation of members with different needs and personality traits. Teams need to have operational meetings, one-on-one personal development sessions, and information-sharing meetings to be able to function. However, it is crucial to also make space for teambuilding meetings, in which coworkers can negotiate relationships, learn from each

other, and work on team development. Since voicing is strongly constrained by set structures and discourse of productivity and efficiency, it would be beneficial to dedicate a section of the team meeting for open brainstorming, reflecting, or presenting ideas.

Altogether, an important implication is the need to highlight that all meetings and voicings constitute and drive organising processes. When coworkers overly engage in pseudo-voicing and higher-purpose silence, they perpetuate separated and individual ways of working in silos. It hampers coworkership, organisational learning, and innovation. It is therefore necessary for managers to start publicly acknowledging the value of voicing, even when not directly relevant or solution-oriented, and creating dedicated spaces for such voicing in their meetings.

Further research

The thesis showcases the importance of studying organisational phenomena, such as voicing, from a communication standpoint. It stresses the value of taking the perspective of coworkers in research and problematising taken-for-granted managerial theories about organising. Such an approach can assist with uncovering new forms of control stemming from contemporary agile and hybrid ways of working and evolving cultural norms. Therefore, further research with a critical edge will be needed to uncover underlying assumptions and potential darker sides of developing phenomena such as wellbeing talk as well as concepts currently taken for granted, for example psychological safety.

To do so, it is necessary to undertake more micro-level studies of coworkers' communication practices and connect them to the macro-level societal discourses and norms. There are still too few works conducted by observing what coworkers actually do when they strategically communicate and how these dynamic processes contribute to organising. Observations also inherently highlight the context-dependence of research. It is unattainable to continue conceptualising organisations, teams, and coworkers as homogeneous.

Future studies could delve into the dynamics of voicing on backstages and in team chats, advancing the knowledge of postponed voicing. Further work on voicing could also explore the influence of gender, experience, and position within organisations. More understanding is also needed regarding coworker's silence. The thesis outlined extensive limitations of existing research, with a potential for developing new theories departing from silence's active, fluid, and multifaceted character (Vu & Fan, 2022).

It would also be valuable to investigate the influence of national culture on voicing and what challenges it may bring to meetings of teams located in different locations but sharing the same corporate identity and values. Jing et al. (2023) mentioned cultural effects on voicing, but did not consider the potential tensions for coworkers who would be required to work in global teams and thus negotiate between their national and organisational expectations on voicing.

Lastly, I encourage researchers to engage more with coworkers in production and manufacturing settings. Contemporary strategic communication research is elitist in its focus on knowledge-intensive and high-earning contexts and professions, which is also a limitation of this study. It would therefore be of value to investigate voicing and meetings in other contexts with likely stricter forms of control, bureaucracy, and larger power asymmetries.

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Appendix 1

Overview of concepts related to coworker's voicing

Concept	Definition	Seminal works	Implications
Dissent	"A particular form of employee voice that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and policies." "An interactive process that occurs as a result of one or more subordinates expressing disagreement with policies, practices, or imperatives."	Kassing, 2002; Garner, 2013; 2017; 2019.	Reactive nature, narrow scope (practices, policies, imperatives). Problematic implications of viewing coworkers as subordinates. Mainly individualistic, not collective or social in nature. Underestimation of social norms and control mechanisms as well as power relations.
Issue selling	"Attempts to call attention to key trends, developments, and events that have implications for organizational performance."	Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Sonenshein, 2012.	Perceives organisation as a marketplace in which members are attempting to "sell" each other ideas they deem important, often by attaching it to organisational goals and dominant values. Problematic for sensitive issues and opinions not held by those in power and/or majority.
Critical upward communication	"Feedback that is critical of organizational goals and management behaviour [...] and which is transmitted by those without managerial power to those with such power."	Tourish and Robson, 2003; 2006; Tourish, 2014.	Narrow focus - only critical feedback transmitted upwards and limited to goals and managerial behaviours. Outdated view on communication as transmission. Useful for highlighting the bias toward positive feedback and managerial discouragement of CUC. Implies existence of formal channels for providing feedback.
Whistleblowing	"Disclosure of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action."	Miceli et al., 2008.	Narrow scope. Typically done through official mechanisms and channels.
Critic's active	"Addressing shortcoming in the	Madsen and	Focuses on critical voicing

communication role	organisation […] by raising their voice to upper management or colleagues.”	Verhoeven, 2019; Verhoeven and Madsen, 2022	only. Limits the expected behaviour by excluding communicating disagreement, providing critical feedback or acting as the devil’s advocate.

Appendix 2

Gaining access to the studied organisation

While I was not required to sign a non-disclosure agreement to participate in the meetings, the organisation requested to be kept confidential. The Communications Director for the accessed division Emma (not her real name) became my direct contact person within the organisation and helped me find suitable teams for the observations. In the majority of cases, the team managers then assisted me in finding and contacting coworkers for the interviews. While this process generates concerns regarding potential bias, gatekeeping, and power influence, it was deemed necessary to secure access to coworkers, who are not in managerial positions, and to their meetings. I also mitigated the impact of gatekeeping and the desire to create a certain image by asking the managers to recommend a varied sample of interview participants.

After the first access interview with Emma, I participated in five more access interviews with managers from different sub-sections of the Corporation's division. In these meetings, I aimed to establish mutual understanding with the managers and clarify expectations and needs. It was also an opportunity for me to understand what kind of meetings I would observe, what the typical agenda - if there is any - looks like, how many members are expected to attend and what their work operations and workflows are. These access meetings also served as the initial trust-building exercise between me as the external researcher and the manager who serves as the link to the team and can assist in pre-building a relationship with the coworkers. The access meetings were all informal, brief, and helped to establish a mutual ground for the material collection.

Appendix 3

Overview of conducted observations

Observation	Team ID	Meeting type	Observation type	Length	Attendees number
1	Team 1	Weekly Department	Virtual	90 minutes	10
2	Team 2	Weekly Check-in	Virtual	30 minutes	6
3	Team 6	Daily Stand-up	Virtual	26 minutes	11
4	Team 2	Weekly Department	On site	58 minutes	8
5	Team 2	Weekly Check-in	On site	21 minutes	6
6	Team 3	Daily Stand-up	On site	20 minutes	8
7	Team 3	Weekly Department	On site	80 minutes	8
8	Team 4	Weekly Department	On site	60 minutes	6
9	Team 7	Weekly Department	On site	58 minutes	10
10	Team 6	Daily Stand-up	Virtual	30 mins	8
11	Team 5	Biweekly Department	On site	85 minutes	7

Appendix 4

Interview guide

Interview Guide: Employee voice in team meetings

Participant's details

Interview date & location	
Interviewee (participant number)	
Interviewee's position	
Years of experience within the company	
Interviewee's gender	

Introduction

Dear X,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview - and nice to meet you! In the next 45 to 60 minutes we will together talk about internal communication at [redacted] and specifically how [redacted] employees and you use your voice to share ideas, opinions and concerns.

I'm interested to learn more about how and when you speak up and what your experiences with internal communication have been. Please feel free to say anything that comes up to your mind - there are no right or wrong answers and I am not looking for anything particular. I'm simply interested in your point of view and experience.

Before we start the interview, I'd like to ask if you have any questions about the information sheet and consent form I sent you before?

I'd also like to repeat that your identity will remain completely confidential. I will use a pseudonym in the thesis and make sure you are not identifiable in any way. All your statements will be anonymised. The interview recording and transcripts will be securely stored and only I will have access to them. They will be deleted when this study is concluded.

If everything is clear and you have no outstanding questions, I'd like to start the interview and recording now. Do I have your permission to do so?

**** START recording ****

INTRODUCTION

Their position at work, what they do, how long they've been with the company

Internal communication within the company

MEETINGS

Could you please walk me through a typical team meeting?

Why do you think you have the meetings?

- how do they make you feel?
- how do you see your role?

Preparations, after meeting work

Comment on observed meeting if there was an interesting moment

VOICING

Could you tell me about the last time you voiced an opinion, concern, idea, feedback - how was the experience for you?

Any instances of more critical voicing? → how was the experience VS why not + description of the situation, barriers, reasoning

Can you take me back to a situation in which you decided to stay quiet even though you had something to say (about a decision, plan, whatever it may be)?

- What do you think would have happened if you raised your concerns?
- So, are there any topics and issues that come to your mind that you feel like you would not or should not talk about in a work meeting?

VOICING SCENARIOS … *only select one/two, discuss only if time/appropriate*

A) Upset in a meeting
B) Needing to vent / complain

C) Constructive criticism

We spoke a lot about meetings and sharing your voice, your opinion. Would you say it is easier in some occasions than in others? If so, what differentiates them?

What would you like your manager to do to make you perhaps share your ideas and concerns more in the future?

CONCLUSION

To conclude our discussion, is there any aspect, issue or topic you'd like to raise in relation to what we spoke about? Any comments you'd like to add?

Contact in case of questions?

Finally, thank you very much for your time and thoughts. I've enjoyed our conversation and I appreciate your help. In the coming days I'm going to transcribe our interview and afterward analyse it. Would you like to receive a transcript of the interview?

If you have no questions or remarks, I'm going to stop the recording now and end the interview. Thank you again!

**** END recording & Thank you ****

Appendix 5

Overview of conducted interviews and participant details

Pseudonym	Years of experience*	Gender	Interview Length
Terrence	20	Male	73 minutes
Phineas	6	Male	49 minutes
Yvonne	36	Female	37 minutes
Paula	32	Female	36 minutes
Katia	12	Female	32 minutes
Emmanuel	4	Male	32 minutes
Lawrence	24	Male	49 minutes
Brad	20	Male	37 minutes
Marianna	11	Female	61 minutes
Mathilda	19	Female	42 minutes
Jack	7 months	Male	54 minutes
Courtney	3	Female	51 minutes
Maria	1,5	Female	39 minutes
Peter	17	Male	56 minutes
Giulia	3	Female	36 minutes
Nina	15	Female	51 minutes

**at the Corporation*

Appendix 6

Information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Master's Thesis Research on Employee Voice in Internal Team Meetings

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Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in my Master's thesis study exploring the dynamics of employee voice in internal team meetings conducted in April 2024. This information sheet summarises the information relevant to you as a participant in the research. It explains the purpose, content and structure of the research in detail. Please take time to read it and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, or concerns or would like to receive further clarification.

Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

Study overview

Employees' voice is a powerful way to foster innovation, increase productivity, and make better business decisions. Voice is also linked to mental well-being and higher job satisfaction. Yet too often, we see that employees stay silent in work meetings and do not share their ideas and feedback. My thesis thus has a dual purpose: firstly, to advance our academic knowledge of how employees use their voices and contribute to organisational learning, innovation, and productivity. Secondly, I aim to produce practical tips for fostering engagement and coworkership, as well as for running effective meetings in which employees actively participate. Overall, the research intends to increase the understanding of how employees communicate with their colleagues in work meeting settings, while embedding voice in wider organisational and social contexts.

Methodology & Interview process

I combine observations of work meetings with in-depth interviews with [redacted] employees. The interviews allow me to understand the employees' perspectives on voice and get deeper insights into their experiences with internal communication. The interviews are conducted either on location at [redacted] in [redacted] or on Teams. All interviews are in English. I intend to stay agile in the research process, assuming the details of my study will likely shift following the observations and discussions with employees.

The interview process will follow this outline:

1. The participant is given this information sheet describing the research and their role in it. The participant then signs a consent form before the interview.
2. The interview lasts about 45-60 minutes and touches on various aspects of employee voice, internal communication and engagement.
3. The interview is recorded and afterwards transcribed and analysed by Karolina Bohacova (the researcher).
4. Only the researcher has access to the audio file from the interview and the transcripts, which are securely stored.
    a. The participant may request to review the interview transcript.
5. The identity of the interview participant remains confidential and protected throughout the process.
6. The study is published in the Lund University database for student theses, accessible via the LUP-SP repository (https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/). After the thesis defence and approval, the researcher deletes all collected data.

Ethical considerations

1. Confidentiality

The participant's name, position, and other potentially identifying data will remain confidential. I will use pseudonyms in the study to protect participants' identities. No personal information will be shared.

2. Withdrawal from study

The participant can withdraw from the study at any time without the need to provide explanations for their decision. The participant can stop the interview at any point if they feel uncomfortable.

3. Potential risk

No risk has been identified that could cause physical or psychological harm to the participant due to their involvement in the study.

Please keep a copy of this document for your reference. In case of any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [redacted]

Appendix 6

Informed consent form

Consent form for participation in a research interview

Master's thesis study on employee voice in team meetings

I, , *("participant"*) agree to participate in a Master's thesis research project led by Karolina Bohacova (*"researcher"*) from Lund University. The researcher is a Master's degree candidate in Strategic Communication studying the dynamics of employee voice. This consent form details the conditions of my participation in a research interview.

1. I have been given enough information regarding the research project I am agreeing to participate in. The purpose of my involvement as an interview participant has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement and the study. All my questions and concerns have been addressed by the researcher.
2. I agree that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I have not been pressured to participate by any parties. I understand that I am not going to be reimbursed for my participation in any way.
3. I understand that my participation involves being interviewed by the researcher for about 45-60 minutes on matters related to employee voice.

4. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview and for the conversation to be audio recorded by the researcher, which will afterwards be transcribed by the researcher, and serve analysis purposes.
5. I understand that I can stop the interview at any point and withdraw my participation agreement if I feel uncomfortable. I also have the right to not answer all questions the researcher asks. I do not need to provide any explanations for my withdrawal.
6. I have been given the guarantee that my participation in the study is confidential and the researcher will not identify me in her thesis. I agree for the researcher to use a pseudonym instead of my real name and surname. My confidentiality will thus remain secure.
7. I agree for the researcher to use the information and direct quotes from my interview in her thesis, which may be published in the Lund University Publications Student Papers repository.
8. I understand that the researcher will follow the data use policies at Lund University, which processes personal data in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and the Swedish Data Protection Act.

Date:

Participant's signature:

Participant's name [in capital letters]:

Researcher's signature:

Researcher's name [in capital letters]: KAROLINA BOHACOVA

Please keep this document for your own records.