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Surveying voice: A study of employees' perceptions of voicing in employee surveys

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Abstract

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Employee surveys (ES) are widely institutionalised in large organisations across Sweden and other Western countries, often embedded in formal or legally required work environment monitoring. ES serve to enable employee voice, enhance internal communication, and support organisational development. Despite their widespread use and growing popularity, they have been criticised for frequently lacking meaningful follow-up and organisational action. This study examines how employees perceive ES as a channel for expressing and having their voices acknowledged within organisations. Drawing on an interpretive, social constructionist approach, the study is based on 25 semi-structured interviews with employees from 24 organisations in Sweden. The analysis is guided by Satterstrom et al.'s voice cultivation process framework, alongside research on employee voice, upward communication, and feedback. The findings suggest that anonymity is a critical yet ambivalent and conditional prerequisite for honest feedback, but simultaneously creates a dilemma in which employees moderate or generalise their responses to avoid identification. This resulting vagueness may constrain the actionability of survey feedback. Employee surveys are largely perceived as organisational "temperature checks" rather than individual expressions of voice, where individual voice influence is contingent upon alignment with the majority. In the absence of visible follow-up or action, ES risk being perceived as symbolic or performative manifestations of faux voice. Moreover, the asynchronous and mediated nature of ES complicates voice cultivation processes that rely on dialogue, limiting the transition from initial expression to perceived acknowledgement. By reframing employee surveys as communicative processes, the study contributes to strategic communication research by advancing understanding of how employee voice is expressed and acknowledged through ES, with implications for their use as meaningful and constructive feedback tools.

Keywords: employee voice, employee surveys, voice cultivation, upward communication, feedback, symbolicity, anonymity, internal communication

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1. Introduction

It feels like HR is supposed to do surveys, then do them, and then we go through it, and then that's it. Wait for the next one.

– Agnes

Employees across organisations regularly receive invitations to complete surveys about their workplace, evaluating and providing feedback on different aspects of organisational life. Employees respond by sharing opinions, experiences, concerns, and suggestions. Yet, what happens after they have spoken? More specifically, how do employees themselves experience the employee survey process as a means of expressing and having their voices acknowledged within organisations?

Employee voice has assumed an increasing central role in contemporary organisations, particularly as employees and human capital are frequently described as “the most valuable resource of an organisation” (Heikinniemi et al., 2025, p. 9). Research highlights employee voice as a critical component of effective organisational communication and engagement, with the potential to drive innovation and contribute to overall organisational success (Ayop & Ishak, 2023; Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2024). Simonsson and Heide (2011) further argue that employees are not passive recipients of information but active communicators who make critical interpretations, formulate messages, and influence other internal and external stakeholders. Giving stakeholders a voice is not only beneficial for organisational development; it is also an ethical responsibility for contemporary organisations and a trust-building activity (Lewis, 2020; Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2024). Furthermore, internal stakeholders increasingly have expectations of being heard within the organisation. It is nowadays standardising to integrate employee input, conduct employee feedback surveys, and exit interviews (Lewis, 2020).

Employee surveys are one means of gathering input from employees. Conducting annual employee surveys is a common practice in many organisations, both profit and non-profit, measuring employees' satisfaction with various aspects of organisational life (de Waal, 2014; Hartley, 2001). In the Swedish context, where this study is situated, employee surveys are also commonly integrated into organisations' Systematic Work Environment

Management (SAM), a legally required process intended to ensure continuous monitoring of the work environment (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2026).

Employee surveys serve multiple organisational purposes. They are intended to provide employees with a voice, enhance internal communication, reduce the social distance between management and employees, and support intervention and organisational development (OD) initiatives (Hartley, 2001; Kraut, 2006, as cited in Huebner & Zacher, 2021). In addition, ES can be used to measure organisational culture, strategic climate, and employee engagement, while also providing top management with feedback regarding how strategies and core values are received by employees (Macey & Fink, 2020; Larsson & Holmberg, 2021). Moreover, they serve multiple purposes in influencing and supporting organisational and workplace change, development, and improvement, making the evaluation process, as well as the follow-up process after surveys including action-planning, important (Hartley, 2001; Huebner & Zacher, 2021; Church et al., 2012; Heikinniemi et al., 2015; Schou, 2007). From a change perspective, employee surveys should be understood as a starting point for organisational change, rather than a completed moment (Church et al., 1995). As Schou (2007) argues, the survey itself is only one component of a broader process and cannot, in isolation, lead to change. Instead, the value of the surveys lies not merely in the data collection itself, but in the processes through which the data is interpreted, discussed, and translated into organisational actions (Church et al., 1995). It should be noted, however, that using employee surveys as a tool for organisational change is a complex process, consisting of multiple interrelated steps, each of which is more or less critical for achieving the intended change (Schou, 2007).

Despite their widespread use, annual employee surveys have been subject to criticism. While ES may constitute an important component of a comprehensive employee listening system (Macey & Fink, 2020), the value and effectiveness of such systems ultimately depends on whether the insights generated are evaluated, interpreted, and potentially translated into organisational action. In Swedish public debate, employee surveys have been criticised for being symbolic rather than actionable (Eksvärd, 2025). A recurring critique is that the evaluation and follow-up process of employee surveys are frequently neglected in practice, which limits the effectiveness of this widely used management tool (de Waal, 2014; Huebner & Zacher, 2021). In line with this, Schou (2007) argues that the greatest weakness of employee surveys is that too little happens after the results have been presented. Reports may be quickly set aside or forgotten without leading to any substantial changes. According to the author, this is mainly due to an underestimation of the complexity involved in using ES as

tools for comprehensive organisational change. This challenge is also reflected in Swedish managerial discourse. A national survey found that nearly half of 550 responding managers expressed doubts regarding whether employee surveys generate the intended outcomes (Hammarkrantz, 2015). Leaders are often overwhelmed by the amount of data generated and struggle to make sense of it and turn it into actionable insights (Burris et al., 2024). According to de Waal (2014), these limitations lie not in the survey itself but in the management. However, the tendency for insufficient action after employee surveys is problematic, as the survey results always generate expectations among employees that any irregularities or issues that emerge will be addressed (Schou, 2007). Therefore, employee surveys can rarely constitute an endpoint, but should function as a starting point for development and change.

When survey input is not used or implemented, the fundamental purpose of conducting employee surveys is undermined and may become pointless. Lewis (2020) conceptualises this phenomena as *faux voice*, referring to situations in which organisations provide channels for feedback without enabling stakeholders to exert genuine influence. In such cases, listening risks becoming a symbolic act, to reassure and “check the box” that the listening has occurred (Lewis, 2020, p. 28). Thereby, the organisation gives an appearance of listening without actually doing so, a dissonance that may have implications. As Eksvård (2025) notes, when the same feedback and issues are repeatedly reported without follow-up, the credibility of employee surveys is likely to be undermined. Moreover, the underutilisation of survey results is problematic from a resource perspective: organisations invest considerable money, time, and resources into these processes without realising their full potential. Swedish companies and organisations are estimated to spend SEK 500 million annually on employee working hours and consultancy fees related to the measurement of employee satisfaction (Hammarkrantz, 2015). This can be connected to Alvesson and Spicer’s concept of the *stupidity paradox*, whereby organisations disengage from critical reflection and the articulation of challenging questions, instead substituting complexity with simplified thinking, banality, and empty talk (Alvesson & Spicer, 2018).

These issues are particularly significant given that employee surveys are widely prevalent in contemporary organisations and that their use is becoming increasingly widespread and popular across both private and public sectors (Hartley, 2001; Church & Wacławski, 2017, as cited in Huebner & Zacher, 2021). The global HR technology market – encompassing digital tools for measuring nearly all aspects of work life – is growing rapidly

at over 12 percent annually (Kullberg, 2021). The widespread use and popularity of ES risks reinforcing an implicit assumption that employee surveys inherently enhance employee voice or contribute to organisational development, improvement, and change. However, the evidence outlined above suggests that such assumptions cannot be taken for granted. Instead, a disparity emerges between the intended purpose of employee surveys – to generate insights that inform organisational progress – and their actual use in practice, where survey data is often underutilised or not translated into action.

While existing research has largely focused on employee surveys as managerial or organisational measurement tools, less attention has been directed towards how employees themselves experience surveys in relation to employee voice. Given that ES are commonly presented as a tool for gathering employee voice, it is essential to understand how this practice is perceived from the employee perspective. This question has important implications for both employees and organisations. For employees, inadequate evaluation and follow-up may cause negative consequences on both a personal and professional level, as crucial employee opinions, experiences, and concerns risk being overlooked and unaddressed. For organisations, failing to use and evaluate employee survey responses may entail missing valuable information and opportunities for learning, development, and improvement.

To approach the research problem, this study adopts an interpretive research approach grounded in the social constructionist tradition, in which employee surveys are understood as socially constructed practices shaped by organisational contexts and interactions. Furthermore, the study draws on the theory of the voice cultivation process in order to analyse how employee voice is created, enabled, and limited in organisational settings. The empirical material is based on 25 semi-structured interviews with employees from 24 different organisations in Sweden. The interviews were conducted online via video or telephone calls. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, after which the data were analysed using thematic coding. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were anonymised and assigned pseudonyms.

1.1 Research aim and research question

The aim of this study is to develop an understanding of how employee voice is constructed and experienced through employee surveys, based on insights from employees' experiences of these practices. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the authors seek to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do employees perceive employee surveys as a means of expressing and having their voices acknowledged within their organisations?

This study contributes to the field of strategic communication by viewing employee surveys as a communicative process. The study positions employee voice as a central component of organisational internal communication and recognises it as a strategic resource for organisational development, with implications for improved decision-making, workflow, problem resolution, innovation, engagement, employee retention, and ethical behaviour (Mayfield et al., 2023; Tourish & Robson, 2004). The thesis problematises the assumption that providing opportunities for employee voice necessarily implies that such voice is heard, legitimised, and acted upon.

By examining how employees experience the expression and acknowledgement of voice through employee surveys, the study sheds light on how organisational communication processes function in practice from the employee perspective. This understanding is important because it may inform how ES can be used and developed in meaningful and constructive ways, positioning them as tools for genuine employee voicing and organisational learning. From a practical perspective, the study may therefore contribute insights into how organisations and managers can better support, enable, and respond to employee voice throughout the employee survey process.

2. Between employee voice and silence

The following chapter reviews previous research on employee surveys and related concepts. First, it presents an overview of employee survey research, focusing on their purpose, design, role in organisational development, and follow-up processes. Second, it broadens the perspective by examining research on employee voice, upward communication, and feedback, highlighting how employee input is managed within organisations. Together, these research streams provide a foundation for understanding the role of employee surveys as communications channels in organisational contexts.

The chapter functions as both a literature review and theoretical framework, reflecting the close and interrelated conceptual relationships. Employee voice, upward communication, and feedback are closely connected to the voice cultivation process framework, which conceptualises how employees' voiced ideas move through stages of resistance, cultivation, and implementation. These processes are situated within a shared organisational context in which employees express their perspectives in ways intended to contribute to organisational change, improvement, and learning. Taken together, the literature review and the theoretical framework complement each other and jointly support a comprehensive understanding of the research question.

2.1 Surveys

A survey is a method for collecting information by interviewing a sample of respondents from a defined population. This survey population may encompass individuals, households, organisations, or any other units of interest (Czaja et al., 2014). Surveys are employed across academic, governmental, organisational, political, and media contexts to generate insights into individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours. A defining characteristic of survey interviews is the use of a standardised questionnaire composed of prespecified questions. Typically, the questions are in a closed format in which a set of response alternatives is specified. The collected data are subsequently entered into a dataset for statistical analysis.

However, the way the questions are designed also shapes the responses they elicit. As Czaja et al. (2014) note, survey question wording affects responses, which is established

through experimental research comparing alternative versions of questions intended to measure the same construct. For instance, studies demonstrate that asking whether a behaviour should be “allowed” or “forbidden” can produce different response distributions, despite the meaning of the two alternative wordings being logically identical (Czaja et al., 2014).

2.1.1 Employee surveys

Employee surveys have become a widely adopted practice in contemporary organisations. Across both private and public sectors, many organisations conduct annual or periodic surveys to assess employee satisfaction and engagement (de Waal, 2014; Hartley, 2001; Schou, 2007). Historically, from the 1950s, the primary focus of employee surveys was to understand job satisfaction and work motivation, with the intention to improve productivity. By the 1990s, the focus shifted to a wider concern and included employees’ views on organisational strategies, such as quality and organisational change (Hartley, 2001).

According to Larsson and Holmberg (2021), the practice of conducting employee surveys generally consists of three phases. The first phase involves establishing the administrative infrastructure of the survey, a process that often requires considerable work. The second phase consists of the actual distribution and measurement, during which all employees respond to the survey within a defined time frame. The third phase concerns the managerial follow-up process, where managers conduct feedback sessions with employees, identify priority areas, and formulate action plans intended to improve future organisational conditions (Larsson & Holmberg, 2021).

In line with this, Schou (2007) argues that the purpose of employee surveys should include at least three core elements. First, it should clearly specify what is to be followed up or evaluated. Second, the survey should be understood as the starting point of a broader development and change process rather than as a completed moment. Third, responsibility for initiating and implementing change must be specifically defined. The responsibility does not solely rest on the top management but is usually distributed across the organisation, including senior leadership, managers at various levels, and employees. The survey results are often broken down to the level of individual organisational units in order to enable local development and change efforts (Schou, 2007).

Typically, employee surveys are designed to ensure anonymity, particularly when administered by a third-party provider (Gallup, n.d.). Survey scores are averaged and

analysed, frequently by the Human Resources department, to identify key attention points. The insights derived from this analysis can inform targeted improvement actions by management. When such actions are executed, employee satisfaction and engagement are expected to increase, which in turn will contribute to enhanced organisational performance. Consequently, employee surveys are regarded as one of the most significant management improvement techniques (Hartley, 2001, as cited in de Waal, 2014).

However surveys do not lead to change by themselves. As Larsson and Holmberg (2021) argue, ES are standardised measurement and control systems which become meaningful in connection with human interpretation, prioritisation, and embedding into existing organisational processes. Their study shows that managers play a central role in making the survey practically useful, as through their work, the standardised system can be “tamed” and adapted to facilitate development. In this sense, leadership becomes an enabling process embedded in an environment characterised by standardisation and expanding control and measurement systems. Larsson and Holmberg (2021) further suggest that the usefulness of employee surveys for change and development depends heavily on managers’ extensive efforts to engage with the system and adapt it to local organisational conditions.

Similarly, Schou (2007) highlights the leader’s responsibility in the follow-up process, where managers organise meetings in which survey results are presented, discussed, analysed, and translated into action plans and changes. Leaders are also responsible for communicating and prioritising actions based on the survey results (Wiley, 2010; Schou, 2007). At the same time, managers are likely to hold an advantage over employees in these processes, as they have often access to the results beforehand and may already have prepared solutions. Therefore, there is a risk that managers move too quickly forward and thereby stifle employee engagement. Schou (2007) argues that employees should be given time to go through the results and be invited to participate. It is not uncommon for managers to view themselves as a solver of all problems; however, Schou (2007) instead suggests that managers should activate and involve employees in order to foster more effective organisational development.

Moreover, employees should also be involved in the evaluation process of employee surveys (Wiley, 2010; Schou, 2007). Wiley (2010) notes that most employees are perceptive observers of their work environment; they want to make their voices heard and be a part of a successful organisation. In line with this, Macey and Fink (2020) argue that employees constitute valuable information resources, as they can provide important insights into both positive and negative organisational aspects, assess whether the employee value proposition

(EVP) is perceived as attractive, and evaluate whether leaderships' stated values are effectively communicated and acted upon in practice.

Today, employee surveys are conducted in the vast majority of large organisations, both in Sweden and in other Western countries. In Sweden, their widespread adoption began in the 1990s, and it has been estimated that more than one million employees in Sweden regularly evaluate aspects such as their work group, immediate manager, and opportunities for development (Schou, 2007). In the Western world, research suggests that they are conducted in more than 50 percent of all larger organisations (Sanchez, 2007). Similarly, in the United States, approximately 75 percent of large organisations were already conducting regular employee surveys by 2003 (Kraut, 2006, as cited in Schou, 2007). A comparable proportion has been reported in a study of 789 companies in Denmark, where 75 percent were found to conduct employee surveys (Copenhagen Business School, n.d.).

Empirical evidence indicates that employee surveys are widely perceived as useful by organisational leaders. For instance, a survey conducted by the education centre Chefakademin, involving more than 1,200 leaders in Sweden, found that 73 percent considered employee surveys to be useful. Leaders particularly valued the surveys for providing a better overview of the workplace (Kullberg, 2021).

However, the process of analysing and interpreting employee survey data is not without limitations. One concern relates to the gradual reduction of the complexity of the analysis of the collected survey responses that is aimed to be measured. There is a risk that, through statistical maneuvers, outliers are sometimes removed, which implies that less common voices are not included at all (Svensson, 2016, as cited in Lantto, 2016). Furthermore, Schou (2007) notes that negative results from the survey tend to be ignored or not acted upon. A natural reaction is to find sources of error that explain the distorted image. Understanding and acceptance of a problem is important when the survey results are presented and discussed (Schou 2007).

2.2 Upward communication

This section extends the discussion beyond employee surveys to upward communication more broadly. It provides a foundation for understanding how upward communication operates in organisational settings and how it is enabled or constrained within organisations.

2.2.1 *Employee voice*

Morrison (2023) defines employee voice as the “informal and discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, problems, or opinions about work-related issues, with the intent to bring about improvement or change” (p. 80), while Li et al. (2025) conceptualise it more specifically as “the upward communication of change-related information” (p. 1276). At its simplest, employee voice denotes having a say in the workplace (Guarin et al., 2025). Central to the concept of employee voice is its intentional and change-oriented character. Voice is not natural, it does not simply mean communicating or speaking, it is aimed to change the current situation (Liang et al., 2012; Bashshur & Oc, 2015).

A central premise in the literature is that employee voice constitutes a unique source of organisational knowledge. Through employee voice, employees can provide managers with valuable insights derived from their close involvement in and deep understanding of day-to-day work processes (Li et al., 2025). According to the authors, input in the form of employee voice can be inspirational to managers by drawing attention to overlooked yet thought-provoking issues, motivating managers to be transformational and engage in change-oriented behaviours. In this way, voice enhances managers’ awareness of alternative possibilities and sparks creative and innovative responses (Nguyen et al., 2025; Zhou & George, 2001, as cited in Li et al., 2025). Similarly, a substantial body of research positions employee voice behaviour as a key driver of competitive advantage, sustainable organisational development, and effective organisational functioning. By proactively voicing their opinions and ideas, employees contribute directly to promoting the development of their organisations (Yang et al., 2025a; Joshi & Li, 2025; Shen & Shen, 2025). In addition, employee voice and workplace democracy have a positive impact on employee wellbeing and the performance of organisations (Abdulgaliimov et al., 2020). Scholars further distinguish between promotive voice, which proposes solutions for improvement of organisational practices, and prohibitive voice, which identifies problems or risks in ongoing processes; both forms are essential for well-functioning organisations (Liang et al., 2019; Joshi & Li, 2025; Huang & Huangfu, 2025).

However, the benefits of voice are not guaranteed. Despite its critical importance for organisational effectiveness and functioning, employee voice does not invariably inspire managers, and its capacity to motivate change-oriented behaviour is therefore not always realised (Li et al., 2025). Crucially, the authors' findings underscore not only the role of employee voice in fostering managers' transformational leadership but also how managers' information-processing styles determine whether such voice becomes an effective tool for organisational change.

The role of managers in enabling, or constraining, the effectiveness and even the occurrence of employee voice is also discussed by McKee (2024). The author suggests that managers' feedback-seeking may function as a precursor to employee voice. Research identifies two broad categories of barriers to employee voice in organisations. The first concerns employees' perceptions that speaking up is futile, stemming from beliefs that managers will neither listen to nor act upon their feedback and suggestions (Bryant & Sharer, 2021, as cited in McKee, 2024). Consistent with this view, empirical evidence indicates that most ideas upwardly voiced by lower-level employees (66 percent) are rejected, ignored, or opposed upon submission, with only a minority (24 percent) ultimately implemented (Satterstrom et al., 2021). The second type of barrier relates to perceived personal risk. Employees may fear negative consequences for speaking up, as expressions of voice can be perceived by those in positions of authority as unwarranted or disruptive. As a result, employees may view offering feedback and suggestions as detrimental to their professional standing or career advancement within their firms (Milliken et al., 2003, as cited in McKee, 2024; Khan et al., 2025; Men et al., 2026; Bashshur & Oc, 2025). Unlike other forms of organisational citizenship behaviours, such as helping colleagues or demonstrating punctuality, voice frequently involves more inherent risks, such as challenging the status quo, criticising managerial practices, or proposing changes that may be perceived as threatening to the existing order (Detert & Burris, 2007; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014, as cited in Men et al., 2026). Consequently, voice is more likely to occur when employees are confident that their input will be acknowledged, if not acted upon, and will not lead to negative repercussions (Morrison, 2014, as cited in McKee, 2024). McKee (2024) argues that organisations should strive to cultivate a climate in which employees feel assured that they can voice concerns regarding potential threats to the organisation, its employees, and its customers, while remaining confident that their managers will listen and that speaking up – even when the issues raised are unpleasant – will not result in reprisal.

A related concern is the phenomenon of faux voice, where organisations provide channels for input without granting any real influence over decision-making. Lewis (2020) defines faux voice as “providing channels for stakeholders to vent or deposit concerns and questions without having the ability to influence the substance of decision-making (p. xvi). By putting on a public show that input was solicited without seriously considering the perspectives that are offered, organisational decision-makers sometimes validate their process without really listening.” Such practices create the illusion of employee participation, allowing organisations to claim they are fostering voice and thereby legitimising their processes, while in reality employees’ perspectives remain largely ignored and exert no meaningful influence. This distinction highlights that the mere existence of communication channels is insufficient; voice requires responsiveness and impact.

Accordingly, scholars emphasise the role of leadership and organisational climate in enabling voice. Leader behaviours such as feedback-seeking, positive attitudes, and constructive responses and feedback foster employee confidence and both encourage and enable individuals to use their voice (McKee, 2024; Apalowo & Nukpezah, 2025). Managers who encourage the sharing of ideas and feelings, respond caringly to employees’ questions, and interact regularly with employees to build quality relationships help cultivate affective trust in the leader (Altunoğlu et al., 2019, as cited in Men et al., 2026). In contrast, giving no response or negative reactions may cause employees to withhold relevant and necessary information (Apalowo & Nukpezah, 2025).

At the organisational level, an inclusive and psychologically safe climate further strengthens voice behaviour. Empirical findings demonstrate a significant positive relationship between inclusive work environments and employees’ willingness to express ideas and concerns (Shen & Shen, 2025). By fostering inclusion, designing effective voice channels, and visibly acting on employee input, organisations enhance employees’ confidence that their contributions are meaningful. Leaders who inspire and motivate their teams, model open communication, and reduce uncertainty help create psychologically safe climates in which employees can share ideas and concerns without fear (Yang et al., 2025b; Xueqin et al., 2025; Silva & Duarte, 2025). Moreover, managers should be supportive, set the example, and foster a culture in which employees feel able to speak freely and safely (McKee, 2024).

Specific leadership styles have been shown to further strengthen employee voice. Inclusive leadership, for instance, positively impacts employees’ willingness to speak up, with psychological capital and internal social capital serving as mediators in this relationship

(Yang et al., 2025a). More broadly, the inherently risky nature of voice behaviours underscores the importance of leadership in promoting voice. As Men et al. (2026) note, voice behaviour entails potential interpersonal and professional risks, making it critical to understand how leadership behaviours – particularly respectful leadership – can mitigate these risks and encourage employees to share their thoughts. In addition to respectful leadership, inspirational leadership (IL) has been found to have a significant positive effect on employee voice. This positive relationship is further strengthened by employees' organisational identification (EOI) (Bi et al., 2025).

Finally, research emphasises that fostering employee voice requires more than simply encouraging employees to speak up; it also necessitates that their input is meaningfully acknowledged and acted upon. Apalowo and Nukpezah (2025) recommend that organisations develop best practices to ensure that employees not only voice their observations and concerns but are also heard and that their input is acted upon. When employees perceive that their voices matter, it encourages them to speak out, thereby reinforcing a culture of open communication.

Employees tend to be treated as passive recipients of information (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). However, the authors argue that coworkers should be seen as active communicators who formulate messages, engage in critical interpretation, and influence colleagues, managers, and customers. Similarly, Tourish (2005) argues that employees are not merely recipients of information; they are active, asking questions, and acting as agents in decision-making processes. This view on employees aligns with the ritual perspective of communication, which contends that the meaning of communication emerges from the interaction between two or multiple participants rather than being defined solely by the sender (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Central concepts defining the ritual view of communication include “sharing”, “participation”, “association”, and “the possession of a common faith” (Carey, 2009). In line with this view, Satterstrom et al. (2021) reconceptualise voice as a collective, interactional process rather than a one-time dyadic event.

Recognising communication as an interactive, two-way process therefore positions employees as active participants in organisational meaning-making and, in turn, frames employee voice as an inherent and legitimate aspect of organisational communication rather than merely a discretionary opportunity granted by managers.

2.2.2 The lack of critical upward communication

Open communication and the upward transmission of critical opinions are essential components of organisational effectiveness and success (Kato et al., 2013; Pfrombeck et al., 2022; Tourish & Hargie, 2004; Tourish & Vatcha, 2003, as cited in Tourish & Robson, 2004). Despite the recognised benefits of upward communication, upward feedback, and open-door policies, research indicates that significant difficulties have been reported with the delivery of upward feedback (Tourish & Robson, 2004).

Leaders are less likely to receive feedback for at least two reasons. First, they are less inclined to actively seek feedback. Managers tend to be older and possess greater organisational and job tenure – characteristics that are associated with reduced feedback-seeking behaviour (Anseel et al., 2015, as cited in McKee, 2024). Second, subordinates are less likely to provide unsolicited feedback to managers; even when they do, it is often communicated in less direct or sugar-coated language (Moss & Sanchez, 2004, as cited in McKee, 2024).

The second phenomenon can be understood through the lens of self-censorship, in which individuals keep quiet to protect themselves, distinct from whistle-blowing (Lewis, 2020). Major factors explaining self-censoring and silence include promotion ambitions, trust in the workplace, fear of retribution, poor supervisory relationships, and organisational cultural norms (Lewis, 2020). Individuals who perceive greater social risk associated with voicing concerns or speaking up are more likely to remain silent (Tedone & Lanz, 2024). When contemplating dissent, employees consider whether their feedback will be perceived as constructive or result in retaliation. Trust therefore becomes a central condition for determining both the availability and effectiveness of upward feedback. In the absence of trust, such communication is constrained (Tourish & Robson, 2004; Blalack, 1986). Moreover, subordinates adapt their communication behaviour according to perceptions of superiors' power, organisational politics, and their own political skill (Kamal Kumar & Kumar Mishra, 2017).

Hierarchy further intensifies these dynamics. Pfrombeck et al. (2022) argue that hierarchy is fundamentally intertwined with employee voice, shaping both the decision to speak up and the appraisals and reactions the voice receives. The authors emphasise that hierarchy influences the entire voice process, including employees' assessments of how speaking up may affect their prospects for ascending the hierarchy. Consequently, upward

communication becomes closely tied to power relations and shaped by both prosocial and self-interested motivations.

Hierarchical structures also shape organisational communication flows more broadly. Traditionally, feedback flows downward from individuals in positions of authority to their subordinates (Luthans & Larsen, 1986). In contrast, there is a hierarchical constraint on upward information flow, as individuals are often reluctant to deliver the bad news or a problem to their supervisors. Since employees tend to withhold bad news, positive information is considerably more likely than negative information to travel upward through organisational hierarchies (Lewis, 2020). As a result, the limited upward feedback that does occur tends to be disproportionately positive (Baron, 1996, as cited in Tourish & Robson, 2004). Research further suggests that senior managers are frequently unaware of these distortions and unwilling to consider the possibility that they exist (Tourish & Robson, 2004).

Research additionally suggests that managers and employees often hold radically different perceptions regarding the extent and quality of upward feedback. Senior managers tend to overestimate how much upward feedback they receive and frequently attribute the absence of more critical communication to non-managerial employees (Tourish & Robson, 2004; Tourish & Robson, 2006). Non-managers, by contrast, are more prone to ingratiation behaviours and seek to minimise their own responsibility for transmitting information upward (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Baron's study, discussed by Tourish and Robson (2004), found that managers perceived themselves as receiving substantially more negative feedback than employees believed they communicated. At the same time, managers and subordinates reported similar perceptions regarding positive feedback. This discrepancy indicates that individuals may be particularly sensitive to criticism, a phenomenon referred to as the automatic vigilance effect (Pratto & John, 1991, as cited in Tourish & Robson, 2004).

The suppression of critical upward communication appears particularly problematic in relation to operational problems and bad news. Kato et al. (2013) distinguish between the upward communication of strategic ideas and the upward communication of operational problems, demonstrating that these forms of upward information flows are influenced by different organisational conditions. While supportive and employee-oriented management practices may encourage the sharing of strategic ideas, they appear less effective in motivating employees to communicate operational problems or negative information upward.

Contemporary evidence further indicates the tendency of organisational silence. A survey analysis of 300,000 employee responses during the past year found that one in seven employees did not dare to express their opinions at work or to make their voices heard, due to

a culture of silence in the workplace (TT, 2025). The problem appears particularly pronounced among women, with one in six female employees reporting reluctance to speak up. The risk associated with a culture of silence is that issues such as discrimination, harassment, and financial misconduct remain unreported and unaddressed (TT, 2025).

Research on organisational communication and the upward expression of disagreement and contradictory opinions further demonstrates that critical upward feedback is frequently suppressed and distorted by employees and disregarded or discouraged by managers (Kassing, 2002; Tourish & Robson, 2004). Tourish and Robson (2004) conclude that upward feedback is not merely difficult to obtain; rather, it is “systematically distorted, constrained and eliminated” (p. 162). These limitations may have considerable organisational consequences. Organisations that fail to effectively utilise upward communication systems incorporating both positive and negative feedback risk impairing the quality of managerial decision-making, ultimately negatively affecting the organisation as a whole (Tourish & Robson, 2004). Consequently, a strong case can be made for institutionalising critical upward communication more thoroughly within the fabric of organisational life (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

At the same time, research suggests that certain organisational conditions can strengthen upward communication. Leaders who emphasise and promote leader-follower relationships may increase employees’ propensity to provide voluntary upward feedback (Kilburn & Cates, 2010). Similarly, followers who view leadership as a co-produced process between leaders and employees are more likely to engage in upward communication behaviours, including voicing opinions and providing constructive resistance. Such behaviours appear particularly likely when supported by positive leadership, high-quality leader-follower relationships, and an autonomous work climate (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

2.2.3 Feedback

Feedback can be defined as a process in which a part of a system’s output is returned to the system as input, forming a loop that influences how the system behaves. Feedback can shape the system in different ways: negative feedback has stabilising effects and reduces errors or deviations from a desired state, while positive feedback has destabilising effects and increases deviations from an initial state (Érdi, 2024).

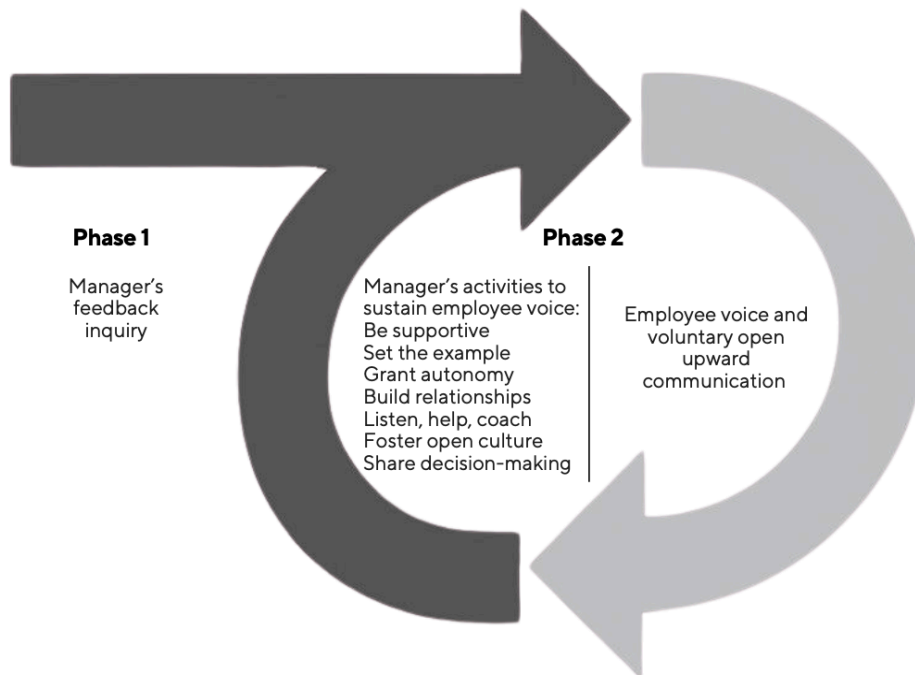
In organisational contexts, feedback is not merely a corrective mechanism but a potentially crisis-preventing communicative practice. McKee (2024) identifies the presence

of managers who are open to feedback and employees who are comfortable providing it as hallmarks of effective organisations, arguing that effective upward feedback may help organisations avoid crises before they occur. The catastrophic implosion of the Titan submersible in 2023, during a dive to observe the wreckage of the Titanic, illustrates the consequences of failed upward communication: employees had reportedly raised concerns regarding the safety and testing of the submersible, yet these warnings were dismissed or avoided. All five individuals onboard were killed in the incident. Similarly, the sinking of the Titanic itself involved unheeded iceberg warnings from several nearby ships that were not relayed up the chain of command. While most organisations do not face life-or-death stakes, these examples underscore how the suppression or neglect of critical upward feedback and communication can endanger organisational effectiveness and, in some cases, organisational survival (McKee, 2024).

Creating a climate that unlocks employees' voluntary and open upward communication is, however, an organisational challenge. To address this issue, McKee (2024) proposes a two-phase model for fostering effective upward communication. Phase One centres on managers' engagement in proactive feedback-seeking behaviours. Feedback-seeking behaviour is defined by Ashford (1986) as "the conscious devotion of effort towards determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviour for attaining valued end states" (p. 466). When managers regularly and intentionally seek feedback from employees, it will over time generate meaningful and unsolicited feedback from those employees through employee voice, thereby enabling the transition to Phase Two (McKee, 2024). Phase Two empowers employees to provide managers with feedback, advice, warnings, and other forms of self-directed communication without managerial solicitation. This phase requires managers to sustain a culture in which such communication is encouraged. Managers' activities to sustain employee voice and voluntary open upward communication include being supportive, setting the example, granting autonomy, building relationships, listening, helping, coaching, fostering an open culture, and sharing decision-making. Many of the behaviours underpinning this form of leadership are highly trainable, such as the use of inclusive language, active listening, and helping behaviours. The transition to Phase Two does not replace Phase One; rather, proactive managerial feedback-seeking continues alongside employee voice, supplementing it when necessary (McKee, 2024).

Figure 1

Two-phase model of upward communication



Note. Adapted from “Unleashing the voice within: Managerial insights for empowering open upward communication,” by R. A. McKee, 2024, *Management Research Review*, 47(11), p. 1794 (<https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-04-2024-0300>).

Although positive feedback is generally better received by the recipient – and easier for providers to deliver – negative feedback may ultimately be considerably more valuable, as it highlights deficiencies and offers diagnostic information that can support performance improvement rather than merely fostering self-contentment (Ashford et al., 2016, as cited in McKee, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that seeking negative feedback is positively associated with job performance, role clarity, and socialisation, whereas seeking positive feedback is, conversely, negatively related to job performance (Gong et al., 2017, as cited in McKee, 2024). Furthermore, seeking negative feedback has been linked to more ethical leadership (Chughtai, 2023, as cited in McKee, 2024). However, Tourish and Robson (2004) suggest that there is a tendency for senior managers to over-critique negative feedback, while instantly agreeing with positive feedback. The authors point to a strong interaction between employee responses to upward communication opportunities and the facilitative or

constraining role of management. Moreover, seeking feedback also involves a crucial listening component, as noted by Kluger and Lehmann (2018, as cited in McKee, 2024).

However, research also points to a paradox in feedback-seeking behaviour. Differences emerge between high and low performers in both their motives and proclivities to seek feedback. High performers are more likely than low performers to actively solicit feedback, despite arguably having less need for it (Amah, 2008, as cited in McKee, 2024). Feedback-seeking behaviour is generally considered an effective self-regulation strategy for enhancing performance (Anseel et al., 2011). In addition to improving performance, this strategy facilitates individual adaptation and the achievement of creative outcomes (De Stobbeleir et al., 2011). Beyond individual-level benefits, incorporating employee feedback also carries important organisational implications. Excluding feedback and opinions from employees may severely disadvantage the organisation by reducing its ability to function in a dynamic environment and gradually undermining competitiveness (Hosseini et al., 2022, as cited in Urbancová, 2024).

Nevertheless, recent research indicates that leaders' feedback-seeking behaviour can not only promote but also inhibit employee voice (Lou et al., 2026). The authors argue that excessive feedback seeking may contribute to workplace anxiety and stress among employees, which in turn can reduce employee voice. The relationship between feedback seeking and employee voice is therefore not linear.

Taken together, these findings suggest that leader receptiveness to feedback constitutes an important foundation for employee voice, influencing employees' willingness to speak up.

3. The voice cultivation process

The theoretical framework of this thesis draws on the voice cultivation process developed by Satterstrom et al. (2021). The framework conceptualises how upwardly voiced ideas – often initially rejected – are cultivated through a set of practices – amplifying, developing, issue-raising, exemplifying, and legitimising – that enable them to endure and ultimately reach implementation. The theory originates from a 31-month longitudinal study of a multidisciplinary team in the healthcare sector.

The framework is considered suitable for this study as it conceptualises employee voice not as an isolated act of expression, but as an organisational communicative process shaped by how voice is invited, listened to, interpreted, and responded to by organisations. Overall, the voice cultivation process provides an analytical lens for understanding how voice is, or is not, cultivated over time, rather than treating voice as a single communicative event. This perspective is relevant in the context of employee surveys, where voicing often occurs in indirect and asynchronous forms. The theory allows an understanding of how voice is socially constructed and influenced by organisational responses.

3.1 Voicing

The voice cultivation process begins with a public voicing of an idea within a team. In Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) study, the focus is specifically on upward voice, defined as instances in which a lower-power team member expresses an idea or undertakes a discretionary action aimed at improving team or organisations functioning. Such ideas typically require the approval of individuals in more powerful roles in order to be implemented.

3.2 Resistance

Following initial voicing, ideas may encounter resistance from both higher- and lower-power team members. Satterstrom et al. (2021) describe how resistance is often an immediate response to voiced ideas, although it may also emerge later in the process.

Resistance generally takes two forms: avoiding and opposing. Avoiding, the more frequently observed form, occurs when team members disengage from the idea without directly confronting it. This may involve ignoring the idea altogether, shifting the discussion to another topic, postponing consideration by labelling it as off-topic or low priority, or false promising by appearing to agree without subsequently following up. Opposing, by contrast, involves more direct forms of resistance. This includes explicitly or implicitly arguing that the voiced idea is flawed, impractical, or previously unsuccessful, or advocating alternative solutions as superior (Satterstrom et al., 2021).

3.3 Cultivation

After initial resistance, a voiced idea may be followed by cultivation practices. Satterstrom et al. (2021) outline five practices through which organisations may cultivate employees' ideas: amplifying, developing, issue-raising, exemplifying, and legitimising. Amplifying involves reintroducing or publicly recalling a voiced idea to ensure that it remains visible in team discussions, particularly after it has been overlooked or dismissed. Developing consists of team members publicly acknowledging an idea and posing clarifying questions, thereby enhancing others' understanding of its meaning and feasibility. This voice cultivation practice was particularly prominent across successful cases, appearing in the cultivation of nearly every voiced idea that ultimately progressed to implementation. Issue-raising occurs when a team member publicly identifies specific weaknesses or limitations in a voiced idea, creating opportunities for collective problem-solving and proposals of alternatives. Exemplifying refers to demonstrating the practicality of an idea through concrete action or by developing the necessary skills that provide evidence of the idea's viability. Finally, legitimising involves publicly endorsing an idea and framing it as important, achievable, or validated by prior successful implementation (Satterstrom et al., 2021).

3.4 Implementation

If a voiced idea can successfully withstand the cultivation stage, it may reach implementation and generate change (Satterstrom et al., 2021). Implementation refers to the realisation of a voiced idea in practice and occurs in three progressively impactful forms: materialising, piloting, and formalising. Materialising occurs when a voiced idea “becomes real” through concrete actions or artifacts, such as the creation of a checklist or new routine, typically within the team. Piloting involves socialising, refining, and testing the idea beyond the team, at the broader organisational level. Formalising represents the most extensive level of implementation, in which the idea becomes routinised and institutionalised as the standard way of operating for the team or organisation. Ideas may achieve multiple forms of implementation, such as first materialising and subsequently being piloted (Satterstrom et al., 2021).

Overall, the processes of voice cultivation are associated with positive organisational outcomes, such as improved decision-making and performance, reduced errors and turnover, and increased learning and innovation (Satterstrom et al., 2021). The authors further conceptualise the upward voicing of ideas as a critical process for organisational performance.

Table 1 summarises the concepts from Satterstrom et al. (2021) that are relevant for the current study.

Table 1*Overview of key concepts*

Practice	Definition
Voicing	
Voicing	Stating an idea or taking an action that (a) benefits team or organization functioning, (b) is discretionary, and (c) is directed to the team or an individual on the team who has the authority to make the change.
Resistance	
Avoding	Ignoring a voiced idea altogether, changing the subject, tabling it, or false promising by appearing to agree but not following up.
Opposing	Saying no directly or indirectly by claiming that a voiced idea is not worthwhile, won't work, failed before, or isn't optimal.
Cultivation	
Amplifying	Reviving a voiced idea by recalling it at a later time, in a new context, or with additional evidence, sometimes by using emotional or urgent language.
Developing	Acknowledging or asking clarifying questions to help oneself and others hear and make sense of a voiced idea.
Issue-raising	Calling out a voiced idea's weakness, creating an opening for others to address the weakness or propose alternative solutions to keep the idea alive.
Exemplifying	Taking personal initiative to raise awareness of a voiced idea or to demonstrate the type of work or embody the skills needed to address it.
Legitimizing	Vouching that a voiced idea makes sense, solves an important problem, can be done, or has been done elsewhere, often by using specific examples or making it your own without citing the original source.
Implementation	
Materializing	Green-lighting a voiced idea through action or creating a physical artifact (e.g., checklist, sign, electronic prompt, form).
Piloting	Testing, socializing, and collecting feedback to improve a voiced idea and gain support from those outside the team.
Formalizing	Making the new process or output related to the voiced idea standard through written documentation or new routines for the team or organization.

Note. Adapted from “The voice cultivation process: How team members can help upward voice live on to implementation,” by P. Satterstrom, M. Kerrissey, and J. DiBenigno, 2021, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 66(2), pp. 394-395 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839220962795>).

4. Methodology

This chapter aims to present the methodological choices for this study. The first section presents the research approach, where we apply a qualitative research method and social constructionism as an epistemological framework for analysing the empirical material. The second section describes the research design and explains how the study developed throughout the research process.

The following section describes how the empirical material was collected, including the sampling strategy and interview process. The empirical material consists of interviews with employees about their experiences of participating in employee surveys. Furthermore, the process of analysing the empirical material is outlined. Finally, the chapter concludes with methodological reflections and ethical considerations related to the study.

4.1 Research approach

The study is based on a qualitative research approach in order to understand and interpret human experiences, behaviours, motives, and opinions in depth (Lim, 2024). Furthermore, it is an exploratory research aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon rather than a descriptive research testing hypotheses. Prasad (2018) argues that neither positivism nor an atheoretical approach can contribute to useful guidelines when conducting an exploratory research. Positivism is not sufficient to understand complex and context-based social processes, while an open, theoryless approach risks appearing natural but is in fact based on underlying assumptions (Prasad, 2018). This study adopts an interpretive research approach. The interpretive traditions view human interpretation as a foundation for understanding the social world. Reality is created and constructed within the human consciousness, instead of existing as a tangible, objective outside world. Reality is described as subjective and socially constructed, shaped by people's experiences, interpretations, and social contexts (Prasad, 2018).

We have chosen one particular segment of the interpretivist paradigm especially applicable – social constructionism. Social constructionism originated as a scientific term by Berger and Luckman in 1966. It attempts to make sense of reality, derived from sociological

and psychological theory. Social constructionism can be viewed as the opposite of determinism, which argues that human actions and ideas are consequences of prior causes and conditions. Social constructionism claims that knowledge is not derived from established phenomena but is constructed from social processes. Language has a central function, as it is through language humans understand their environment and make sense of events and facts (Slater, 2017). The language we use everyday includes posits and objectifications, which makes everyday life meaningful and understandable to us (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Our language can be treated as natural or objective although it is socially created by how we talk about and understand it. The everyday life is described as an intersubjective world. There is an ongoing correspondence between individuals' own meanings, making them share a common understanding of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Our language habits are usually so integrated in our minds that we generally do not challenge their discursive constructions (Slater, 2017).

By adopting the social constructionist perspective, this study approaches employee voice as socially produced through language, interaction, and organisational and managerial practices, rather than as an objective or fixed organisational phenomenon. The research approach was chosen for its ability not only to describe social phenomena but also to understand how these processes are experienced. In this thesis, social constructionism is used as an epistemological position guiding an understanding of knowledge as situated and dependent upon social processes (Tracy, 2020).

4.2 Research design

In the initial stage of the thesis, the study was designed to examine how managers construct and engage in listening activities related to the follow-up process of employee surveys. This perspective was motivated by previous research emphasising that managers are responsible for interpreting, responding to, and evaluating employee survey results (Schou, 2007; Wiley, 2010; Larsson & Holmberg, 2021; Burris et al., 2024). The original intention was therefore to capture how managers listen to, cultivate, and act upon upward employee voice within organisations.

However, during the data collection process, difficulties arose in recruiting managers willing to participate in the study, and the research design was therefore adjusted. This was due to the scope of the study, time constraints, and the feasibility of conducting interviews.

Tracy (2020) notes that conducting interviews involves learning to deal with rejection and being flexible.

Instead, the study shifted its focus from a managerial perspective to employees' experiences of participating in employee surveys. The shift enabled a deeper understanding of the experiences of those providing feedback in ES rather than those managing it.

In order to answer the research question qualitative interviews were conducted. Qualitative interviews were considered appropriate as they enable an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, experiences, and ways of understanding a phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

4.3 Empirical material collection and analysis

In this section we describe how the empirical material was collected and provide an overview of the interview procedures as well as how the empirical material was analysed.

4.3.1 Participant selection

A purposive sampling method was used to select interviewees who were considered relevant to the aim of the study (Flick, 2023). The primary selection criterion required participants to have completed at least one employee survey within the past five years. The criterion helped identify interviewees who were able to reflect on their experiences with employee surveys. Beyond these criteria, no specific departmental affiliation or professional background was required, as the aim was not to compare perspectives across departments or professions.

However, the majority of the participants held white-collar positions, and the analysis may therefore primarily reflect experiences common within such organisational contexts. This was not an intentional selection criterion but rather reflected the networks through which participants were recruited. However, the participants could refer to experiences within previous organisations and were not limited to their current organisations.

In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used in order to identify further relevant participants. Snowball sampling involves asking interviewees to suggest other individuals who may be suitable for the study (Flick, 2023). Participants were contacted via email or social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Messenger.

In total, 25 interviews were conducted across 24 different organisations in Sweden (see Appendix D). The analysis therefore also reflects a Swedish context. The number of

interviews was not predefined prior to the data collection process. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) note, researchers should conduct as many interviews as are needed to adequately address the research question. The final number of participants was therefore determined based on the richness of the empirical material and when a level of thematic saturation was considered to have been reached. In line with sample size considerations, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) note that in qualitative research, saturation can be reached with approximately 9-17 interviews. However, as Flick (2023) points out, sample size is of greater importance in quantitative research, as the purpose of this study is not to produce generalisable findings but instead to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

Furthermore, we aimed to achieve a balance between male and female participants across different age groups in order to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences.

4.3.2 Interview procedures

The interviews were conducted between 06/03/2026 and 25/03/2026, each lasting approximately 25–60 minutes and conducted digitally. A total of 22 interviews took place via video calls and three via phone calls. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Both authors were present during the first 10 interviews and alternated between the roles of asking questions and taking notes. This was done to establish a consistent structure and approach and to ensure a shared interpretation of the interview guide and questions. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted separately. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and only the quotes included in the thesis were translated into English.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexible and customised interviews. Semi-structured interviews are based on a set of prepared, mostly open-ended questions, probes, or a list of bullet points that guide both the interview and the interviewer (Flick, 2023; Tracy, 2020). As Tracy (2020) emphasises, the preparation is intended to stimulate the discussion rather than dictate it. Consequently, semi-structured interviews encourage the interviewer to actively listen, reflect, and adapt to the evolving context of the conversation, thereby granting interviewees greater control over the interview. Participants are given space to freely share their viewpoints, including unexpected insights, which enables the development of in-depth and complex understandings (Tracy, 2020).

Prior to conducting the interviews, an interview guide was developed as a supporting tool (see Appendix C). The interview guide consisted of 21 open-ended questions designed to

be used flexibly, allowing room for participants' perspectives and topics in addition to the questions (Flick, 2023). Each interview began with an introductory section in which the researchers presented themselves and the purpose of the study, assured participants of their anonymity, and informed them that the interviews would be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. This was followed by a set of opening questions aimed at establishing context, such as the participant's position within the organisation and the organisation in which they currently worked. The interviews then proceeded to the main body of open-ended questions, all of which were constructed with the aim of addressing the research question and generating a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon.

However, interview questions should not be asked in the same way as research questions. While research questions can be based on theoretical concepts, interview questions must be simple, jargon-free, and grounded in the knowledge and interest of the interviewees (Tracy, 2020) – principles that guided our formulation of all questions. Moreover, particular attention was paid to avoid leading questions. For instance, no predefined answer categories were provided; instead, all questions were open-ended, enabling participants to offer rich and detailed information (Flick, 2023). Additionally, follow-up questions were used where appropriate to encourage elaboration and clarify participants' responses.

This study was deliberately limited in scope: it did not investigate the design or content of the employee surveys themselves, such as the specific questions asked. Instead, the focus was on the communication surrounding the surveys and experiences related to expressing one's voice and having it acknowledged. As previously mentioned, the study was further confined to employees' perspectives on the work processes associated with employee surveys and therefore does not capture how managers experience these processes.

4.3.3 Empirical material analysis

The empirical material was analysed shortly after the interviews had been conducted. All interviews were transcribed to ensure that no parts of the material were overlooked. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify patterns and themes related to employee voice. During the coding process, recurring patterns and themes in the participants' answers were identified and compared. At the same time, each interview was considered as an individual case in order to preserve the context and nuances of the participants' experiences. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) note, coding involves reviewing the empirical material and identifying relevant sections for further analysis.

The coding process was carried out in two cycles, as suggested by Flick (2023). The first cycle was based on an open coding approach, meaning that the empirical material guided the coding process rather than pre-existing theories or concepts. During the primary cycle, we highlighted all eminent quotes and subsequently created a coding sheet containing definitions of the themes and representative examples (see Appendix E). In this cycle, we went back and forth in the material, compared the data, and looked for similarities and differences, which led to new insights and interpretations. In the second cycle, we began to organise the themes into interpretive concepts. The codes were grouped into overarching themes by identifying patterns and groupings of codes, which were then related to previous research and theoretical concepts (Tracy, 2020).

4.4 Reflexivity statement and ethical considerations

This section reflects on the reflexive positioning of the researchers throughout the research process and discusses the ethical considerations that have guided the design and execution of the study.

4.4.1 Reflexivity statement

When conducting qualitative interviews, it is critical to acknowledge power dynamics. Qualitative interviews implicate an asymmetrical power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, where the interviewer has ownership over the interview situation and the interpretation of the results. There is a risk that the interview becomes a manipulative dialogue, following an hidden agenda (Kvale, 2006). To reduce the impact of these power dynamics, great emphasis was placed on creating an open and comfortable interview environment by encouraging the interviewee to speak freely and elaborate on their experiences.

Furthermore, researchers should reflect on how they personally experience the research process, depending on who they are. Researchers should reflect on their position within the study and their prior knowledge, as well as whether they are insiders or outsiders to the topic. One may prefer studying a familiar subject; on the other hand, studying an unfamiliar subject can offer unique perspectives (Tracy, 2020). In this study, the authors position themselves as outsiders to the subject, as they have no personal experience of completing employee surveys. Being outsiders may entail a risk of missing complex and

nuanced organisational terms. At the same time, it may also facilitate asking questions that might otherwise be taken for granted.

4.4.2 Ethical considerations

Since the empirical material involves personal experiences that may be perceived as sensitive in relation to employee voice, ethical considerations are highly important to reflect upon. Research should be based on informed consent, meaning that participants have agreed to take part in the study. The codes of ethics further require that research should avoid harming participants, including avoiding the invasion of their privacy and misleading them about the aim of the research. Furthermore, the anonymity of interviewees must be protected (Flick, 2023).

Before the interviews were conducted, an information sheet (see Appendix A) and a participant consent form (see Appendix B) were sent to all participants. The information sheet outlined the purpose of the study and what participation would involve, while the consent form specified the conditions of the study, such as confidentiality and anonymity. Both the interviewees and the researchers signed the participant consent form prior to the interviews.

Furthermore, the interviewees were assigned pseudonyms. Demographic information was presented on a general level to protect participant anonymity. Recorded materials and handwritten notes will be destroyed after the thesis has been submitted.

Moreover, Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) note a tension in qualitative interviewing between gaining rich empirical material and the ethical obligation to respect participants' integrity and boundaries. During the interviews, it was important that participants did not feel pressured to disclose sensitive information and that their boundaries and personal integrity were respected.

5. Analysis

This chapter presents and analyses the key findings from the empirical material. The study aimed to develop an understanding of how employees perceive ES as a means of expressing and having their voices acknowledged within their organisations.

The chapter is structured around four themes. The first section focuses on anonymity and how it shapes employee voice. The second section addresses employee surveys as a tool for expressing collective rather than individual voice. The third section highlights the symbolic dimensions of ES. Finally, the last section analyses employees' experiences of resistance, cultivation, and implementation processes.

5.1 The role of anonymity in employee surveys

This theme explores the multifaceted role of anonymity in shaping employee voice in employee surveys, highlighting both its enabling function in facilitating expression and its potential constraints on how such voice is acknowledged and acted upon within organisations.

5.1.1 Anonymity as a prerequisite for employee voice

Usually, employee surveys are anonymous by design, especially those run by a third-party provider (Gallup, n.d.). Anonymity in employee surveys were perceived by the majority of the interview participants as being absolutely crucial, in order to dare to freely express their opinions. One interviewee, Ingrid, described that anonymity is an absolute key in an employee survey – given that multiple alternative channels already exist for openly raising criticism and other important matters in the company. She explained that employee surveys constitute one of the few mechanisms through which all employees can provide feedback anonymously, making this feature highly important in enabling individuals to express opinions they might otherwise be reluctant to share if their name and identity were disclosed. Another participant, Albin, similarly emphasised the importance of anonymity. He noted that issues and opinions that employees want to stand behind with their name are most often addressed by having a dialogue with one's manager. In his view, the surveys therefore serve

as a valuable opportunity to voice opinions, and he did not believe people would do so if they were not anonymous. In the same vein, both Sara and Hugo highlighted the importance of anonymity in survey contexts, pointing out that without it, it might become difficult to dare to respond openly as individuals may feel compelled to filter or withhold their views. Frida was another of the big majority of the participants who thought that the anonymity aspect of employee surveys was important: “I would not have dared to respond to everything if it had my name on it. Then I would have just pretended that everything was great.”

For some participants, anonymity was not merely important but fundamental to the very purpose of employee surveys. Ingrid noted that it “kind of ruins the whole point” if one cannot be anonymous. Similarly, Karin expressed a strong conviction regarding its necessity, stating:

I would say that it [anonymity] is crucial. Otherwise, there is no point to it at all. Because then it just comes down to what people dare to say to their manager in one-on-one conversations, really.

Likewise, Axel described anonymity as a prerequisite, arguing that it would be strange not to ensure it. He emphasised the importance of capturing as many opinions as possible, maintaining that individuals must have the right to express their views freely.

This is all in line with Liu et al. (2025), explaining that employees are found to be more willing to speak up under anonymous conditions than under non-anonymous ones. The authors also highlight that psychological safety mediates the relationship between technical anonymity and employees’ willingness to voice their opinions. Moreover, Murdoch et al. (2014) argue that anonymous survey methods tend to promote greater disclosure of sensitive or stigmatised information than non-anonymous approaches. Traditionally, higher disclosure rates have been interpreted as reflecting greater accuracy compared to lower rates (Murdoch et al., 2014). In that sense, employee surveys create a forum where opinions, experiences, or concerns can be raised which might not have happened otherwise. The aspect of anonymity therefore seems to be more than a technical feature but a communicative condition for expressing voice. Without the surveys, organisations might miss out on critical information from employees.

Some participants further highlighted that anonymity is important given the hierarchical nature of the employment relationship, where the survey feedback often concerns individuals in positions of authority – most notably immediate supervisors or managers. As McKee (2024) notes, employees often fear negative consequences for speaking up, since

these expressions can be perceived as unwanted or disrupting by actors in positions of authority. As Lukas explained, providing feedback in employee surveys may involve evaluating someone who is responsible for one's work tasks and salary. In such contexts, Lukas believed anonymity becomes essential, especially when addressing dissatisfaction or sensitive issues, as employees may otherwise fear negative repercussions. Sam reinforced this perspective, arguing that anonymity safeguards employees from being personally singled out when raising concerns. He also pointed to the risk that some managers may respond poorly to criticism, potentially taking it personally and reacting in obstructive or counterproductive ways, thereby further underscoring the importance of anonymity. In a similar vein, Agnes noted that ES often aim to surface issues that individuals may feel uncomfortable with or dissatisfied about. She therefore emphasised that the ability to remain anonymous is very valuable and important for fostering honesty. Although anonymity appears to enable employee voice, particularly in relation to negative feedback or concerns, the organisation also benefits from this. As Ashford et al. (2016, as cited in McKee, 2024) argue, negative feedback is especially valuable as it highlights deficiencies and provides information for performance improvement.

However, one of the interviewees, Maja, provided a contrasting example from a company where employee surveys were conducted without anonymity. Employees had questioned the absence of anonymity, but according to Maja, these concerns were never addressed or followed up on by the organisation. Maja experienced that nothing generally happened after the surveys and that the surveys consistently showed positive results. Initially unaware that the surveys were non-anonymous, she responded honestly. However, after realising that the surveys were non-anonymous, she chose not to participate in some of the subsequent employee surveys, as she preferred to be fully anonymous. During periods when she felt uncomfortable at the company, she did not dare to express her true opinions, as she knew that someone could find out what she had said or written. Instead, she withheld certain concerns, and kept it to herself, rather than raised them. Her account illustrates how the absence of anonymity may discourage participation and honesty, thereby silencing certain employee perspectives.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that anonymity plays a central role in shaping employees' willingness to voice their concerns, thereby affecting how they perceive employee surveys as a channel for voice. In organisational contexts characterised by hierarchical relationships, power asymmetries, and potential risks associated with speaking up, anonymity appears to function as a key enabler of candid communication and honesty. It

not only lowers the threshold for participation but also allows employees to articulate concerns that might otherwise remain unvoiced. In this sense, anonymity is not simply a design feature of employee surveys but a foundational condition for their effectiveness as a mechanism through which employees can express themselves and, potentially, have their voice acknowledged within their organisations.

5.1.2 Questioning anonymity: Distrust and perceived traceability

However, the empirical material also suggests a critical tension: despite the strong importance attributed to anonymity in employee surveys, several participants neither fully trusted nor experienced anonymity as complete in practice. This perceived lack of anonymity had direct behavioural implications, including a reduced willingness to respond openly. This finding aligns with Gallup (n.d.), which suggests that when employees do not trust that their input is truly anonymous, response rates tend to decline and the reliability of the resulting survey data is reduced. Gallup (n.d.) emphasises the importance of employees' belief regarding confidentiality and the responsible use of responses. It is not only technical anonymity that is decisive, but also employees' perceived anonymity and their trust in how responses are handled, as without such trust even formally anonymous surveys may generate incomplete or guarded feedback.

Several participants expressed doubts about whether their responses were truly unidentifiable, particularly in smaller organisational settings. Ingrid, for instance, explained:

I often feel when I do these surveys that it doesn't feel very anonymous, even though it is anonymous, because we are such a small organisation. So it feels like it can still be quite easy to figure out, if someone has a very deviant opinion, who it is that has expressed that opinion, so you end up standardising your responses and placing yourself somewhat in the middle on everything.

Axel similarly expressed that he did not fully trust that he was completely anonymous in the company's employee surveys, as he believed that it may be possible to infer his responses if one tried. He noted that the small size of his department, combined with differences in how individuals write and express themselves, may make it relatively easy to identify who has written what. Axel further explained that this leads him to hold back somewhat when responding to employee surveys, as he is aware that his answers might be identifiable. Even if this is not always the case in practice, he emphasised that the mere

perception of possible identification still affects him, and for him personally, this appears to constrain his openness.

In Ingrid's case, the perceived lack of anonymity was closely linked to the very small organisational context in which she worked, where only one other person shared her role and tasks. She explained that providing highly specific feedback in the survey would therefore be relatively easily traced back to her, which led her to reason that she might as well raise such issues directly with her manager – something she may not dare to do if it concerns something sensitive. This illustrates a dilemma between specificity and anonymity: while specificity in feedback is necessary for meaningful organisational improvement, it simultaneously increases the perceived risk of identification. This dilemma was also highlighted by Sofia, who reflected on the difficulty of providing very specific feedback as it may be linked or traceable to oneself, particularly in situations where it feels challenging to raise the concern with one's manager. Building on this, she further questioned what can actually be done with survey input if it must be kept vague in order to protect anonymity. As Waldman and Atwater (1998, as cited in Kilburn & Cates, 2010) note, formal upward feedback such as surveys or written comments can potentially provide valuable information; however, it risks being too vague to interpret accurately. Although anonymity seems to enable voice, it might constrain the organisation's ability to cultivate that voice. Furthermore, as Bashur and Oc (2015) emphasise, voice is change-oriented. However, when voice is perceived as vague, attempts to change a situation may not become sufficiently visible to the organisation. At the same time, the organisation may view surveys as a starting point for voices that can be further developed. As Satterstrom et al. (2021) mention, for voice to potentially lead to organisational implementation, it needs to be cultivated through the posing of clarifying questions, recalling the voice, identifying limitations, and demonstrating its practicality.

The apparent challenges regarding the perceived traceability of responses and doubts about anonymity in practice, point to a deeper ambiguity concerning the role and value of employee surveys as a communication tool. It raises questions about their usefulness from both an employee and an organisational perspective. On the one hand, employees may feel compelled to remain vague in order to protect their identity; on the other hand, organisations may receive feedback that is too vague to be actionable, relevant, or useful – resulting in neither party fully realising the potential value of the instrument. Moreover, such vague or non-actionable input is likely to limit the organisation's ability to respond effectively to employees' survey contributions, which may, in turn, shape employees' perceptions of whether their voice is genuinely acknowledged. If employees cannot speak freely without

fear of identification, and organisations in turn receive diluted, incomplete, or non-specific input, the capacity of employee surveys as both a channel for employee voice and organisational learning is ultimately constrained.

5.1.3 Anonymity as conditional: The role of group size and aggregation

Liu et al. (2025) identify the boundary conditions for the effects of technical anonymity. This illustrates that the effectiveness of anonymity is contingent upon contextual factors and conditions. The empirical material in this study reinforces this perspective, indicating that the effectiveness of anonymity is dependent on organisational circumstances – most notably the size of the respondent group.

A key finding is that the size of the team or respondent group plays a decisive role in whether anonymity is perceived as credible and effective. If the group is too small, anonymity may be compromised, as respondents' identities can be inferred and responses can be indirectly attributed to specific employees. One practical solution observed in the empirical material is the aggregation of smaller groups with another department when reporting survey results. However, this solution introduces its own challenges. William described how teams consisting of fewer than five full-time employees, including his own team, had their survey results merged and analysed with broader European-level data due to confidentiality constraints. While this protected anonymity, it also meant that team-specific issues were diluted, limiting the possibility of identifying and acting upon concerns within the immediate work context. Similarly, Ronja explained that in her organisation, teams with fewer than ten employees – such as her own – had their results merged with the whole department. This was particularly relevant for questions concerning leadership and one's immediate manager, where more specific feedback would otherwise risk compromising anonymity in very small units.

However, while such aggregation practices strengthen anonymity, they may also make it more difficult to accurately evaluate group-specific responses and reduce the relevance of the feedback for employees' immediate work context. Ronja further described how this merging of survey results allowed managers to deflect or dismiss certain findings by attributing them to other departments, which in her experience made the process feel somewhat meaningless. As she expressed:

It was also the case that our group had fewer than ten people, so we were grouped together with the department. And then I thought that the boss could kind of hide behind that, like ‘no, this probably doesn’t apply to us, this probably doesn’t apply to us’, so much that I felt like, but then what *does* apply to us? It can’t be, it can’t be that nothing applies to us.

These findings highlight the dual nature of this dynamic: while increasing group size through aggregation may protect anonymity, it may also dilute the contextual, team-based specificity and actionability of survey results. This, in turn, affects how employees perceive whether their voice is meaningfully acknowledged through employee surveys.

5.1.4 The ambivalence of anonymity: Enabling expression, constraining impact

The empirical material further suggests that anonymity is not only conditional – structurally shaped by group size and aggregation – but also inherently ambivalent. While it appears to enable employees to express their views, an anonymous voice may simultaneously be perceived as less impactful.

Several participants reflected on the limitations of anonymous feedback. Frida explained that direct conversations with her manager had generally produced better outcomes than anonymous survey responses because face-to-face communication created stronger accountability and obligation to act on the feedback provided. Albin similarly argued that anonymous comments “lose some value”, as they are difficult to follow up on, particularly from a managerial perspective. At the same time, he emphasised that anonymity is likely a prerequisite for participation, stating that he did not think very many responses would be obtained without it. Gustav articulated a similar perspective, contending that anonymity is essential for securing both high response rates and honest answers. This suggests that anonymity increases participation and the volume of feedback, while simultaneously making it more challenging to engage with that feedback, through dialogue or follow-up questions, due to the absence of an identifiable source. Axel similarly questioned the effectiveness of expressing concerns anonymously within infrequent survey formats, arguing that this may weaken the immediacy and force of employee voice: “Once a year, it’s like, are you supposed to hold on to your opinions all year just to then express them in a somewhat weak anonymous way?”

This perceived limitation can be further understood through the lens of voice cultivation (Satterstrom et al., 2021). While anonymity may facilitate the initial expression of

voice by lowering the threshold for speaking up, it may concurrently complicate subsequent stages of the voice cultivation process. In particular, the practice of developing voiced ideas relies on interaction, iteration, and the ability to engage with the sender – for instance by posing clarifying questions. When the sender is anonymous, such interaction is constrained, which may hinder the development, progression, and eventual implementation of voiced ideas. As a result, anonymous input risks being treated as less actionable, thereby reducing its influence within organisational decision-making processes. In this sense, anonymity can be understood as both enabling and constraining. It protects employees, facilitates expression, and increases participation, yet may at the same time limit the extent to which that voice can be cultivated, developed, and ultimately translated into organisational change.

This dynamic – where anonymously expressed feedback may be perceived as less impactful – is further reflected in other parts of the empirical material. Some interviewees described that, in order for issues or criticism raised in employee surveys to lead to actual change, employees themselves needed to take personal responsibility for driving these issues forward, beyond the survey context. As Agnes explained, survey results were frequently presented without clear action plans, leaving employees to initiate further discussions or propose solutions to identified problems: “But I also feel that it is perhaps not up to the employees to make the workplace a better place.” According to Agnes, the expectation that employees themselves must drive change “becomes a bit wrong”, as doing so requires stepping out of anonymity and publicly standing behind views that were initially expressed under the protection of confidentiality. In her organisational context, this points to a situation in which anonymity in employee surveys enables more candid expression, yet must be relinquished for that expression to have impact. She summarised this dynamic as follows:

One can be negatively affected, it feels like, if one has too negative and wrong opinions in a workplace, so that’s probably why it is anonymous, but it won’t be anonymous in the end – if one wants change, that is.

Overall, these findings highlight the inherently ambivalent role of anonymity in employee surveys. Anonymity does not simply enable employee voice, but also shapes its trajectory and potential impact within organisations.

5.1.5 Contextualising anonymity: Psychological safety, voice climate, and complementary channels

However, although anonymity appears to facilitate employee expression, the empirical material suggests that its significance cannot be understood in isolation from the broader organisational context in which employee voice occurs. The perceived value and necessity of anonymity were closely connected to employees' experiences of psychological safety, leadership, organisational culture, and the availability of alternative channels for voice. In this sense, anonymity did not emerge as a universally sufficient condition for meaningful employee voice, but rather as one component within a broader ecosystem of organisational communication.

Several participants expressed a preference for direct dialogue with managers rather than employee surveys when relationships were characterised by trust, openness, and responsiveness. In such contexts, employees experienced fewer barriers to raising concerns openly, reducing their dependence on anonymous surveys as a voice mechanism. This reflects Kilburn and Cates' (2010) argument that strong leader-follower relationships increase followers' propensity to provide voluntary upward feedback. Previous research similarly stresses the importance of openness and trust between managers and employees for enabling upward communication (Tourish & Robson, 2004; Blalack, 1986). Employees contemplating dissent consider whether their feedback will be perceived constructively or result in retaliation, making trust central to both the availability and effectiveness of upward feedback (Tourish & Robson, 2004). At the same time, participants repeatedly emphasised that this preference was highly context-dependent and varied between organisational environments and managerial relationships. Axel, for example, reflected on how the importance and effectiveness of employee surveys increase when employees have poor relationships with their managers. In such situations, the survey may become the only available channel through which employees can express their opinions, particularly because the feedback is likely reaching another organisational function, usually HR, rather than going directly to the immediate supervisor. In this way, anonymous surveys may allow employees to "avoid the manager as a bad gatekeeper", as Axel expressed it. This resonates with Kilburn and Cates' (2010) finding that leaders may need to alter their behaviours in order to move beyond the role of gatekeeper and foster greater levels of voluntary upward feedback, which in turn may increase organisational effectiveness. Thereby, the surveys can create an alternative pathway for employee voice when direct communication feels difficult or unsafe.

This finding closely aligns with Liu et al.'s (2025) argument that anonymity is strongly connected to psychological safety. The authors note that employees are generally more willing to raise their voice under anonymous conditions and that psychological safety mediates this relationship. In this sense, anonymity may function as a compensatory mechanism in environments characterised by limited trust in managers or interpersonal risk, creating a comparatively safer space for expression.

The empirical material further highlights the importance of organisational culture in shaping whether employees perceive it as meaningful to express their voice. Viktoria emphasised that organisational culture is crucial for enabling genuine dialogue, while Ingrid described how defensive leadership and organisational cultures resistant to change may create a sense of futility around giving feedback, particularly when change seems unlikely. As Moss and Sanchez (2004, as cited in McKee, 2024) state, employees are not likely to provide unsolicited feedback to managers. If feedback is not perceived as wanted within the organisation, as Ingrid described, employees may remain silent. At the same time, Ingrid noted that in cultures where employees feel safe expressing opinions regardless of channel, anonymity becomes less necessary.

Similarly, several interviewees emphasised the importance of a safe and open environment for the ability to express and have one's voice acknowledged. According to Viktoria, a safe work environment is characterised by openness, curiosity, and the absence of reprisals when employees express various opinions. Shen and Shen (2025) explain that a psychologically safe and inclusive climate strengthens voice behaviour and contributes positively to employees' willingness to express ideas and concerns. These accounts suggest that anonymity in employee surveys, and its perceived importance for the enabling of voice, is embedded in – and partially dependent on – the surrounding voice climate. The importance of anonymity seems to be closely shaped by the broader organisational climate. When employees perceive the climate as psychologically safe, they may be more comfortable with expressing concerns directly, reducing the need for anonymity.

Another recurring theme concerned the role of anonymity in ES for individuals who do not dare or feel comfortable speaking up directly. Several participants described anonymity as particularly important not necessarily for themselves, but for employees who are quieter, less confrontational, or more cautious in how they express concerns. Hugo, for instance, explained that while he personally felt increasingly comfortable voicing opinions openly due to his role, experience, and age, anonymity remained “even more important for other people” because some individuals simply “do not dare to say”. Similarly, William, who

described himself as a very cautious person, emphasised that anonymity was “very, very important” to him personally. He explained that anonymity allowed him to be significantly more honest when discussing problems or dissatisfaction.

Sara likewise pointed out that employee surveys often include questions concerning sensitive issues, such as harassment, where anonymity may provide employees with an opportunity to at least indicate that problems exist, even if they do not dare to speak openly about them. Axel similarly argued that employee surveys are particularly valuable for employees who are less outspoken or verbally expressive. While he personally described himself as relatively outspoken and therefore less dependent on surveys to express opinions, he viewed surveys as an important tool precisely because “not everyone is that verbal”:

You know, some people keep more to themselves, are a bit quiet and all that, so they might not even realise, they might not even know themselves what they think or feel until they get the question.

This perspective may also be understood in relation to dispositional factors of voicing. LePine and Van Dyne (2001, as cited in Morrison, 2011) highlight individual differences in employee voice behaviour. Employees who are more extraverted or conscientious tend to engage in voice behaviour more frequently, partly because they are more comfortable expressing opinions and discussing improvements. In contrast, individuals characterised by higher levels of neuroticism or agreeableness may be less likely to challenge existing situations or openly express concerns. This further illustrates that employee surveys may not only provide an anonymous channel for expression, but may also facilitate reflection and articulation among employees who might otherwise remain silent. The survey format itself may therefore help employees identify, formulate, and communicate concerns that they had not previously verbalised.

Taken together, these findings suggest that anonymous employee surveys contribute to creating a broader ecosystem of voice channels within organisations. Several participants emphasised the importance of maintaining multiple forms of communication and feedback mechanisms. Hugo, in particular, stressed the value of preserving this diversity of forums, arguing that no single channel is inherently superior to another. Instead, different forms of employee voice serve different purposes and together contribute to a more complete organisational understanding of employees’ experiences, concerns, and perspectives. According to him, this breadth of channels is valuable both for making employees feel seen

and heard and for enabling organisations to develop a more accurate understanding of how the workplace actually functions.

At the same time, the findings indicate that the value of anonymity is limited when the available form of anonymous expression does not align with employees' preferred ways of conveying their opinions and feedback. Several interviewees pointed to the lack of anonymous options beyond surveys. Notably, what emerged as a suggested improvement was some form of "anonymous discussion", perceived as either superior to employee surveys or at least a valuable complement. Oskar, for instance, emphasised the need for additional channels:

There needs to be a complement to surveys as well. You need to be able to go and talk to HR anonymously too. There need to be other anonymous ways to express your opinion.

He described one-on-one meetings with HR as a valuable and "almost better" alternative, as they allow for an individual discussion characterised by a sense of confidentiality – both in terms of what is shared and the assurance that one's identity remains protected. This format, he perceived, fosters a strong sense of being listened to.

Similarly, Gustav suggested that more interactive formats – such as anonymous, AI-mediated conversations resembling a video chat with HR – could enhance employees' ability to express themselves. He argued that speaking, rather than checking boxes or writing responses in a survey field, may enable more detailed and nuanced feedback.

Collectively, these findings indicate that anonymous employee surveys are most effective when embedded within a broader system of complementary voice channels. The findings further indicate that employee voice may benefit from surveys being complemented by additional anonymous channels, particularly those that are more dialogical or interactive. Such additions may not only strengthen employees' ability to express their voice – especially for those who prefer alternatives to written survey responses – but also enhance their perception that their input is meaningfully acknowledged.

5.2 Employee surveys as organisational “temperature checks”

This theme investigates employee surveys as organisational “temperature checks”. It highlights how this understanding positions surveys as tools for aggregating and quantifying employee experiences into an overall picture of organisational wellbeing, carrying implications for employee voice.

5.2.1 A snapshot of the organisation

A prominent theme in the empirical material is that employee surveys are, by several participants, primarily perceived not as a channel for individual voice but as a tool for “taking the temperature” of the organisation. In this sense, they are understood as instruments for capturing an overall picture of organisational conditions and the whole organisation’s wellbeing at a given point in time. As Karin expressed it:

...it is important to remember with employee surveys that it is very time-sensitive, because it is really a snapshot or a still image of how the organisation looks exactly right now.

Similarly, both Sanna and Sara argued that employee surveys mainly function as a form of temperature measurement, reflecting the overall condition of both the organisation and its employees. Sara emphasised the importance of regularly assessing the state of the organisation and providing employees with an opportunity to express their views on what is working well and what is not. This understanding positions surveys as a good way of grasping the organisation as a whole. Karin further argued that without such surveys, organisations risk losing sight of this overall perspective, while also missing an important symbolic function – namely, signalling to employees that “we care about what you think, say, and feel”. As Abdulgalimov et al. (2020) suggest, providing employees with a voice has a positive impact on employee wellbeing.

At the same time, Karin emphasised the importance of considering the purpose of conducting employee surveys. While ES are well-suited for assessing issues at an organisational level, they are less appropriate for addressing matters at the individual level. Karin noted that employee surveys are more of a quantitative than a qualitative method, producing broad insights at an organisational level rather than in-depth understandings. Consequently, Karin believed other formats – such as one-to-one conversations with the manager or more intimate team discussions – are much better suited for addressing individual

concerns. Karin cautioned that when organisations misinterpret surveys as substitutes for such qualitative exchanges, they risk overlooking their actual purpose and what they can provide.

This distinction was echoed by Johan, who rejected the idea of surveys as a meaningful channel for individual feedback. Instead, he described them as anonymous and very “blunt” instruments which, in contrast to direct dialogue with managers, are less specific and less connected to individual concerns. This perspective aligns with previous findings suggesting that employee surveys, when used as a standalone tool, are too blunt and therefore need to be combined with other tools, such as dialogues and interaction, in order to realise their value (Chef, 2008). While Johan acknowledged that surveys can be useful for taking the temperature of the employees’ opinions across different issues, he argued that expressing one’s voice within an organisation requires a fundamentally different approach: one needs to hear what employees are saying, as a survey alone is not sufficient.

Gustav similarly highlighted the standardised and impersonal nature of survey formats – often reduced to numerical scales or predefined response categories – which may produce an overall picture but fail to capture individual responses in depth. Although employee surveys offer advantages such as anonymity and statistical results, face-to-face communication allows individuals to engage in speaking, listening, providing feedback, and observing simultaneously (Stemmer & Whittaker, 1998).

5.2.2 Quantifying employee voice: Identifying patterns, legitimising concerns, and enabling action

Despite these limitations, participants widely acknowledged the organisational value of surveys as tools for identifying patterns, trends, and potential problem areas. Several participants described how survey results can function as early warning signals, indicating where issues may be emerging or where further investigation is needed.

For instance, Sanna highlighted how surveys can help organisations detect underlying problems, such as increasing sick leave, employee turnover, or declining performance. In this sense, the “temperature check” can indicate where attention should be directed in order to address existing problems. Similarly, Johan emphasised the usefulness of identifying downward trends within specific areas, suggesting that such patterns may serve as valuable warning signals that the organisation is “heading in the wrong direction”. Karin likewise

stressed that employee surveys enable organisations to clearly identify patterns, warning signs, and areas for development at an organisational level.

Central to this perceived value was the surveys' capacity to quantify employee experiences. Many participants described employee surveys as statistically valuable precisely because they transform opinions, concerns, and perceptions into measurable and comparable data. Through percentages, numerical scores, and recurring indicators, employee experiences become visible in ways that participants perceive as difficult for organisations and managers to ignore or dismiss. Several participants therefore emphasised the importance of standardised and recurring questions, as these enable the comparison of results over time – for instance, percentage-based and from year to year – and make it possible to track whether organisational conditions have improved or deteriorated.

Ronja, for instance, described how quantified changes become significantly more difficult to “talk away” once they are presented “in black and white”. Karin similarly described how recurring survey measurements enabled her organisation to identify teams experiencing unusually low results during periods of crisis, while subsequent improvements in later surveys functioned as confirmation that organisational interventions had been effective. Frida likewise noted that survey statistics made existing organisational problems more tangible and visible, thereby contributing to managerial awareness and organisational action.

Beyond comparisons over time, interviewees also highlighted the value of comparisons across organisational contexts. Karin described how surveys enable organisations to compare results between teams, departments, offices, and even countries in order to identify deviations from broader organisational patterns. Such comparisons were perceived as particularly valuable for distinguishing between organisation-wide issues and problems rooted in specific local contexts. As Karin explained, significantly lower scores within one team could indicate that a problem was not structural at the organisational level, but instead tied to a particular team environment or leadership situation.

Importantly, interviewees also described quantification as a source of legitimacy and organisational influence. Several participants suggested that employee concerns gain greater weight once they are supported by statistics rather than communicated solely through individual complaints or informal conversations. Frida explained that managers may become more attentive when survey results demonstrate that a substantial proportion of employees share a particular concern, as measurable data is often easier to grasp. Since the statistics are

presented to all managers, they also provide a useful basis for identifying patterns and responding accordingly.

Similarly, Hugo argued that quantification strengthens managers' ability to communicate employee concerns upward within the organisation. According to him, survey statistics transform employee opinions into documented organisational facts that are more difficult to dismiss as subjective perceptions. He further suggested that this is particularly important for middle managers, whose role involves being a messenger both upwards and downwards within the organisation:

I think that when something is quantified, it becomes clearer. [...] And I think that well-conducted employee surveys will make it easier for first-line managers, by facilitating their work of conveying important information upwards within the organisation.

Critical upward feedback has been shown to be frequently suppressed and distorted by employees and disregarded or discouraged by managers (Kassing, 2002; Tourish & Robson, 2004). When opinions become statistical and are supported by a broader collective, they may become more difficult to ignore. In this regard, employee surveys – and the quantification they produce – appear to strengthen employee voice by transforming employee experiences into measurable, legitimate, and actionable forms of knowledge. In doing so, they may also facilitate middle managers' ability to communicate employee opinions upward within the organisational hierarchy. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that employee perspectives reach higher managerial levels and acquire broader organisational influence.

This quantifying function was also linked to accountability and organisational action. Sara, for instance, noted that problematic survey results in her organisation require the development of action plans, thereby making it more difficult for managers or organisations to avoid addressing identified issues. Employee surveys were therefore frequently associated with increased organisational clarity and visibility: once problems are formally represented through survey statistics, they become documented, measurable, and harder to ignore.

At the same time, participants did not perceive quantification as sufficient in itself. Several participants emphasised the importance of complementing numerical ratings with opportunities for contextualisation through open-ended comments. Ronja, for example, argued that standardised rating scales are valuable because they enable statistical comparison over time, while also stressing the importance of including opportunities for employees to provide comments, express personal views, and suggest improvements within the survey.

However, she maintained that the majority of the survey should consist of scaled ratings, precisely because such formats facilitate comparisons of responses statistically across years. Albin similarly suggested that combining scaled responses with more open-ended reflections creates a more balanced survey format. These reflections indicate that while quantification was widely perceived as valuable for identifying patterns, legitimising concerns, and enabling comparison, participants also recognised that numerical indicators alone cannot fully capture the complexity of employee experiences.

Lastly, employee surveys appear to both provide organisations with measurable overviews that help identify patterns, deviations, and areas requiring attention, while simultaneously strengthening the legitimacy of employee concerns by rendering them statistically visible, comparable, and actionable.

5.2.3 The primacy of the collective: Voice through the majority

Closely linked to this “temperature-taking” function is the perception that survey results primarily reflect the views of the collective rather than the individual. Many interviewees described how the impact of one’s voice within surveys is contingent upon alignment with the majority. Employee surveys are described as a tool for providing employees with a voice, enhancing internal communication, and supporting organisational development (Hartley, 2001; Kraut, 2006, as cited in Huebner & Zacher, 2021). Although surveys are intended to provide employees with a voice, this voice may be mainly collective rather than individual in nature.

Karin, along with Gustav and Sanna, noted that in the context of employee surveys, “you are just one in the crowd”. This implies that individual concerns and opinions risk being overlooked unless they are shared by a larger number of participants. In practice, this means that issues are more likely to be highlighted when many employees express similar views.

Frida similarly emphasised that a critical mass of similar responses is often required for an issue to gain attention. While she acknowledged that employee surveys can be a useful way of expressing one’s views, she noted that their impact depends on multiple employees expressing the same concern, making it feel as though an entire group must respond similarly for anything to happen. This dynamic can also affect employees’ perceptions of their own influence, as reflected in her remark: “I feel like ‘why should my little voice really make any difference’, maybe that’s not how you’re supposed to think, but yeah.”

Karin further elaborated on this logic, explaining that employee surveys tend to privilege widely shared views while offering limited scope for more individualised concerns. As she expressed:

I experience that if you think something that very many others also think, then it is a good way of getting your opinions acknowledged. But if you have a more specific problem, for example you have a problem with your team, you have a problem with your manager, you have a problem with a colleague, then it is basically meaningless, because what employee surveys show, or what they reflect, is what the large mass thinks...

Oskar reinforced this view, arguing that organisations tend to focus on patterns in the majority's responses and draw conclusions based on these, rather than on individual ideas or opinions. In such contexts, he suggested, surveys may not be the most suitable tool for capturing individual voice. Correspondingly, Hugo noted that while he could not identify any specific change resulting directly from his own survey responses, he believed that his input – combined with others' – had contributed positively to both the organisation and its employees.

This aggregation logic was further linked to participation rates. Several interviewees stressed that the effectiveness of ES depends on broad participation, as low response rates risk distorting the overall picture and weakening the legitimacy of the results. Some participants framed this in normative terms, suggesting that employees have a duty to report problems and shortcomings in the workplace, in respect of both colleagues and the organisation. Sofia, for instance, emphasised that employees have a responsibility to communicate both positive and negative aspects of their work environment, including not only team dynamics and leadership but also broader workplace conditions that enable them to perform their work. Hugo similarly noted that colleagues tend to share fairly similar issues. He further reasoned that the perceived impact of one's voice is dependent on others also speaking up: "If many of those in my situation respond, then my voice will gain greater strength." He further connected this to his organisation's code of conduct, which, in his view, implies an expectation that employees speak up when they observe something problematic or strange. However, the willingness to report such information has been shown to depend on trust, as research indicates that subordinates who do not trust their superior may suppress unfavourable information even if they recognise that it is useful for decision-making (Tourish & Robson, 2004).

Importantly, the collective dimension of surveys was not only seen as a limitation but also, at times, as a source of validation. Several participants described how reviewing and discussing aggregated survey results allowed them to situate their own experiences in relation to others. Ronja, for instance, noted that this helps distinguish between individual concerns and more structural issues. Karin also emphasised the value of post-survey group discussions, describing them as highly valuable and rewarding opportunities to hear others' perspectives. She noted that employees may otherwise carry distorted assumptions about how colleagues perceive the organisation, particularly in environments where dissatisfaction is not openly expressed. In such cases, collective discussions of survey results can provide reassurance and recognition, as individuals realise that others share similar thoughts and experiences. Morrison et al. (2011) point out that group voice climate influences the individual voice; employees are more likely to share ideas and suggestions in groups where they believe that voice is safe and effective. When employees raise similar concerns or opinions, voice may become normalised and validated. In this sense, the collective dimension of voice in ES may contribute to a voice climate in which employees perceive voicing as safer, more legitimate, and more likely to influence organisational change.

5.2.4 Organisational utility versus individual voice: An asymmetrical instrument

Building on the preceding discussion, the empirical material points to a central tension in how employee surveys are perceived: while they are widely regarded as effective tools for the organisation, their value as a mechanism for individual voice is more contested. In this sense, employee surveys appear to operate as an asymmetrical instrument – highly functional at the aggregate level, yet comparatively limited at the individual level.

Several participants explicitly distinguished between these two dimensions. Gustav, for instance, emphasised that the numerical and standardised format of surveys is well-suited for generating an overall organisational picture, suggesting that from a company perspective, employee surveys are highly effective. This aligns with previous research indicating that employee surveys are widely perceived as useful among organisational leaders, particularly because they provide a clearer overview of the workplace (Kullberg, 2021). Simultaneously, however, Gustav questioned the adequacy of a numeric format for capturing individual voice:

...when it comes to having your voice heard, I think numbers are quite a poor measurement, because I think that HR and culture are very much connected to wellbeing and people – there are always people behind things, and in that regard, I think you often need more context than just a one to five.

He further noted that it is insufficient to infer dissatisfaction from low average scores alone; without insight into the underlying reasons, such data offers limited guidance for meaningful change. This observation resonates with Larsson and Holmberg's (2021) argument that the same single number from a survey can come to hold very different meanings depending on the work unit in which it is situated.

Frida likewise acknowledged the organisational benefits of employee surveys, particularly their ability to provide an overview of organisational and employee sentiment. At the same time, she expressed doubts about their usefulness at the individual level. She did not perceive surveys as her primary channel for influencing her own situation or bringing about meaningful change; rather, she indicated that she would instead turn directly to her manager if she sought a more substantial impact. Importantly, she also highlighted a perceived lack of obligation on the part of the organisation to act on survey results, which further weakens the link between expressing one's views and seeing them translated into action. This observation resonates with prior research suggesting that the follow-up and evaluation process of employee surveys are often neglected in practice (de Waal, 2014; Huebner & Zacher, 2021).

Karin's reflections reinforce this asymmetry. While she recognised the value of employee surveys in reflecting the opinions of the majority and providing a snapshot of the organisation's overall wellbeing, she argued that they are largely ineffective in situations involving specific or individualised problems. In periods of strain within the immediate work environment – such as difficulties with one's team, manager, or a colleague – employee surveys were described as offering her no practical support. Rather, their value remained confined to the organisational level.

At the same time, this does not imply that their value is exclusively one-sided. As Hugo pointed out, the process “goes both ways”. He reasoned that it is of great value for the company to understand what is happening across the organisation, while it is also of great value for employees to experience that they have a say. According to him, this sense of having a say, over time, influences employees' willingness to exert additional effort when needed. This perspective aligns with McKee (2024), who emphasises that organisations and managers can actively shape constructive attitudes by granting employees autonomy and

allowing participation in decision-making. Such practices, according to the author, yield significant returns in the form of empowered, engaged, and vocal employees. Employees' attitudes towards the organisation, leadership, and work are crucial, as feelings of responsibility and commitment strongly contribute to the promotion of voice (McKee, 2024).

A related perspective is that the effectiveness of employee surveys depends not only on their design, but also on how they are enacted in practice. Larsson and Holmberg (2021) argue that whether a system becomes constraining or enabling depends less on its technical characteristics and more on the communication surrounding it. Their findings highlight the interplay between managerial leadership and organisational systems, emphasising managers' role in shaping standardised measurement tools as enabling. In particular, employee surveys can be rendered more enabling through substantial managerial work aimed at "taming" the survey to fit local contexts and needs. In this way, ES can be turned into a resource for locally meaningful change and development (Larsson & Holmberg, 2021). This perspective provides a nuance to the findings, as it suggests that the limitations identified by interviewees may not reside entirely in the survey instrument itself. Rather, employees' experiences of the value of employee surveys for individual voice – and whether ES are perceived as constraining or enabling – may also depend on how managers handle and communicate about the survey, contextualise its results, and adapt the process in ways that make it feel relevant to employees' local realities and everyday work situations. In this sense, managerial practices may shape whether employee surveys are experienced merely as mechanisms for organisational measurement or as more credible and meaningful avenues for employee voice and acknowledgment.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that this mutual value is unevenly distributed. While organisations gain structured and actionable overviews, employees' experiences of voice remain more conditional – dependent on aggregation, managerial follow-up, and the extent to which expressed concerns align with broader patterns. Employee surveys enable organisations to monitor, map, and respond to collective sentiment, but they do not necessarily provide employees with a strong sense of being heard as individuals. In this respect, employee surveys appear to privilege organisational insight over individual expression, reinforcing their role as instruments of collective measurement rather than personalised voice. This asymmetry is central to understanding how employees perceive surveys as a voice mechanism, as it highlights the gap between the opportunity to express and the experience of being acknowledged.

5.3 The symbolic dimensions of employee surveys

This theme examines the symbolic dimensions of employee surveys, which extend beyond their function as feedback collection tools. These symbolic dimensions shape employees' interpretations of the surveys' legitimacy, value, and effectiveness, and inform how they make sense of the organisation's intentions in soliciting their voice.

5.3.1 *Employee surveys as performative voice practices*

A prominent theme throughout the empirical material concerns the perception of employee surveys as largely symbolic practices rather than meaningful mechanisms for influence. Many participants described ES as something organisations conduct primarily because they are expected to, creating a risk that the surveys become performative routines without any real meaning or substance.

Axel articulated one of the clearest expressions of this perception, describing employee surveys as a tool used to create the illusion that employees are being taken seriously without this necessarily being the case in practice. This closely resembles a situation of faux voice, where organisations create channels for input without allowing that input to meaningfully influence or shape decisions (Lewis, 2020). Reflecting on what comes to mind when hearing the term “employee survey”, Axel explained:

If I'm being completely honest, I think first and foremost of a tool that is used to give employees something – how should I put it – something that makes them feel like they are being taken seriously without them necessarily being so. [...] It is more of a way for the company to, you know, give the illusion that employees have more say than they actually do.

Axel further described employee surveys as a kind of public performance by HR, allowing organisations to signal internally that they “care” about their employees and “listen” to them by distributing a survey once a year, regardless of whether the responses are treated seriously in practice. According to him, by doing surveys once a year companies can claim that they have “done what they can” to listen to employees, while in reality feedback may not be treated with corresponding seriousness. In this sense, the survey became associated less with dialogue and organisational learning, and more with legitimacy-building and symbolic self-presentation. This reflects Lewis's (2020) argument that organisations may engage in a form of “public show”, where input is solicited without decision-makers genuinely

considering the perspectives offered, thereby validating the decision-making process without truly listening.

Participants similarly described employee surveys as organisational routines carried out largely because they are expected to be. Agnes, for instance, explained that surveys often feel as though they are conducted simply because they “need to be done”, where HR distributes the survey, employees complete it, the results are briefly reviewed, and the organisation then moves on:

It feels like HR is supposed to do surveys, then do them, and then we go through it, and then that's it. Wait for the next one. That it feels a bit unnecessary and mostly just takes time. Since it doesn't feel like anyone actually, it doesn't feel like anyone is responsible for actually making the changes. [...] It is kind of a thing that is supposed to be done, not something that will lead to anything.

This reflects the stupidity paradox, in which organisations disengage from critical reflections and challenging questions (Alvesson & Spicer, 2018). Rather than reflecting upon how the surveys can contribute to enhanced internal communication, employee wellbeing, and organisational development, they are conducted merely because they are supposed to be.

In a similar vein, Johan expressed frustration with organisations “doing things just for the sake of doing them” without the process feeling meaningful, arguing that employee surveys have significantly greater potential than what organisations currently make use of. Ingrid likewise described surveys as having substantial untapped potential, both as a mechanism for making employees feel heard and as a tool for identifying dissatisfaction within the workplace. However, in practice, she argued that surveys in her organisation had instead become more of an obligatory organisational exercise required by the trade union, than a meaningful process.

The surveys were also frequently described as an additional work task taking time away from employees' regular work. They were by some characterised as repetitive, time-consuming, annoying, or unnecessary. Surveys were also described as lengthy and competing with more urgent work tasks, suggesting that participation was often shaped by employees' workload and available time rather than motivation alone. Gustav, for instance, explained that whether he completed a survey partly depended on when it was distributed and how much work he had at the time. Short and simple surveys requiring little time and effort were generally appreciated, whereas more extensive surveys risked being postponed, ignored, or answered less thoughtfully. These accounts indicate that employee surveys can become

experienced as administrative burdens or obligations detached from employees' everyday work realities rather than meaningful opportunities for voice or organisational development.

5.3.2 The absence of acknowledgement and the reinforcement of symbolicity

A central factor reinforcing the perception of employee surveys as symbolic concerned the absence of visible follow-up and concrete action after employees had shared their views. Across the interviews, many participants described frustration over investing time and energy into surveys without later seeing any tangible outcomes, communication, or organisational change. This resonates with critiques in the Swedish public debate, where employee surveys have been described as symbolic rather than actionable (Eksvärd, 2025). Ingrid explained that when employees repeatedly provide feedback without “noticing any difference or getting anything back from it”, the process becomes more frustrating than helpful. When the same feedback and issues are repeatedly reported without follow-up, the credibility of employee surveys is expected to be undermined (Eksvärd, 2025). In line with Schou's (2007) argument, the surveys generate expectations among employees that issues will subsequently be addressed. Ingrid therefore questioned the purpose of asking employees for input if organisations fail to act upon it: “Why even ask if you are not going to do anything more concrete or follow up on it?”

When follow-up processes and feedback from the surveys are absent, ES may become merely a one-way communication process. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) emphasise the ritual perspective of communication as emerging from interaction between individuals, rather than being solely defined by the sender. On the one hand, even in the absence of follow-up processes, employee surveys may still be understood as a form of two-way communication process, as employees are invited to express their opinions and the organisation actively seeks employee input. On the other hand, when employees receive little response or opportunity for continued dialogue, the interaction becomes limited. Management is often responsible for following up on the surveys, thereby shaping and defining the communication process. In this sense, communication flows mainly from employees to the organisation without exchange of views, clarification, or discussion, which risks leading to a symbolic perception of the surveys.

Similarly, Frida described surveys as something employees complete and then forget about until the results are briefly revisited months later: “I don't really know what they do with all the statistics, if they actually do anything.” Ingrid further explained that she had

provided clear feedback regarding organisational issues she was dissatisfied with, yet experienced that nothing had happened afterwards. This created a sense that investing time and energy into responding felt futile and contributed to suspicions that the organisation did not do very much even with more concrete suggestions provided by employees. Anders similarly explained that his otherwise positive attitude towards employee surveys could quickly shift if previous opinions and concerns did not appear to have been taken seriously, causing the process to feel “just symbolic overall”. He further stated that he had “never felt that [his] opinions had ever made any difference in any employee survey”. Ronja captured this frustration succinctly by asking: “Why should I raise good things, or why should I complain, if nobody cares?” These experiences resonate with findings by Church et al. (2012), who argue that the absence of action planning following surveys evokes negative reactions among employees. The lack of follow-up thus became central to whether employee surveys were perceived as genuine voice mechanisms or merely symbolic gestures.

Another point raised is the importance of structure, accountability, and visible action plans following surveys in order to avoid them becoming symbolic “tick-box” exercises. Ronja, for example, argued that formal follow-up processes, such as creating work environment action plans based on survey results, force managers to take employee feedback more seriously rather than simply concluding that “now we have done this employee survey, it turned out like this, now we are letting it go, goodbye”.

In this regard, perceptions of symbolicity appeared closely connected to whether employees could observe that their voice led to some form of acknowledgement, discussion, or organisational response. As Apalowo and Nukpezah (2025) state, employees are more likely to speak up if voice is not only encouraged but acknowledged and acted upon. Several participants further described how the absence of follow-up affected not only their perception of surveys, but also the effort and quality of the responses they provided. Viktoria explained:

If I know that nothing is going to happen, then I don't put much energy into responding. I tick a few boxes, maybe I don't write comments because it's like, no one is going to read this anyway, so then it just becomes a product. It will be bad input from me, it will be a product that no one will benefit from. [...] But if I know that someone wants it, then I put a little extra energy into actually explaining, how I've been thinking, what do I think?

In contrast, when participants perceived that survey results were taken seriously, analysed, and acted upon, they described becoming more motivated to provide thoughtful and

constructive input. The findings therefore suggest that the experience of employee voice is not solely dependent on being given the opportunity to express opinions, but also on whether those opinions are met within the organisation. The follow-up process appears to partly determine whether surveys are perceived as meaningful or symbolic. This is supported by research indicating that by visibly acting on employee input, together with fostering inclusion and designing effective voice channels, organisations enhance employees' confidence that their contributions are meaningful (Shen & Shen, 2025).

Viktoria's description of the survey becoming merely a "product" unless someone actively engages with the responses reflects Larsson and Holmberg's (2021) argument that the surveys are standardised systems that become meaningful only when humans interpret and act upon the results. Similarly, the findings align with Apalowo and Nukpezah's (2025) argument that negative responses – or no response at all – may cause employees to withhold information, while McKee (2024) emphasises that organisational climate and leadership can enable and encourage employee voice through feedback-seeking, positive attitudes, and constructive responses. Organisational follow-up therefore appeared to influence not only perceptions of legitimacy, but also employees' willingness to actively and constructively engage in the voice process itself.

5.3.3 Survey frequency as an indicator of organisational commitment

The frequency of employee surveys also emerged as an important aspect. A dominant perception was that annual surveys were too infrequent and contributed to the feeling that organisations did not genuinely prioritise employee voice. Axel expressed this clearly:

For me, the fact that you send out an employee survey once a year, for me that's a signal on behalf of the company that 'we don't really care', because if they did, then they would have sent them out more often.

Axel further argued that if organisations genuinely cared, surveys would not only be conducted more frequently, but also be accompanied by stronger communication, reminders and encouragement to participate, better follow-up, and regular updates regarding how responses were being processed and acted upon. What he felt was missing was some form of internal signal that the organisation actually considered the employee surveys important and took them seriously:

Because to me, that's just a way of 'look, we're giving you a forum to express your opinions once a year', that's so, that's like so little. So I would say, at least once a quarter for them to be meaningful, at least. No, they need to happen more often I think for it to be considered a reasonable and effective tool. [...] Once a year feels, it doesn't feel frequent enough for it to feel genuine and important.

Correspondingly, many participants advocated quarterly or semi-annual surveys, arguing that greater continuity would make it easier to identify trends, monitor organisational development over time, and better capture employee voice. Karin described employee surveys as fresh “snapshots” of the organisation's condition at a specific moment, explaining that infrequent surveys made little sense because relatively continuous input is needed to apprehend dynamic organisational environments:

In the autumn of 2024 I marked red on so many things. I felt like shit, we were extremely stressed, so it was just red, red, red. And then in the autumn of 2025, it was green, green, green. I still feel that even though you fill it in quite often, it doesn't become the same answers.

The material also indicated that employees tend to primarily remember what they have experienced most recently, which then shapes how they respond. Lukas argued that long intervals between surveys increase the risk that problems remain unnoticed for extended periods, thereby reinforcing the perception that organisations are not genuinely listening to employees and causing surveys to feel “completely pointless”.

At the same time, participants nuanced the discussion by emphasising that frequency alone was insufficient. Karin argued that surveys should function as a complement to continuous dialogue with managers rather than replacing direct communication channels:

I think it is partly necessary to do it often and I think it is necessary that it is done as a complement to the relationship you have with your manager. That you also have one-to-one dialogues with your manager every now and then. In my case, we have it every other week, some have it once a month, some every week, so the fact that they exist is kind of the most important thing. This is truly a complement.

This suggests that ES are perceived as most meaningful when combined with ongoing dialogue and interaction, rather than functioning as stand-alone mechanisms for employee voice. This may further be connected to previous research emphasising that employee

surveys need to be combined with other forms of communication and dialogue in order to realise their value (Chef, 2008).

5.3.4 The symbolic value of being seen and heard

At the same time, the empirical material implied a more nuanced understanding of the symbolic dimension of employee surveys. While many participants criticised surveys for being symbolic in a negative or superficial sense, others described symbolicity itself as potentially valuable. They emphasised that employee surveys may carry an important symbolic meaning simply by signalling that employees matter to the organisation and that their experiences are considered worth paying attention to.

Karin, for example, argued that surveys send “a very clear signal” to employees that their input is valuable and that the organisation takes employees seriously and cares about understanding how the workplace is functioning. She described employee surveys as symbolically important because they communicate that employees’ voices matter: “It has a very symbolically important meaning in that it shows employees that ‘we care about what you think and say and feel.’”

Similarly, Agnes noted that even if surveys do not always result in visible change, employees may still appreciate that the organisation at least attempts to ask how they are doing and demonstrates that employees “mean something”. As she explained:

I still think people like being able to have their opinion heard [...] that you actually get this attention from people wondering how we are doing and how we see things, and all of that.

Anders likewise viewed surveys positively insofar as they demonstrated that organisations cared enough to ask employees for their perspectives and gain an overview of how the organisation was functioning:

That they at least care about what we have to say and want to improve the work for us and different processes, how we are doing socially, how we are doing professionally, how we are doing with the work overall. So in that sense I feel, it is very positive that they want to have an overview of how the business is going. But then the question is whether it is only symbolic or not.

These reflections illustrate how symbolicity may carry both positive and negative meanings simultaneously. The act of asking employees for their perspectives can itself hold

positive symbolic meaning. This also reflects prior research suggesting that merely asking a question about a given topic signals that there is interest and value in employees' responses (Church et al., 2012). However, this symbolic meaning may shift into a more negative form of symbolicity – organisational performance without substance – if nothing happens after the question has been posed. In such situations, there appears to be a risk of employees developing cynicism towards the process.

However, in contrast, Hugo argued that there is inherent value in employees simply feeling “seen and heard”, independently of what subsequently happens:

I perceive it as, regardless of what I think they are going to do with it, it is a chance for me to express my opinion and my attitude. [...] For employees, it can probably be important simply to feel seen and heard.

These findings therefore suggest that employee surveys may hold symbolic value in multiple senses. On the one hand, surveys risk being perceived as forms of faux voice when organisations solicit feedback without meaningfully engaging with or responding to it. On the other hand, the very act of asking employees for their perspectives may itself hold symbolic and emotional significance by making employees feel acknowledged, visible, and included within the organisation. At the same time, regardless of whether employees experience ES as symbolic or not, organisations risk missing out on valuable employee insights, which can be crucial for organisational survival. This is because employee voice behaviour is described as a key driver of sustainable organisational development, competitive advantage, and effective organisational functioning (Yang et al., 2025a; Joshi & Li, 2025; Shen & Shen, 2025).

5.4 Addressing employee survey feedback through the lens of the voice cultivation process

Employee voice in ES has been described as both being met with resistance or disregard and being acknowledged, supported, cultivated, and translated into action. Through the lens of Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) framework of the voice cultivation process, organisational responses can be understood as shaping whether employee voices are ignored, reinforced, or cultivated towards influence or potential implementation.

5.4.1 When voice meets resistance

Resistance to employee feedback emerges as a recurring theme in the material. Participants explained how questions, raised issues, or ideas have been met with skepticism, ignorance, or opposition. Karl described a situation in which colleagues raised suggestions for improvements, and management responded by arguing that such efforts were already being implemented in daily work, thereby downplaying the concern. He further mentioned that this can make employees reluctant to challenge managerial responses in group settings, especially when anonymity is perceived as important. Agnes described a similar situation in which a minority of the team expressed dissatisfaction, which she noted was met with jokes and dismissed as unlikely to be valid because the majority appeared satisfied. She explained that when raised issues are not acknowledged, this further risks negatively affecting employees' willingness to speak up:

You become less motivated to respond at all. But also somewhat frustrated with the workplace, because it is actually us employees who make the company function and keep it running, yet what we think and feel doesn't seem to matter that much in the end.

This illustrates how organisational responses perceived as dismissive may reduce employees' willingness to continue voicing concerns. As Morrison (2014, as cited in McKee, 2024) points out, voice is more likely to occur when employees are confident that their input will be acknowledged, even if it is not acted upon. Agnes's description of becoming "less motivated to respond at all" suggests that when feedback is not acknowledged, participation in employee surveys may lose its meaning. It further appears to affect organisational trust as Agnes expressed frustration that employees' opinions are not being taken seriously or seem

to matter. As Lewis (2020) notes, organisational listening constitutes a trust-building activity. When feedback is not acknowledged or acted upon, trust may gradually be undermined.

Through the lens of Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) description of resistance, Agnes's and Karl's experiences may be understood as relating to what the authors explain as opposing. Opposing occurs when employee voice is rejected in ways that communicate that the voiced concern or idea is undesirable, inappropriate, or not worthwhile. Karl and Agnes explained how the voiced concerns were met with arguments rather than an invitation to discussion. In these cases, employees' concerns seemed to be directly rejected, implying that further discussion was excluded. By framing the concerns as already addressed or denying its accuracy, the legitimacy of employees' feedback was weakened. At the same time, Agnes described how minority concerns were portrayed as less credible than the majority view. When minority voices are perceived as less credible, this may reflect what Satterstrom et al. (2021) conceptualise as avoiding, where members disengage from an idea without confronting it, instead labelling it as off-topic or low priority. In such cases, minority concerns are not engaged with but are instead set aside in favour of the majority perspective.

While avoidance can occur explicitly, the analysis further suggests that it may also occur indirectly when follow-up processes are absent. Interviewees described a lack of feedback after completing the survey. In some cases, avoidance may even occur consciously, as "many leaders and managers engage in survey efforts only to ignore the results obtained" (Church et al., 2012, p. 225). Conducting surveys creates expectations among respondents that their input will be acted upon, regardless of what is being communicated by the organisation (Schou, 2007). In case there is a lack of follow-up action and the implicit contract between the employees and the organisation gets violated, employees may not only increasingly become negative towards the survey but also towards the organisation itself (Church et al., 2012). When the follow-up process was absent, the surveys were perceived as a one-way communication process, creating a sense that responses disappear after they have been submitted. Anders described a silence after completing the survey:

I don't think I've ever gotten any feedback on any of my surveys. I get an email, I do the survey, but I never get any feedback on what's been done in the business since then or anything so it's completely silent.

This suggests that avoidance may occur indirectly, through organisational silence, which is similar to the previously discussed symbolic perception of surveys. As Lewis (2020) describes the term *faux voice*, organisations may implement feedback channels without

having a plan to act upon the results. On the other hand, organisations might act upon survey results without employees being aware of it. In this sense, even if actions are taken, surveys may still be perceived as symbolic, and employee voice may be experienced as being avoided in the absence of a communicative organisational response.

At the same time, Axel perceived it as positive that his feedback was formally received. He described that the surveys create a sense that his views are documented and give him confidence that his feedback will at least be acknowledged and not disappear unnoticed. However, as Lewis (2020) notes, organisations may appear to solicit input while not engaging with the perspectives provided, thereby legitimising the process of listening without actually doing so. This highlights a tension between perceived acknowledgement and actual organisational responsiveness. It points to how formal recognition of feedback can contribute to a sense of involvement, even in contexts where the handling of the feedback remains largely invisible. At the same time, perceptions of whether voice is acknowledged within the organisation may differ between employees. While some may perceive voice as being acknowledged simply by being heard or invited to give feedback, others may expect voice to be acted upon.

Furthermore, feedback has not only been described as being ignored or dismissed, but has also been met with active forms of resistance, where voiced concerns have led to direct negative consequences for employees. Ellen recounted an experience in which the employees could leave comments in the survey and were encouraged to specify who the sender was to enable further discussion. After raising concerns and leaving her name behind it, she experienced what she perceived as punishment in the form of being reassigned. The response she received made her regret raising her voice, Ellen mentioned:

At that moment, I felt that I should probably have stayed silent; I could have done without that survey, and it would have been better if I had not expressed that opinion in the survey.

Mulder (2014) emphasises that in surveys, anonymity is particularly important for preventing negative effects of participating, maintaining trust, and ensuring that sensitive data are handled carefully. Ellen's experience illustrates how the lack of anonymity can possibly undermine trust in employee surveys as a safe channel for expressing voice. While some participants highlighted that leaving comments can provide more nuanced and context-based answers, Ellen expanded this reasoning. Ellen emphasised that employees should not feel obligated to provide detailed information in the surveys. She argued that simply expressing

dissatisfaction should be sufficient, without feeling pressured to elaborate further. However, she believed that the main issue lies in management's handling of critique rather than the survey itself. Ellen's example can be related to Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) concept of opposing. In her case, rather than encouraging further dialogue, the organisation responded by opposing her voice, which created regret and self-censorship. Moreover, her voice was not only met with opposition but also resulted in negative repercussions for her role in the organisation, as she was reassigned.

The fear of negative consequences may shape how employees express themselves in ES or in the team discussions following the surveys. Participants described concerns that criticism could result in social tension or other repercussions. As a result, employees may moderate, soften, or withhold critical information. Ronja mentioned: "Even if you do not get fired, it can still create a negative atmosphere, and it is not very pleasant to work in that environment."

As Lewis (2020) notes, self-censorship occurs when individuals keep quiet to protect themselves. The analysis suggests that if employees perceive that expressing dissatisfaction or raising concerns may negatively affect them, they are more likely to remain silent in order to protect themselves. Furthermore, when employees consider expressing dissenting opinions, they assess whether their feedback will be perceived as constructive or lead to retaliation. Trust is therefore a crucial prerequisite for the availability and effectiveness of upward feedback (Tourish & Robson, 2004; Blalack, 1986).

This appears to be the case even when employee surveys are anonymous, as anonymity does not always seem to be trusted. When negative feedback is associated with blame, criticism, or some form of punishment, employee surveys may contribute to a culture of silence. According to a study by Brilliant Future on the culture of silence in Swedish organisations, approximately one in seven employees is afraid to raise their voice in work-related contexts (Hadjipetri Glantz, 2025). Sofie Johansson, an expert on employee surveys (2025, as cited in Hadjipetri Glantz, 2025), argues that a culture of silence means that misconduct, including financial irregularities and sexual harassment, risks never coming to light.

Axel referred to a situation at his workplace in which employees who had expressed critical opinions in an employee survey were perceived as harming the image of the department rather than contributing to constructive feedback. He explained that this shifted the focus away from the issues raised and instead towards identifying those responsible for raising them. He further noted that such accusatory responses make him less likely to answer

honestly in surveys, meaning that such responses can contribute to self-censorship. As McKee (2024) emphasises, organisations risk undermining their effectiveness or, in the worst case, their survival when critical upward feedback is neglected or suppressed. In this sense, resistance to critical feedback does not only affect employees negatively but also the organisation as a whole.

5.4.2 Cultivation of meaning

The interviewees did not solely view the surveys as a channel for expressing individual opinions, but also as a collective space for developing ideas in interaction with others. Participants described how discussions with others following surveys contribute to cultivating ideas and creating a shared understanding. Ellen described a situation where she suggested new implementations in the organisation during a follow-up discussion of the survey, where her team members were curious and asked questions to develop her ideas. At the same time, she perceived it as important that the organisation could question ideas, which she described as necessary in order not to “track away and spend time and energy on things that may have already been tested, or didn't work”. This suggests that employees do not necessarily perceive criticism or questioning as something negative. Rather, discussions following the surveys can become spaces where ideas are collectively explored and refined before being acted upon. This aligns with Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) description of developing and issue-raising practices, where ideas are developed through clarifying questions or the identification of potential weaknesses or limitations.

Hugo portrayed influence as emerging from the accumulation of shared perspectives over time, and he perceived the survey results as contributing to the development of the organisation in the long term:

I believe that my answers, along with other answers, have been positive for the organisation and also for us. [...] I feel that the answers contribute to developing the business in the long term.

This suggests that employees may perceive their contribution as meaningful not only because they lead to immediate change, but also because they become part of a broader collective process that shapes organisational development. Employee surveys themselves may not automatically create influence, rather influence appears through the social processes that follow the survey. Sanna explained:

The employee survey in itself doesn't really do anything, but if you work with it in a relevant way, hold employee review meetings, and continuously follow up on the organisation's work, then it can have an effect. Then you're basically saying: 'Okay, here we have the numbers, what do we do with these numbers?'

The concept of voice cultivation is described by Satterstrom et al. (2021) as a social process. This suggests that cultivating voices is dependent on interaction with others and cannot emerge individually. Therefore, the employee survey itself, as Sanna described, can be viewed as a starting point for collecting voice and making voices visible within the organisation. This is in line with Church et al. (1995), arguing that employee surveys should be understood as a starting point for organisational change, rather than a completed moment. As noted in the earlier analysis section, the employee survey is mainly perceived as a "temperature check" rather than a forum for expressing individual ideas. Consequently, we view the discussions following the surveys as a key condition for developing ideas further. Satterstrom et al.'s (2021) framework uses the term "ideas" to describe how voice can be cultivated and lead to implementations. We argue that voiced concerns may likewise need to be cultivated in order to identify underlying causes of issues and create a shared understanding within a team or organisation. Raised concerns may subsequently, during discussions following the survey, lead to suggestions for solutions.

At the same time, implementations might occur even when voices have not been further developed, for instance when higher management makes decisions based on the results without involving employees in discussions. However, for voices to be cultivated, follow-up discussions might be a condition. At the same time, Satterstrom et al. (2021) note that ideas raised by lower-power employees typically require approval of other individuals in more powerful roles in order to be implemented. This suggests that for ideas to emerge into implementations, discussions alone are not sufficient; approval from actors in more powerful positions may still be required.

The analysis further indicates that employee voice becomes more influential when supported collectively. Viktoria mentioned:

If someone dares to be open, then others will join in. 'Yeah, but I also thought this way' [...] then you might think that the question is strengthened a bit by more people daring to express how they have responded.

Voice frequently involves inherent risks, such as challenging the status quo or criticising managerial practices, and may be perceived as threatening to the existing order

(Detert & Burris, 2007; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014, as cited in Men et al., 2026). On the one hand, this suggests that openness from one employee can encourage others to speak more honestly. Employees may gain confidence when realising their ideas or concerns are supported by others. On the other hand, it further indicates that some employees may hesitate to voice concerns until others have spoken first, implying that voice might be dependent on whether others create a sense of legitimacy. The findings therefore point towards the relational and collective dimensions of employee voice, where ideas and concerns might evolve with others rather than solely through individual expression. Moreover, when multiple employees express similar concerns or ideas, this may increase their visibility and legitimacy within the organisation. This relates to the practice of amplifying, whereby an expressed voice does not remain with the initial speaker but is subsequently taken up by others, thereby becoming more visible (Satterstrom et al., 2021). In this sense, voice may be socially reinforced as more employees respond to it. Similarly, ES can be viewed as a starting point for expressing voice, where the organisation can potentially amplify voices by reintroducing or revisiting concerns expressed in the survey.

At the same time, the organisation's ability to develop ideas seems to be further dependent on whether employees perceive the climate to be supportive and psychologically safe. Sanna mentioned:

We try to spread a positive climate and it is also thanks to the survey that we have decided rules about how we should be with each other. That we should listen to each other, you can have different ideas, but you shouldn't offend anyone, you should be able to bring it up and try to interpret it kindly.

Ronja further emphasised smaller group discussions in enabling employees to express themselves more openly and sharing ideas with others, as she perceived smaller groups as less intimidating. This indicates that it is not enough to encourage ideas or to test them, the existing organisational climate may need to be perceived as safe for expressing ideas or concerns. Furthermore, it suggests that employees perceive voicing as vulnerable and potentially conflictual. Cultivation practices might require more than collecting or discussing ideas, employees must perceive the environment as safe and respectful to raise their voice. Morrison (2014, as cited in McKee, 2024) similarly argues that organisations should strive to create a climate in which employees feel safe expressing their voice, where they are listened to and not subject to reprisals.

5.4.3 Frictions of implementation

Employee surveys seem to contribute to new implementations within the organisation. The analysis suggests that employee voice may result in different forms of implementation, from smaller practical adjustments to broader organisational changes. Participants describe how survey results led to changed working habits such as increased communication, increased cooperation between departments, and new fields of operation in the organisation. At the same time, implementations were not always perceived as sufficient or relevant.

Linnea explained how criticism regarding inadequate workplace meetings led to substantial changes to the structure of APT meetings at the unit level, which she perceived as an improvement. She explained how suggestions on improvements evolved during smaller group discussions, which eventually resulted in adjustments to the meetings. Similarly, Frida explained how unclear responsibilities within the team led to clearer division tasks following low survey ratings regarding working structure. These examples may resemble materialising, where voiced ideas become translated into concrete actions, such as new routines, usually within the team (Satterstrom et al., 2021).

However, the analysis indicates that even though voiced ideas or concerns lead to implementations, this does not necessarily mean that employees perceive them as resolving the issue. Maria explained how employees expressed a need for further professional development in the survey, which instead resulted in book circles. She further noted that the book circle was initiated by other colleagues and was introduced to the whole organisation. As Satterstrom et al. (2021) note, piloting implies testing an idea at a broader organisational level. Although the initiative represented a response to the survey results, Maria did not perceive the implementation as addressing the original concerns:

You have a question, for example, ‘Do you feel that you are getting the professional development that you need?’ and then you might say: ‘No, I think I would need to attend more training.’ Then you get the response: ‘Yes, we will look into it in the future, but right now we don’t have the budget for it.’ And then you might think: ‘Why even ask that question?’

Advice on how to work with employee surveys published by *Arbetsliv* (2026, as cited in Hammarkrantz, 2026) argues that organisations should avoid asking questions that they are not prepared to follow up on, and instead focus on a smaller number of areas where actions can be implemented. As Apalowo and Nukpezah (2025) argue, to increase employees’ willingness to raise their voice it is not sufficient to simply encourage them to do so, their

input needs to be acted upon. This argument can be further developed by suggesting that, for employees to voice their concerns or ideas, it may not be sufficient for organisations to encourage voice and merely act upon employee feedback. Employees may also need to perceive the implementations as meaningful and connected to the concerns they originally raised. Otherwise, organisational actions or feedback-seeking may be interpreted as symbolic, which may negatively influence motivation to raise the voice in the future.

Similarly, Johan described an example in which the issue of harassment at work was addressed through workshops, which he perceived as not solving the problem and, additionally, as taking time away from regular work tasks. The initiative was introduced as a top-down decision and implemented across the entire organisation. Johan explained difficulties in questioning such decisions when they are made by senior management:

There were definitely people who questioned whether we should do these workshops, but it had already been decided somewhere further away, so there wasn't really anything our managers dared to do about it. I think it was because there were so many levels upward that it was already too late. Once something has been decided for the whole company, it becomes very difficult to avoid.

The initiative could be described as a formalised implementation as Satterstrom et al. (2021) conceptualise, which is the most extensive level of implementation, when an idea becomes institutionalised as a standard way of operating in a team or the organisation. However, the initiative appeared to miss out on stages of materialising and piloting before being formalised, meaning the ideas were not tested on a smaller scale and refined before being implemented across the entire organisation. Organisations might not always be able to “test” implementations in smaller scales before implementing them across the whole organisation.

However, Johan's experience further suggests that even though implementations are taken, employee voice might not be perceived as acknowledged if the actions are not addressing the original issue that was raised. Johan explained that he perceives the organisation as willing to listen to employees, but sometimes there is an “obvious and thoughtless handling of the answers”. Ruck (2020) emphasises an employee centric approach, viewing employees as internal stakeholders with a focus on their needs and preferences. At the same time, Johan's example highlights how hierarchical organisational structures may constrain upward communication and employee influence over implementation processes. This is in line with research suggesting that hierarchies often inhibit the upward flow of

negative information (Lewis, 2020; Pfrombeck et al., 2022; Kato et al., 2013; Tourish & Robson, 2004). Employees tend to hesitate in communicating bad news due to weak trust in the workplace, poor relationships, organisational cultural norms, or fear of retribution. Johan described how neither employees nor local managers felt able to question decisions once they had been established at higher organisational levels. Employees commonly perceive that managers will neither listen to nor act upon their feedback and therefore view speaking up as futile (Bryant & Sharer, 2021, as cited in McKee, 2024). Johan's example both points towards a frustration of misaligned organisational responses being implemented and a difficulty in changing decisions when it has been decided by higher management.

Moreover, some interviewees described examples dealing with relatively concrete or "low-hanging fruit", such as coffee during meetings or extra one-to-one meetings with the manager, when changes might be perceived as easier to implement. In contrast, more complex and structural issues such as workplace harassment or structures in the organisational culture appear to be more difficult to change despite recurring criticism. Ingrid mentioned:

There are still issues raised in the surveys that are being listened to, but perhaps it is often the low-hanging fruit that gets addressed rather than the major organisational problems.

This suggests that employee voice through ES is likely to lead to change when issues are practically defined and easy to handle. On the other hand, interviewees described how even smaller changes can influence the organisational culture in the long term.

Furthermore, survey feedback has been shown to potentially contribute to broader organisational or structural changes, extending beyond smaller practical adjustments. Hugo described how recurring survey feedback regarding a disconnect between employees and higher management contributed to an increased dialogue between senior managers and employees. According to Hugo, higher management became more present and encouraged dialogue with employees. However, the changes seem to be dependent on actors in higher positions choosing to acknowledge and act upon employee feedback. As Li et al. (2025) point out, the benefits of employee voice are not guaranteed, they depend largely on how managers interpret, process, and use the feedback that they receive.

6. Concluding discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight key results from the study in relation to existing knowledge. Theoretical contributions to the field of strategic communication are discussed. Furthermore, practical implications to organisations working with employee surveys are suggested based on the empirical material. Finally, we propose directions for future research. It is worth noting that this study does not aim to contribute to a statistical generalisation of a wider population. However, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) note, qualitative studies can contribute to an analytic generalisation, meaning that the analysis within one context can potentially contribute to guidance in other situations. This implies that the study's empirical material may be applicable in other contexts of employee voice expressed through employee surveys.

The study departed from earlier research noting that employee surveys are often insufficiently acted upon and followed up on (de Waal, 2014; Huebner & Zacher, 2021). This, despite their purpose of contributing to organisational development and serving as a channel for employee feedback (Hartley, 2001; Kraut, 2006, as cited in Huebner & Zacher, 2021). Within the field of strategic communication, employee voice holds a critical role in shaping effective organisational communication, engagement, and contribution to organisational success (Ayop & Ishak, 2023; Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2024). Moreover, employees are active communicators who interpret, formulate messages, and influence external and internal stakeholders (Simonsson & Heide, 2011). From this point of view, we considered it critical to develop a deeper understanding of how employees experience employee surveys as a means of expressing voice and having it acknowledged within their organisations. This understanding is important as it can guide the more effective and meaningful use of employee surveys. This study is built upon qualitative semi-structured interviews with 25 employees working in 24 different organisations in Sweden, focusing on their experiences of participating in employee surveys. Based on the analysis of the empirical material, we propose six factors influencing the experiences and perceptions of voicing in ES:

- Anonymity
- Psychological safety
- Follow-up practices following the surveys
- Frequency of occurrence
- Collective voice rather than individual voice
- Organisational responsiveness to employee voice

Anonymity was highlighted as enabling and facilitating expression, while simultaneously constraining the acknowledgement of voice and its potential to be acted upon. The aspect of anonymity in the surveys was perceived to play a crucial role among the participants, as it functioned as a protection against potential repercussions. It seemed to enable voices that would not otherwise have been expressed, especially regarding subjects considered as sensitive. Concerns or negative feedback is not only important for employee voice but also for organisational survival. Identifying problems or risks are noted as being essential for well-functioning organisations (Liang et al., 2019; Joshi & Li, 2025; Huang & Huangfu, 2025). In cases where anonymity was perceived as insufficiently protected, the risks related to voicing were considered higher and participants tended to withhold information or sugar-coat it. Furthermore, the analysis suggested a tension between too specific expressions and too poor information to act upon. Participants experienced fear of answers being traced back to them, leading to somewhat vague formulations which in turn risked being perceived as less actionable. Taken together, ES are suggested to be more effective when complemented by additional anonymous and dialogical voice channels, as anonymity facilitates voice, while additional channels may enhance its acknowledgement.

Psychological safety appeared to be closely connected with the perceptions of anonymity. Where employees perceived the climate as insufficiently psychologically safe, anonymity was perceived as more crucial for expressing voice. As Morrison (2014, as cited in McKee 2024) notes, employees are more likely to speak up when they are confident that their input will be acknowledged or at least not lead to negative repercussions.

Furthermore, the surveys risked to be perceived as symbolic if there was a lack of organisational response. It further negatively affected the willingness to participate in future surveys, as the input was perceived as having limited potential to influence organisational development. As Apalowo and Nukpezah (2025) point out, in order to encourage employee voice it is important that employees experience that their voices are being heard and acted upon. The perception of ES as being symbolic further negatively impacted organisational

trust, which is in line with Lewis (2020) emphasis that if feedback is not acknowledged, trust might be gradually undermined. Moreover, when surveys are conducted at long intervals, this reinforced the perception of them being symbolic, as employees experienced long waits before being able to express their opinions and that issues remained unaddressed for extended periods of time. The experienced frustration associated with having to wait to voice concerns until the next survey, however, indicates that employee surveys are perceived as an important tool for voicing. At the same time, the frequency of organisational listening influences perceptions of whether voice is acknowledged.

Moreover, the surveys were described as forums for expressing a collective voice rather than an individual one. It was explained as a “temperature check”, capturing the organisational- and employee well-being at a specific moment of time. Furthermore, the majority of voices were perceived as a momentum for change, while minority voices were not perceived as capable of such influence. In ES, the individual voice becomes transformed into standardised data and may therefore lose contextual and individual nuances. At the same time, this quantification can create legitimacy. When voice is supported by a broader collective and results are presented in “black and white” terms, they become more difficult to dismiss, thereby potentially compelling the organisation towards change.

Lastly, organisational responses influence whether employee voice is, or is not, developed. The voice may be resisted, cultivated, or lead to organisational implications. The experience of having the voice resisted seemed to induce self-sensorship among employees, as they experienced fear of receiving negative repercussions. On the other hand, even if voice is developed towards organisational implementations, the analysis suggested that implementations need to be perceived as relevant for the voice to be perceived as acknowledged. Participants experienced that survey results could lead to “wrong solutions”, not addressing or resolving their original concerns. Therefore, we suggest that simply acting on employee voice is not sufficient for it to be perceived as meaningful or relevant. At the same time, the analysis also pointed towards a hierarchical aspect. If decisions were taken by higher management, employees could fear or perceive it as difficult to challenge or question implementations. For implementations to be perceived as relevant, we therefore suggest that employees should as far as possible be integrated in the evaluation process. Relating this to the voice cultivation process (Satterstrom et al., 2021), involving employees in the follow-up process of the surveys is important, as their voices can then potentially be cultivated, increasing the probability that “right” implementations are made and that their voices are perceived as acknowledged.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

Employee surveys are in this study not merely viewed as measurement tools or feedback systems. The study highlights how employee surveys may function as organisational communication practices that shape employees' perceptions of whether their voices are encouraged, acknowledged, and capable of influencing and contributing to organisational development and change. The theoretical contributions of this study to the field of strategic communication are: (1) Developing a perspective of employee surveys as communicative processes where employee voice is negotiated, cultivated, limited, or silenced. (2) Extending the theory of the voice cultivation process by suggesting how asynchronous and anonymous forms of voicing may complicate opportunities for cultivating voice. (3) Demonstrating how employee surveys may function as opportunities for critical upward communication by constituting anonymous communication channels associated with psychological safety.

An overarching insight from the empirical material is that employee surveys should not be understood in isolation from communicative processes. In relation to the research question – *How do employees perceive employee surveys as a means of expressing and having their voice acknowledged within their organisations?* – this study suggests that perceptions of meaningful voice are closely tied to organisational follow-up and responsiveness. Therefore, it should not be understood as a one-way communication tool where employees provide voice without receiving feedback in return. The analysis suggested that voice is perceived as meaningful only when employees experience that their voice is acknowledged and acted upon. When follow-up processes are absent, surveys risk being perceived as symbolic, where employees express their voices without seeing any organisational response. When survey results are not acted upon, voice may remain at the initial stage of expression instead of potentially contributing to organisational development. The study suggests that voice is not cultivated through the survey itself, but through the communicative processes that follow. If employees repeatedly experience that survey responses do not exert any influence, there is a risk that they perceive voicing through ES as meaningless and become reluctant to participate in future surveys. This aligns with Apalowo and Nukpezah's (2025) recommendations that organisations should ensure not only the encouragement of voice but also that it is heard and acted upon. We therefore emphasise that the practice of employee surveys should be understood as a two-way process, in line with the ritual perspective of communication. As Falkheimer and Heide (2018) explain, communication emerges from the interaction between two or multiple participants, rather

than being solely defined by the sender. Consequently, this study contributes to the field of strategic communication by emphasising that employee surveys should be understood as a two-way interactional communicative practice, in which organisational response to voice is central to whether participation is perceived as meaningful and constructive.

A further central perspective derived from the study is the temporal and processual nature of voice cultivation in ES contexts. Unlike face-to-face discussions, where ideas and concerns potentially can be collectively elaborated in real-time, survey responses remain static unless they are reintroduced into dialogical settings. While Satterstrom et al. (2021) conceptualise voice cultivation as a visible and interactional process, we suggest that employee surveys introduce an indirect and asynchronous form of voicing. This complicates opportunities for cultivation practices, as employees may not witness or participate in how their input is interpreted, discussed, or developed. In this sense, we argue that employee surveys may function as an incomplete forum for voice cultivation if discussions following the surveys are absent. This, since the voice may remain at the stage of initial expression instead of collectively being developed. Furthermore, when voice is expressed anonymously and in a mediated form, organisations may be more inclined to overlook or postpone addressing issues, compared to when issues are communicated directly and interpersonally. Building on the processes of resistance by Satterstrom et al. (2021), anonymous survey results may risk remaining disconnected from dialogue. This may particularly become relevant in situations where employees raise sensitive concerns and hesitate to reinforce them with their name behind. At the same time, some issues may be perceived as too sensitive to be cultivated collectively. Concerns related to, for example harassment or violations may require contextual understandings and interpersonal dialogue, which a survey may not fully provide. Consequently, there is a risk that implementations are perceived as insufficient or misdirected.

Moreover, we highlight the central role of managers in the cultivation process. While voice cultivation is explained as a social process involving team members, managers appear to have a particular influence on whether voice gets developed or ignored. This aligns with Li et al.'s (2025) argument that employee voice does not necessarily inspire managers, instead managers' own approaches to process employee input influence whether voice becomes a resource for organisational change. At the same time McKee (2024) argues that managers' feedback-seeking behaviour is a precursor to employee voice. This perspective highlights that voice cultivation may operate differently under mediated or anonymous conditions than in

direct interpersonal interactions. For the voice to be cultivated we therefore note the importance of follow-up processes and managerial responsiveness.

Additionally, we emphasise that employee surveys have the potential to enable critical upward communication due to its anonymous aspect – which is associated with psychological safety. A sense of psychological safety enables employees to raise concerns without the fear of negative consequences, if anonymity was perceived as protected. This aligns with previous research suggesting that anonymity positively contributes to employees' willingness to raise their voice, further suggesting a correlation between anonymity and psychological safety (Liu et al., 2025). We further suggest that ES may create opportunities for expressing criticism, concerns, or opinions perceived as sensitive which employees might hesitate to communicate openly. Participants described anonymity as a key condition for expressing critical opinions, particularly as ES seemed to be the only anonymous communication channel in many of the organisations. Furthermore, Shen and Shen (2025) note that there is a positive relationship between an inclusive work environment and employees' willingness to voice concerns and ideas. We propose that anonymity may function as a compensatory communicative mechanism in organisational contexts where employees do not experience sufficient psychological safety. In such contexts, employee surveys may become particularly important for raising critical upward feedback.

In summary, following up on ES is not only beneficial for employee voice and employee wellbeing, but also for organisational function. Organisations can make use of valuable employee input from surveys – voices that might not emerge in other communicative contexts. These inputs are certainly valuable, as employee voice is widely recognised as a key driver of competitive advantage, sustainable organisational development, and effective organisational functioning (Yang et al., 2025a; Joshi & Li, 2025; Shen & Shen, 2025).

6.2 Practical implications

In this study, we found that employee surveys can function as meaningful channels for employee voice, particularly by enabling employees to express opinions and concerns that may otherwise would have remained unspoken. However, whether ES are perceived as meaningful depends largely on how organisations communicate and follow up on the survey process. Based on the empirical material, practical implications for organisations working with employee surveys are highlighted.

6.2.1 The importance of anonymity

The empirical material indicated that anonymity is a central condition for employees to feel comfortable expressing themselves honestly in the surveys. Participants described anonymity as particularly important when addressing sensitive issues such as harassment or criticism of leadership. The possibility of remaining anonymous appeared to reduce fear of negative repercussions. At the same time, the analysis demonstrated that ES are not always anonymous or might be perceived as insufficiently protected in terms of confidentiality. In smaller organisations or teams, employees described how it may still be possible to identify who submitted responses. Such perceptions appeared to influence how honestly and specifically employees formulated their answers. We therefore suggest that organisations should carefully consider how anonymity is communicated and safeguarded throughout the process, including how responses are managed and who has access to the data. Furthermore, smaller organisations should consider alternative forums for anonymous feedback. If employees perceive anonymity as only partially guaranteed, their willingness to participate honestly in surveys may decrease.

6.2.2 Employee surveys as complementary feedback channels

The study further suggests that ES are primarily perceived as feedback channels for capturing collective rather than individual voice. Furthermore, employee surveys are perceived as “temperature checks”, capturing the organisational wellbeing at a certain moment in time. They therefore appear to function more effectively for identifying broader patterns rather than addressing individual concerns in depth. Therefore, we suggest that employee surveys should not be treated as a self-contained channel for employee voice within organisations. Instead, they should be understood as a complementary communication channel that needs to co-exist with other forms of employee voicing, such as one-to-one conversations and team-meetings.

Some issues may require individual dialogue in order to understand individual concerns at a deeper level. Organisations should therefore avoid relying too much on employee surveys when attempting to understand employees' experiences, opinions, and concerns.

6.2.3 The importance of follow-up and continuity

Employee surveys risk being perceived as symbolic rather than meaningful if organisations fail to act upon the results. Participants described frustration after filling out surveys without subsequent communication or follow-up, which weakened the willingness to participate in future surveys. Moreover, long intervals between surveys may contribute to this perception. Annual surveys were by some participants described as insufficient as organisational issues and employee experiences are often dynamic and subject to change. Organisations may therefore benefit from considering more continuous feedback practices, such as shorter and more frequent surveys.

6.2.4 The role of follow-up conversations for cultivating voice

We highlight the importance of follow-up conversations after ES. While organisations may implement changes based on survey results without dialogue with employees, participants described that such implementations can be perceived as irrelevant or disconnected from the issues originally raised. Follow-up conversations appear to play an important role in further developing employee voice. Through dialogue, organisations may gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of employee feedback and ensure that potential actions correspond to employee needs. This may further strengthen employees' perceptions of their voice being acknowledged and taken seriously. Finally, we suggest that ES should not be understood as isolated measurement tools, but rather a part of a broader communicative process.

6.3 Suggestions for future research

As mentioned earlier in the study, the empirical material is based on interviews with employees in various organisations in Sweden. Furthermore, the majority of the interviewed participants worked within white-collar positions. The participants' experiences and perceptions may therefore be influenced by the existing context surrounding them. It is therefore possible that other findings would be discovered if the empirical material were collected in a non-Swedish setting or among participants in other work environments or industries. We therefore suggest conducting further studies in other national contexts and within additional industries, as employee voice in employee surveys may vary depending on organisational conditions.

Moreover, as employee voice is communicatively constructed and taking place through social and organisational interactions, future research could benefit from complementing an interview-based approach with observational studies. While interviews provide insights into employees' experiences and perceptions, observations of the follow-up discussions connected to ES could contribute to a deeper understanding of how voice is potentially resisted, cultivated, or implemented. Observational studies may develop a deeper understanding of possible interactional dynamics, power relations, or communicative practices in follow-up discussions, which influence how employee voice is handled by the organisation. Such an approach could develop an understanding beyond retrospective descriptions.

Lastly, as initially intended, developing an understanding of managers' roles in relation to ES remains a relevant area for future research. Managers are described as being responsible for interpreting, responding to, and evaluating employee survey results (Schou, 2007). Specifically, research on how follow-up and evaluation processes are organised and conducted in practice by managers could contribute to a deeper understanding of managerial listening practices that influence whether employee voice is acknowledged, further developed, or resisted within organisations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information sheet



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Information sheet

A Study of the Perception of Employee Voice in Employee Surveys

Dear participant,

We would like to invite you to participate in a master's thesis study conducted at the Department of Communication, Lund University.

This document outlines the purpose of the study and what your participation would involve. Please read it carefully to understand your rights as a participant. If you have any questions, feel free to contact us.

Thank you for considering our invitation.

Kind regards,

Emma Axelsson & Hanna Dalborg

Study objectives

The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of how employees perceive employee surveys as a means of expressing their voice and having it acknowledged within their organisations. It seeks to explore the phenomenon of upward communication and how employee surveys function as a channel through which employees can share feedback, opinions, and concerns with management.

Methodology

The data for this study will be collected through qualitative interviews with employees within various organisations. Sample questions include: Can you describe your experience of participating in employee surveys? How do you perceive employee surveys as a way for expressing your voice within your organisation? Do you consider employee surveys to be an effective tool for upwardly raising criticism within organisations?

Procedure

To achieve the aims of this study, we invite you to participate in a 45-minute interview. The interview will be conducted digitally, either via a phone call or Google Meet. The conversation will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Relevant excerpts will be included in the analysis section of the thesis.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time. Choosing not to participate or to withdraw will not affect your relationship with us or with the institution we represent, Lund University.

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality and data security

You will remain anonymous throughout the study. It will not be possible to identify you or the organisation you work for. Once the data analysis is complete, all personal details will be removed from the transcript. Both the recording and transcript will be stored electronically and protected with password security.

Conflicts of interest

This study is conducted independently. We hold no positions at Lund University other than our roles as students.

Risks and financial compensation

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. No financial compensation will be provided to you or your institution.

Appendix B: Participant consent form

Participant consent form **A Study of the Evaluation and Implementation of** **Employee Surveys**

☐ I understand that the researchers will ensure the confidentiality of my personal data and that my identity will not be identifiable to readers of this thesis.

☐ I recognise that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without consequence. I may also choose not to answer any questions or provide comments during the interview.

☐ I acknowledge that the interview will be audio-recorded and understand how the information I provide will be used during and after the study.

By signing below, I confirm that I agree to participate in this study, that I have read and understood the information sheet, and that I am aware of my rights as a participant.

.....
Place, date

.....
Hanna Dalborg
(researcher)

.....
Place, date

.....
Emma Axelsson
(researcher)

.....
Place, date

.....
(participant)

Appendix C: Interview guide

Introduction

- Introduce ourselves and the study.
- Explain that the participant will remain anonymous in the study.
- Remind the participant that the interview will be audio recorded.

Background questions

1. We will start with a few introductory questions about you: Which organisation do you work for, and what is your current role?

Experiences of employee surveys

2. What comes to mind when you hear the term employee surveys?
3. How often are employee surveys conducted in your organisation?
4. Do you know which tool or system is used for employee surveys in your organisation?
5. Who is responsible for employee surveys in your organisation? For example, is it HR or another department?
6. Can you describe your experience of participating in employee surveys?
7. How do you perceive employee surveys as a way to express your voice or opinions within the organisation?
8. How do you perceive employee surveys as a way to have your voice or opinions considered once you have expressed them within the organisation?
9. To what extent do you feel that you can answer honestly in employee surveys?
10. How important do you think anonymity in employee surveys is?
11. Do you feel that employee surveys are an effective tool for raising criticism or concerns upward in the organisation?
12. Are there any aspects of employee surveys that you perceive as particularly positive?
13. Is there anything about employee surveys, or the work surrounding them, that you believe could be improved?
14. Are there other tools, channels, or situations in the organisation that you feel work better than employee surveys for providing feedback or raising your opinions upward?
15. What is your general attitude towards employee surveys?

Questions related to the voice cultivation process

Resistance

16. Have you ever experienced that ideas or opinions you raised in employee surveys were not taken seriously, ignored, or met with resistance?

Cultivation

17. Do you have any experiences where ideas or feedback you provided in employee surveys were strengthened, developed, or supported by others in the organisation (for example by colleagues in your team or your manager) in order to gain traction?
How did that process unfold?

Implementation

18. Can you give examples of situations where ideas or feedback provided in employee surveys – by you or another employee – actually led to changes, new routines, or new ways of working within the organisation?
19. If possible, can you describe whether the change first occurred at the team level, as a pilot initiative, or whether it eventually became implemented across the whole organisation?

Closing questions

20. Is there anything you would like to add that you think is important to highlight beyond what has already been discussed during the interview?
21. Do you have any questions or reflections?

Appendix D: Overview of interviews and participant details

Pseudonym	Organisation	Gender	Age	Lenght
Maria	1	F	30	59 min
Karin	2	F	26	60 min
Ingrid	3	F	25	43 min
Sofia	4	F	25	33 min
Linnea	5	F	42	44 min
Karl	6	M	24	28 min
Johan	7	M	40	53 min
Lovisa	8	F	26	32 min
Sanna	9	F	45	54 min
Lukas	10	M	34	36 min
Sam	11	M	45	44 min
Ellen	11	F	39	54 min
Viktoria	12	F	40	39 min
Maja	13	F	26	30 min
Oskar	14	M	24	29 min
Gustav	15	M	24	41 min
Albin	16	M	26	32 min
Ronja	17	F	29	39 min
William	18	M	25	34 min
Agnes	19	F	24	29 min
Anders	20	M	26	36 min
Frida	21	F	26	25 min
Axel	22	M	32	35 min
Sara	23	F	54	23 min
Hugo	24	M	58	43 min

Appendix E: Coding sheet

Nº	Category	Code	Description	Example quote
1	Anonymity	Importance of anonymity	Participants describe anonymity as essential for expressing honest opinions and criticism freely in employee surveys.	“Employee surveys are one of the few tools where you can make everyone anonymous, which is why it is so important to do so so that people dare to express opinions that they might not dare to do with their names behind them”
2		Fear of identification	Employees experience that anonymity can be undermined where responses may still be identifiable, especially in smaller organisations.	“We're such a small organisation so then it feels like it can still be pretty easy to figure out if someone has a very different opinion who came up with that opinion, so it still ends up being that you kind of standardise your answer and put yourself in the middle with everything.”
3		Difficulty of translating anonymous opinions into actions.	Participants perceive a tension between anonymity and organisational change, where issues may require individuals to reveal themselves in order to create change.	“You can be negatively affected, it feels like, if you have too negative and wrong opinions in a workplace, so that's probably why it's anonymous, but it won't be anonymous in the end if you want change then.”
4	Employee surveys as organisational temperature checks	Organisational overview rather than individual voice	Participants distinguish between surveys being effective for identifying patterns on an organisational level, while being less effective for expressing personal concerns or creating individual change.	“Employee surveys are very good for the purpose of looking at an organisational level, but if you want to look at an individual level, I think that's wrong, or that there are other tools that are better, and then more like one-to-one conversations with the manager or more intimate discussions with your team can also be much better.”

5		Quantification and lack of context	Numerical survey formats are perceived as useful for generating measurable organisational insights, but insufficient for capturing the complexity of employee experiences.	“There are always people behind things, and I think you need more context there than just one, like one to five. It's usually not so black and white that you can just say, "Okay, the company on average prints two on this, then they must be very dissatisfied," but like this: why are they dissatisfied? Then you really have to give an explanation of why in order to change things.”
6		A majority voice required for action	Employees perceive that organisational change only occurs when many employees express the same concerns collectively.	“It feels like there has to be a whole group that responds the same way for something to happen. And it's a great way to see what the organisation thinks [...] but I don't know if it's my primary way to make a difference or change how I experience things.”
7	ES perceived as symbolic	Lack of organisational follow-up	Participants describe frustration when survey feedback does not appear to lead to concrete action, follow-up, or visible organisational change.	“When you fill out these surveys and don't really notice any difference or get anything back for it, it feels more frustrating than helpful.”
8		ES as an extra workload	Surveys are experienced as time-consuming tasks that compete with ordinary work responsibilities, especially when they are long or perceived as low value.	“First of all, it takes time away from the actual work. For the ones I've done, they're often very, very long, with lots of questions and there are also a lot of the same questions. And then I've felt a bit like, 'What are you doing with this?'. I haven't really gotten a review or anything like, 'Has it gotten better?', but now you just get the results in a PowerPoint and that's it.”

9		Reduced motivation and disengagement	Employees become less motivated to participate thoughtfully when they perceive surveys as meaningless or ineffective.	“If I know that nothing will happen, then I don't put much energy into responding, I just tick a few boxes, maybe I don't write comments like this, but no one will read this anyway, so it's just a product.”
10		Surveys as a performative action	Employee surveys are perceived as something organisations conduct to appear attentive and responsible, rather than to genuinely listen.	“To be completely honest, I think first and foremost about a tool that is used to give employees [...] something to make them feel like they are being taken seriously without necessarily being so. [...] It gives the illusion that employees have more say than they actually do”
11	The psychosocial environment influences	The relationship with the manager influences employee voice	Employees describe how trust, openness, and their relationship with their manager shape how the voice is perceived as acknowledged.	“It's very much about how your manager processes and analyses the employee surveys, so for me it's also associated with which managers I've had because the questions are recurring.”
12		Organisational culture and psychological safety	A psychologically safe and open workplace culture is described as essential for employees to feel comfortable expressing criticism, feedback, and opinions.	“There must be a safe place for dialogue [...] A workplace where you can express your opinions, where they are received, where you feel like there will be no reprimand for saying this, but that there is openness and curiosity.”
13	Resistance and negative repercussions	Fear of negative consequences	Employees express concerns that criticism may result in punishment, exclusion, damaged relationships, or career-related consequences.	“I might still have gotten the message across, but I think I would have phrased it a bit more carefully if I'd had to give my name. Because it can be sensitive to criticise your boss, since you're in a dependent position in relation to them.”

14		Regret of voicing	Describes how negative consequences or uncomfortable reactions after giving feedback can create regret about having expressed one's opinions in the survey. The code captures situations where employees feel that speaking up was not worth the risk, leading to self-censorship or reluctance to provide honest feedback in the future.	"At that moment, I remember thinking that I should have just left it alone, that I could have done without that employee survey, and that it would probably have been better if I had never expressed that opinion in the survey in the first place."
15		Self-censorship and withdrawal of voice	Employees describe withholding opinions or moderating criticism because they feel feedback will not matter or may create problems.	"They pretend to care. So that has kind of reinforced my negative image of it, and that's maybe also a reason why I don't express a hundred percent of what I think and feel in them."
16	Cultivation and reinforcement of ideas	Supportive response to ideas	Describes situations where employees experience that ideas and suggestions are welcomed, encouraged, or constructively discussed by colleagues or management.	"Many of the ideas were taken very well by the others in the group [...] and this organisation is very clear that they are extremely positive about hearing ideas."
17		Collective reinforcement of feedback	Refers to how feedback can be strengthened when multiple employees express similar concerns or support each other's ideas. Once someone dares to speak up, others often join in and reinforce the voiced idea/issue collectively.	"If someone dares to be open about how they've been thinking, then it's often the case that someone else also dares to say more, and then you might feel that the issue becomes amplified as more people dare to express how they've responded."

18		Dialogue-based development of ideas	Group discussions help employees refine, expand, and develop feedback or ideas together. Smaller discussion groups are described as creating safer spaces for participation before ideas are brought into larger forums.	“In small groups, then maybe you can say a little more about what you think, because it doesn't feel as scary as if you were presenting to 20 people.”
19	Implementation of change	Organisational changes after the survey	Refers to situations where feedback from employee surveys resulted in new routines or organisational initiatives. This includes new meetings, leadership changes, communication initiatives, or clearer work structures.	“We have workplace meetings once a month, APTs, and they had been quite inadequate. That was brought up in the employee survey, and based on the results, they were restructured quite significantly in our workplace. Which really led to a big improvement.”
20		Low-threshold implementations	Captures perceptions that organisations are more likely to implement smaller, or easily manageable changes rather than addressing deeper structural or organisational problems.	“There are still issues raised in the surveys that are being listened to, but perhaps it is often the low-hanging fruit that gets addressed rather than the major organisational problems.”
21		Leadership and follow-up as conditions for implementation	Describes how the impact of employee surveys depends on whether managers and the organisation actively follow up the results, create action plans, and integrate feedback into ongoing organisational work. Surveys alone are not perceived as sufficient to create change.	“The employee survey itself doesn't do anything, but if you work with it in a relevant way, hold employee discussions, and follow up on the organisation continuously, then it can have an effect. Because then it becomes, ‘Okay, here we have the numbers, what do we do with these numbers?’”
22		Limited or unsuccessful implementation	Describes situations where organisations introduced action plans or initiatives after survey feedback, but where employees perceived that the measures were ineffective, incomplete, or failed to address the underlying issue.	“It's more like, how annoying, because I already know from the beginning that this measure is basically a waste of time.”