

# FAST COMPANY

## How To Make Sure Your Most Outspoken Employee Doesn't Hog The Spotlight

**When you're the manager of someone who monopolizes every conversation, how do you make sure they don't ruin everyone's work life?**



[Photo: Flickr user Victor Bergmann]

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The squeaky wheel gets the oil, and sometimes the squeaky wheel is just an irritating distraction. When you're the manager and you have a squeaky wheel in your office—that person who's always eager to voice an opinion, give advice,

and monopolize a meeting—how do you make sure they don't spoil it for everyone else?

Outspoken employees can be a great asset, as they often make leaders aware of concerns or issues, and suggest solutions that others might not be comfortable expressing, says Amy Wallis, professor of organizational behavior at Wake Forest University School of Business. "They can also become allies in generating commitment to new ideas by rallying others and creating buzz about organizational initiatives," she says. "However, to leverage these benefits, leaders must partner with their more outspoken workers, and create an environment in which that individual understands the impact they are having on others."

This can create a delicate balancing act, says Derek Newberry, coauthor of *Committed Teams: Three Steps to Inspiring Passion and Performance*.

"Outspoken members of teams tend to be rewarded over their more introverted counterparts, even if they are not necessarily better performers," he says.

"Research and our experience tell us that teams make better decisions and get better results when each member is an equal contributor. Teams that are dominated by a few individuals tend to suffer from group-think."

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While you don't want to silence your vocal, energetic contributors, it's important to manage them effectively. Here are four steps for maintaining your authority while leveraging their skills.

## **ESTABLISH GROUND RULES**

Outspoken employees are least likely to be persuaded by a manager's authority. "The 'do

it because I said so' approach is likely to rub strong personality types the wrong way," says Mario Moussa, Newberry's coauthor.

Instead, teams that have outspoken members should go through a collaborative, transparent process of establishing team goals, individual roles, and the norms of collaboration. "If the outspoken employee was a contributor to this consensus-driven process, it is easier to leverage the authority of these agreed-upon standards when they get out of line," he says.

Set timelines for the amount of time someone can have the floor during a meeting, for example. "Start by saying, 'We will address this topic for 15 minutes with a five-minute maximum for each participant,'" says Kim Shepherd, CEO of the recruiting firm Decision Toolbox. "This gives a heads-up to the overall team that their time is being properly managed."

## **CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES PARTICIPATION**

Don't look at one outspoken employee as an outlier who must be managed, says Kelly Max, president, CEO and cofounder of the human resources consulting firm Haufe USA. "Encourage everyone to be outspoken by creating a workplace culture that values every employee through transparency, openness, trust, and a clear structure for refining 'outspoken' points of view into healthy ways to move the company forward," she says.

Indirectly welcome quieter employees to speak up by creating an environment of "psychological safety," where each person feels safe to take risks, challenge each other, and admit mistakes without retribution, says Newberry, who adds that there are three ways to do this:

- 1. Hold one-on-one meetings.** Have one-on-ones with individual team members

before a meeting where you will be making a big decision. "This helps them air their views in a lower-pressure environment so that it will be easier to do so in the larger group setting," says Newberry.

**2. Set communication-style guidelines.** Identify preferred communication styles to be used within the team to avoid misunderstandings. Outspoken members often jump to fill silent moments because they assume no one else has a contribution to make, for example, while introverts may assume they're being credit hogs, he says.

**3. Get out of the office.** Hold an offsite lunch, retreat, or happy hour where team members can gather to brainstorm and get to know one another. "Doing this is shown to help team members build rapport and can even make them more creative," Newberry says.

## **ACT AS A COACH**

Know that you'll have to manage this type of employee differently, says Rajeev Behera, founder and CEO of employee engagement and talent management startup Reflektive.

"Coaching is the most indirect way to establish authority without being aggressive and at odds with the employee," he says. "If you aggressively establish authority, they will disengage and feel powerless. Instead, you have to frame this issue as a prop that can be further developed into a leadership quality."

For example, encourage the employee to facilitate group discussions, Behera says. "By encouraging them to lead and facilitate group discussion, you're solving the problem of the outspoken employee overpowering meetings, without pointing out their outspoken personality as a negative," he says.

## **DON'T TOLERATE NEGATIVE**

An employee who is outspoken about negative things will bring down the morale of the entire team, cautions Behara. "Then you have to tackle that head on, and let them know how what they are saying is impacting their coworkers and the company culture," he says.

Take control of the situation with coaching, says Wallis. Outline specific examples of situations where their behavior has negatively impacted the group's progress. "It requires preparation and planning, but it can be a powerful way to help the individual see the importance of holding back sometimes, or considering the potential consequences of their behavior," she says.

"Ask the employee to suggest ways the two can work together to support the employee in expressing himself when it will help the team, and refraining from doing so when it may damage the team's success.

"When leaders give employees a voice—and they must—they accept outspoken as the start of a good conversation."