Balancing Upward and Downward Communication in Multigenerational Workplaces: An Integrative Review and a Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model

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ABSTRACT

Organizations must combine clear downward direction with upward employee voice, and the age diversity of contemporary workforces is often presented as making this balance harder to achieve. This article examines that claim through an integrative review of research on organizational communication, employee voice and silence, psychological safety, organizational justice, and generational diversity. The review covers the four cohorts that dominate today's workforce (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z), considers Generation Alpha prospectively, and sets boundaries for its central constructs: multigenerational workplace, downward and upward communication, communication balance, and communication equilibrium. Searches combined communication-direction, voice, and generation terms, supplemented by citation tracing and targeted searches of African journal platforms; sources were screened against explicit inclusion criteria, synthesized through data reduction, display, comparison, and verification, and each claim was graded as established, supported, or conjectural. Meta-analytic and consensus evidence shows that differences between generational cohorts in work attitudes are small and confounded with age and period effects. The article therefore proposes a Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model (CEM), which starts from age diversity but locates its communicative effects in five proximal sources of variation: career stage, hierarchical role, digital access, work arrangement, and cultural orientation. The model specifies one downward condition (directive clarity), two upward conditions (psychological safety and leadership responsiveness), and one bidirectional condition (channel diversity), which together sustain directional balance, a state in which decision-makers act on clear direction and accurate upward information. Five assumptions underpin the model, and equilibrium is maintained by a balancing responsiveness loop that counters a reinforcing spiral of silence. Eight propositions, with indicators, levels of analysis, and evidential status, set out a research agenda that prioritizes designs separating age, period, and cohort effects and theory built from sub-Saharan African organizations, treating their employees as agents of voice rather than deviations from Northern norms.

Keywords: multigenerational workplaces, upward and downward communication, employee voice, psychological safety, integrative review

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations now employ people whose ages span more than four decades, and practitioner discourse attributes communication friction at work to differences between Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z and, soon, Generation Alpha. The organizational stakes are not in doubt. Upward communication carries the problems, ideas, and dissent that leaders need to correct course, and its suppression has been linked to poorer learning and unreported errors (Edmondson, 1996; Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2014); downward communication carries the direction and rationale without which coordinated action fails (Miller, 2015). This

review asks how organizations can sustain both flows in age-diverse workforces, and whether generational categories are a sound basis for designing the answer.

The second question is not rhetorical. A meta-analysis found generational differences in job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intention "moderate to small, essentially zero in many cases" and concluded that interventions targeting them "may not be effective" (Costanza et al., 2012, p. 375). Most generational research cannot separate age, period, and cohort effects (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2021); a consensus report concluded that many findings attributed to generations may reflect age, experience, or changes in work (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2020); and the Pew Research Center now compares cohorts only at the same life stage (Parker, 2023). Others defend generations as "fuzzy but useful" constructs (Campbell et al., 2017). The term "multigenerational" is retained because it is the prevailing framing of the problem; the argument examines, and largely qualifies, that framing.

The review has four objectives: to set boundaries for its central constructs and identify the generational groups covered; to integrate organizational communication, employee voice, and generational diversity research through a documented integrative review; to propose the Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model (CEM), specifying its dimensions, assumptions, relationships, and equilibrium mechanisms; and to state its claims as testable propositions, with particular attention to sub-Saharan African organizations, where evidence is thinnest. The contribution is theoretical in Whetten's (1989) sense: it specifies which factors matter, how they relate, why, and under what boundary conditions. Its practical implication is a shift in design logic, from asking what each generation wants to asking what range of communicative needs a workforce contains and which conditions allow upward information to travel.

SCOPE AND KEY CONCEPTS

The central terms of this review are used loosely in practitioner and scholarly writing, so Table 1 fixes their meaning and boundaries. Two clarifications matter most. "Balance" is functional, not volumetric: it does not require equal communication in each direction. "Variation-based" refers to differences between people within a workforce, of which generational differences are the starting point; it does not refer to the frequency of communication, nor to hierarchy as such, which is one source of variation among five.

Table 1: Key Concepts, Definitions, and Boundaries

Concept	Definition used in this review	Boundary
Multigenerational workplace	A workforce spanning cohorts conventionally given two or more generational labels, whose members differ in age, career stage, and period of entry to work.	Defined by observable age composition, not assumed cohort traits; employing organizations only.
Downward communication	Direction, role and task information, rationale, feedback, and socialization from those with formal authority (Jablin, 1979; Miller, 2015).	Excludes external communication and lateral communication that does not relay direction.
Upward communication	Reporting, suggestions (promotive voice), concerns (prohibitive voice), and internal disclosure of wrongdoing (Morrison, 2014; Read, 1962).	Includes direct and representative voice; excludes exit and external whistleblowing (Hirschman, 1970).
Communication balance (directional balance)	The degree to which decision-makers act on an accurate picture of conditions because direction flows clearly downward and problem-relevant information flows upward.	Functional, not volumetric; a unit- or organization-level outcome that must hold across workforce subgroups.

Communication equilibrium	A steady state in which balance is maintained over time by feedback between upward input and leaders' responses (Katz & Kahn, 1978).	Dynamic, not consensual: dissent and bad news continue to surface.
Generational variation-based	Generational variation is the starting point, but its effects are located in the proximal sources of variation that generational labels imperfectly index.	Five sources: career stage and tenure, position and role, digital access, work arrangement, and cultural orientation.

Generational Groups Covered

The review covers Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (Table 2), using the Pew Research Center boundaries (Dimock, 2019); Dimock left the end of Generation Z open, and 2012 is used by convention. The largely retired Silent Generation is excluded, and Generation Alpha is considered only prospectively. All boundaries are conventions, not empirical breakpoints. Generational differences are examined in three steps: claims are graded by the strength of their evidence (Table 6); each study design is checked for whether it can separate cohort from age and period effects (Rudolph et al., 2021); and plausible differences are translated into the proximal source of variation that could explain them, which then enters the model.

Table 2: Generational Groups Covered by the Review

Group	Birth years	Age in 2026	Commonly attributed traits	Status of the evidence
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	62–80	Respect for hierarchy	Focus groups (Gursoy et al., 2008); not separated from age
Generation X	1965–1980	46–61	Independence; direct communication	No study separating cohort from age located
Millennials	1981–1996	30–45	Close supervision; frequent feedback	Conceptual (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010); often overstated (Deal et al., 2010)
Generation Z	1997–2012	14–29	Digital fluency; explained communication	Student samples (Seemiller & Grace, 2016); qualitative employee data (Rosnani et al., 2026)
Generation Alpha	c. 2013 onward	Under 14	None established	No workplace evidence

Note. Attributed traits are practitioner claims to be tested, not findings.

METHODOLOGY

Review Design and Philosophical Position

This is an integrative review (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) that combines empirical, conceptual, and theoretical literatures to build a new framework (Cronin & George, 2023; Post et al., 2020); in Jaakkola's (2020) terms, it combines theory synthesis with model building. A systematic review was not feasible because the question spans literatures with different vocabularies, levels of analysis, and designs that cannot be pooled (Snyder, 2019), but the review documents its search, criteria, synthesis, and grading of claims.

The review adopts a critical realist position (Fleetwood, 2005): organizations contain real mechanisms, such as feedback loops and climates of safety or fear, whose effects appear as context-dependent tendencies. Generations are therefore treated as a contested category whose causal significance is an empirical question, and the model specifies boundary conditions rather than laws. The review reasons retroductively from documented regularities to explanatory mechanisms and treats the resulting propositions as fallible conjectures. "Equilibrium" denotes a regulated steady state maintained through feedback (Katz & Kahn, 1978; von Bertalanffy, 1968), not functionalist consensus.

Search Strategy and Source Selection

Three blocks of search terms (Table 3) were combined in Google Scholar and publisher databases, followed by citation tracing from the evidential anchors. Because African evidence is under-represented in international databases, targeted searches were also run on African Journals Online and South African open-access platforms. Sources were organized in three tiers: evidential anchors, namely meta-analyses, reviews, and consensus reports (e.g., Chamberlin et al., 2017; Costanza et al., 2012; Frazier et al., 2017; Morrison, 2023; NASEM, 2020; Newman et al., 2017; Parry & Urwin, 2011); primary studies that illuminate a mechanism or extend evidence beyond North America and Europe (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Huang et al., 2005); and foundational theory cited for concepts.

Table 3: Integrative Review Protocol

Stage	Procedure
Search terms	A: "upward communication", "downward communication", "internal communication", "superior–subordinate communication". B: "employee voice", "employee silence", "speaking up", "psychological safety", "whistleblowing". C: "generational differences", "multigenerational", "age diversity", "Millennials", "Generation Z". Combined as A AND C, B AND C, and B AND Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, or South Africa.
Sources	Google Scholar; publisher databases; backward and forward citation tracing; African Journals Online; Sabinet and AOSIS journals. Last updated October 2026.
Inclusion	Peer-reviewed article, scholarly book, or consensus report; addresses communication direction, voice or silence, psychological safety, generational or age differences at work, or cultural moderation of voice; English; design reported well enough to judge the claim.
Exclusion	Trade sources as evidence (discussed only as positions); student samples as evidence about employees; theses not verified as peer-reviewed; designs unable to support the claim.
Extraction	Constructs, level of analysis, design, sample and country, principal finding, and limitations.
Synthesis and appraisal	Data reduction, display, comparison, and verification (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005); claims graded as established, supported, or conjectural.

The final corpus comprises 104 sources: 6 meta-analyses or consensus reports, 16 reviews, 35 primary studies (7 with African data), 18 conceptual works, 6 methodological sources, 21 books, and 2 Pew Research Center reports. Because selection was iterative, PRISMA screening counts are not reported.

Synthesis Procedure and Grading of Claims

Sources were coded for construct, level, design, sample, and finding; constructs were mapped across vocabularies so that upward communication, prohibitive voice, and internal whistleblowing could be compared; recurring mechanisms and contradictions were identified, and every generational claim was tested against the

age–period–cohort critique; and the CEM was developed abductively as the most parsimonious model consistent with those mechanisms, with each citation checked against its source. Claims are graded as *established* (convergent meta-analytic, review, or consensus evidence), *supported* (well-designed primary studies consistent with the wider literature but not aggregated), or *conjectural* (theoretical inferences, stated only as propositions). Table 6 grades common claims about generations, and Table 8 grades the model's propositions.

Positionality

The author is based at a Kenyan university, which motivates the attention to African contexts and carries two risks: applying North American findings uncritically, and essentializing "African" management through idealized readings of Ubuntu (Nkomo, 2011). Claims about African contexts are graded like any other.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The CEM draws on three theoretical perspectives, together with cross-cultural and Global South management scholarship, which supplies its boundary conditions (Table 4).

Table 4: Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning the CEM

Perspective	Core theories and sources	Contribution to the CEM	Model elements
Organizational communication	Open systems (Katz & Kahn, 1978; von Bertalanffy, 1968); upward distortion (Jablin, 1979; Read, 1962; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974); internal communication (Men, 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2012)	Downward and upward flows as parts of one regulated system	Directive clarity; channel diversity; directional balance; equilibrium
Employee voice	Exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970); voice and silence (Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000); psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999); collective voice (Freeman & Medoff, 1984)	Why upward information is offered or withheld	Psychological safety; leadership responsiveness; feedback loop; representative channels
Generational diversity	Mannheim (1952); lifespan development (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017); age–period–cohort critique (NASEM, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021); disparity (Harrison & Klein, 2007)	Differences enter through proximal sources; voice must be evenly distributed	Workforce variation; distributional criterion
Cross-cultural and Global South management	Power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and its critique (Jackson, 2011); cultural moderation of voice (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Huang et al., 2005; Kwon & Farndale, 2020); African management scholarship (George et al., 2016; Nkomo, 2011)	Boundary conditions; African employees as agents of voice	Moderating context

Organizational Communication Perspective

Classical management treated communication as administrative control: instructions travelled down a scalar chain, and upward communication was confined largely to reports (Fayol, 1916/1949; Miller, 2015; Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1921/1947). The Human Relations school, from the Hawthorne studies (Mayo, 1933) to Maslow (1943), McGregor (1960), and Likert (1961), recast participation as an asset. Katz and Kahn's (1978) open-systems account (von Bertalanffy, 1968) then gave communication a structural role: downward flows supply

direction, and upward flows supply the feedback through which a system detects whether its actions work. Early research found upward communication less accurate when subordinates aspired to promotion (Read, 1962) and less open when they distrusted their superior (Read, 1962; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974), evidence later consolidated by Jablin (1979). This systems view, with its evidence of upward distortion, is the theoretical root of the CEM.

Downward communication supplies strategic direction, role clarification, policy, feedback, and socialization (Miller, 2015; Shockley-Zalabak, 2016); what matters is its quality and its relation to upward flows. In a survey of 400 United States employees, transformational leadership was associated with symmetrical two-way internal communication and with leaders' use of information-rich channels (Men, 2014). Internal communication should be judged from employees' perspective (Ruck & Welch, 2012), and explanation matters: justifying a decision raises judgements of its fairness (Bies & Shapiro, 1988), and informational justice is a distinct dimension of fairness (Colquitt, 2001). Information also degrades as it is relayed, for which Shannon and Weaver's (1949) channel noise serves only as an analogy, and Tourish and Robson (2006) argue that managers discount critical feedback while subordinates withhold it, a mutual reinforcement that can commit leaders to flawed courses of action.

Employee Voice Perspective

The voice perspective begins with Hirschman's (1970) argument that members of a declining organization can exit or speak up, and that voice, unlike exit, tells the organization what is wrong; organizational behaviour research narrowed voice to discretionary communication intended to improve functioning (Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Promotive voice proposes improvements and prohibitive voice raises concerns (Liang et al., 2012), and the two have partly distinct antecedents (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Prohibitive voice is the form leaders most need and, being riskiest, the most readily suppressed; psychological safety was its strongest antecedent in a two-wave study (Liang et al., 2012).

Silence is common. Most of the 40 employees interviewed by Milliken et al. (2003) recalled not raising an important concern, citing fear of negative labels, damaged relationships, and the belief that speaking up would make no difference. Silence can become a collective property of organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), and implicit voice theories lead employees to self-censor even where explicit risks are absent (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). In hospital units, more open leadership climates were associated with more reported medication errors, which Edmondson (1996) attributed to greater willingness to report. Leaders shape these dynamics: leader openness was more consistently related to voice than transformational leadership, through psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007); managers rated challenging voice less favourably than supportive voice (Burris, 2012); and voice benefited units only when it reached leaders able to act on it (Detert et al., 2013). Whether antecedents of silence differ by age has received little direct study, so such possibilities are carried forward as propositions.

Indicators of Downward and Upward Communication

Table 5 defines observable indicators for each flow. Downward indicators also measure directive clarity; upward indicators describe the flow itself and are kept distinct from the conditions expected to produce it, so that the propositions can be tested without circularity.

Table 5: Indicators of Downward and Upward Communication

Direction	Indicator	Candidate measure or source
Downward	Role and priority clarity	Role clarity and ambiguity scale (Rizzo et al., 1970)
Downward	Explanation of decisions	Informational justice items (Colquitt, 2001)
Downward	Adequacy of information and feedback	Communication satisfaction (Downs & Hazen, 1977); employee-centred assessment (Ruck & Welch, 2012)
Downward	Two-way character of channels	Symmetrical internal communication (Men, 2014)

Upward	Promotive and prohibitive voice	Liang et al. (2012); Van Dyne & LePine (1998)
Upward	Silence and its motives	Van Dyne et al. (2003); Milliken et al. (2003)
Upward	Reach of voice to those able to act	Detert et al. (2013)
Upward	Being heard (manager–employee agreement)	Burris et al. (2013)
Upward	Use of representative channels	Channel records (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Mowbray et al., 2015)

Generational Diversity Perspective

Mannheim (1952) distinguished a shared generational location, defined by birth period, from a generation as an actuality formed through common historical experience, and expected divergent units even within one cohort. Popular designations, including Strauss and Howe's (1991) cyclical account, operate at the level of location, and cohort boundaries are conventions (Dimock, 2019).

Three bodies of evidence bear on these categories. First, cohort differences in work attitudes are small and often near zero (Costanza et al., 2012), and variation within cohorts exceeds variation between them (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Second, most designs cannot attribute differences to cohort: cross-sectional comparisons confound cohort with age, and comparisons over time confound it with period (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2021), a problem even Smola and Sutton's (2002) comparison of 1974 and 1999 data cannot fully resolve. Age itself is modestly related to job attitudes (Ng & Feldman, 2010), a lifespan perspective explains such differences more parsimoniously (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017), and the National Academies concluded that the literature cannot support inferences about generational differences (NASEM, 2020). Third, time-lag data show modest cohort change, such as rising leisure values among United States high school seniors (Twenge et al., 2010), on which basis generations are defended as imprecise but useful (Campbell et al., 2017); Twenge's (2017) trade book is cited as a position in the debate, not as workplace evidence. Evidence on generational communication preferences is weaker still: it is largely qualitative or conceptual (Gursoy et al., 2008; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), often overstated (Deal et al., 2010), or drawn from students (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Table 6 summarizes its status.

Table 6: Evidential Status of Common Claims About Generations at Work

Claim	**What the evidence shows**	**Status**
Cohorts differ substantially in work attitudes	Small, often near-zero differences (Costanza et al., 2012); larger variation within cohorts (Parry & Urwin, 2011)	Not supported
Age-group differences reflect generation	Cohort confounded with age and period (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; NASEM, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021)	Not identifiable in most studies
Some cohort-level value change has occurred	Time-lag data (Twenge et al., 2010); "fuzzy but useful" constructs (Campbell et al., 2017)	Supported, but modest and contested
Each generation has distinct channel preferences	Qualitative, conceptual, or student evidence (Gursoy et al., 2008; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Seemiller & Grace, 2016); preferences vary by message type (Men, 2014)	Conjectural
Generation-targeted interventions improve outcomes	No robust evaluations; such interventions may not be effective (Costanza et al., 2012)	Not supported

Note. Status follows the grading defined in the Methodology section.

The implication is not that age diversity is irrelevant. People of different ages differ on average in career stage, tenure, position, digital experience, and the cultures in which they learned to work; generational labels are a crude proxy for these sources, which a design framework should address directly.

SYNTHESIS: MECHANISMS OF COMMUNICATION BALANCE

The Costs of Imbalance

Where upward communication is weak, organizations decide on filtered information: employees withhold concerns from fear and futility (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2014), silence becomes a climate (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), and leaders who discount criticism reinforce the withholding (Tourish & Robson, 2006). Such an organization approximates a closed system (Katz & Kahn, 1978); double-loop learning requires challenging information to reach those who hold prevailing views (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990), and tacit knowledge becomes organizational only through channels that carry it upward (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The opposite imbalance is also costly: downward communication that lacks clarity leaves roles and priorities uncertain, and role clarity is an antecedent of psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). The evidence does not show that younger or older employees bear more of these costs, but they are likely to fall unevenly by position, tenure, and work arrangement, so communication health should be measured by subgroup rather than averaged.

Psychological Safety and Leadership Responsiveness

Psychological safety, a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, predicted learning behaviour and performance across 51 manufacturing teams (Edmondson, 1999) and is now an established predictor of information sharing, learning, and performance, with leader behaviour among its main antecedents (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017); Kahn (1990) identified it as a condition of engagement. Responsiveness is its complement: safety lowers the expected cost of speaking, and responsiveness raises its expected benefit. Because futility is a main reason for silence (Milliken et al., 2003) and voice helps only when it reaches leaders who can act (Detert et al., 2013), unanswered voice teaches that speaking up is pointless; this futility mechanism forms the CEM's feedback loop. Edmondson's (2019) practitioner framework is consistent with it but untested. These mechanisms do not depend on generation, although the samples studied are mostly North American, European, and East Asian, and employees of any age who were penalized for speaking may need more sustained evidence of responsiveness (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

Channels, Digital Platforms, and Hybrid Work

Enterprise social media make messages visible across an organization (Leonardi et al., 2013), lowering barriers to upward communication but also exposing speakers, so their effect is likely to depend on psychological safety. Remote work removed much spontaneous interaction (Kniffin et al., 2021); among more than 60,000 employees of a technology firm, firm-wide remote work made collaboration networks more static and siloed and shifted communication towards asynchronous media (Yang et al., 2022). If informal ties carry concerns upward, their loss must be replaced deliberately. Channel diversity is not channel proliferation: the question is whether every employee, given role, location, digital access, and work arrangement, has a viable and trusted route in both directions. Channels may also be representative: the employment relations tradition treats voice as collective, exercised through unions and joint consultation (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Mowbray et al., 2015), which can carry concerns individuals would not raise alone.

Culture, Power Distance, and African Organizational Contexts

Cultural context conditions these mechanisms more clearly than generation does. Power distance, the extent to which less powerful members accept unequal power (Hofstede, 2001), moderated the relationship between employees' relationship with their supervisor and their voice in the United States and Colombia (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). Across 421 units of a multinational in 24 countries, formal involvement mechanisms were related to voice in higher-power-distance cultures only where employees also perceived a participative climate (Huang et al., 2005), and culture shapes the forms and targets of voice as well as its amount (Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa is limited but growing. Among 77 officials in Kenyan county governments and oversight agencies, fear of victimization, inaction after reporting, weak trust, hierarchy, and kinship and ethnic loyalties shaped whether wrongdoing was reported (Onyango, 2021), and perceived retaliation against Kenyan public-sector whistleblowers rose with the wrongdoer's position and was predicted by management support (Mawanga, 2014). In Nigerian telecommunications firms, fear of victimization, high power distance, and high unemployment produced silence, while culturally adapted voice mechanisms were associated with better outcomes (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019). In South Africa, psychological safety mediated the link between inclusive leadership and voice among remote and hybrid employees (Mohase et al., 2025), voice climate predicted well-being among women bank employees (Choeni et al., 2025), organizational trust facilitated internal whistleblowing (Binikos, 2008), university staff tied feeling heard to their line managers (Harry, 2026), and collective voice operates through alternative forums where unions do not reach (Dibben et al., 2023). Kenyan work on generational communication remains largely desk-based (Aswani & Otiende, 2025). Accounts of Ubuntu propose that consensus-seeking shapes how disagreement is expressed (Mangaliso, 2001), consistent with evidence that group voice climate predicts individual voice (Morrison et al., 2011).

Global South Perspectives and African Agency

Treating African contexts only as places where evidence is missing would reproduce the asymmetry that postcolonial management scholarship criticizes (Nkomo, 2011). African organizations are settings from which theory can be developed, not only tested (George et al., 2016), and values-based frameworks such as Hofstede's are a blunt instrument in Africa because they overlook global dependencies and the hybrid organizations formed where indigenous, colonial, and global practices meet (Jackson, 2011). The evidence above shows African employees as agents: weighing reporting against victimization and loyalties (Onyango, 2021), using silence as a reasoned response to retaliation and unemployment rather than as deference (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019; Mawanga, 2014), and building alternative forums (Dibben et al., 2023). The CEM therefore treats cultural orientation as variation in how voice is exercised, not as a deficit; recognizes that collective and relational voice (Mangaliso, 2001) may achieve balance through channels that individual-voice models misread as silence; and calls for theory built from African evidence, with indicators adapted and validated locally.

Emerging Developments

Algorithmic aggregation of employee input could make dispersed voice more visible but belongs to a broader shift towards algorithmic control at work that provokes resistance (Kellogg et al., 2020); whether it is experienced as being heard or as surveillance is an open question. Generation Alpha reaches working age in the early 2030s on the boundaries used here; the productive preparation is not to forecast its preferences, for which there is no workplace evidence, but to build systems that respond to variation in whoever joins.

THE GENERATIONAL VARIATION-BASED COMMUNICATION EQUILIBRIUM MODEL

Status and Structure of the Model

The CEM is a conceptual model of the conditions under which a unit or organization sustains functional bidirectional communication. Consistent with critical realism, its components are context-dependent mechanisms, and it is offered for explanation, diagnosis, and design rather than prediction. It has five dimensions (Figure 1; Table 7): an *input*, workforce variation, represented through five proximal sources; *conditions*, one downward (directive clarity), two upward (psychological safety and leadership responsiveness), and one bidirectional (channel diversity); an *outcome*, directional balance with a distributional criterion; a *context* of two moderators, culture and digital mediation; and a *regulatory* feedback loop.

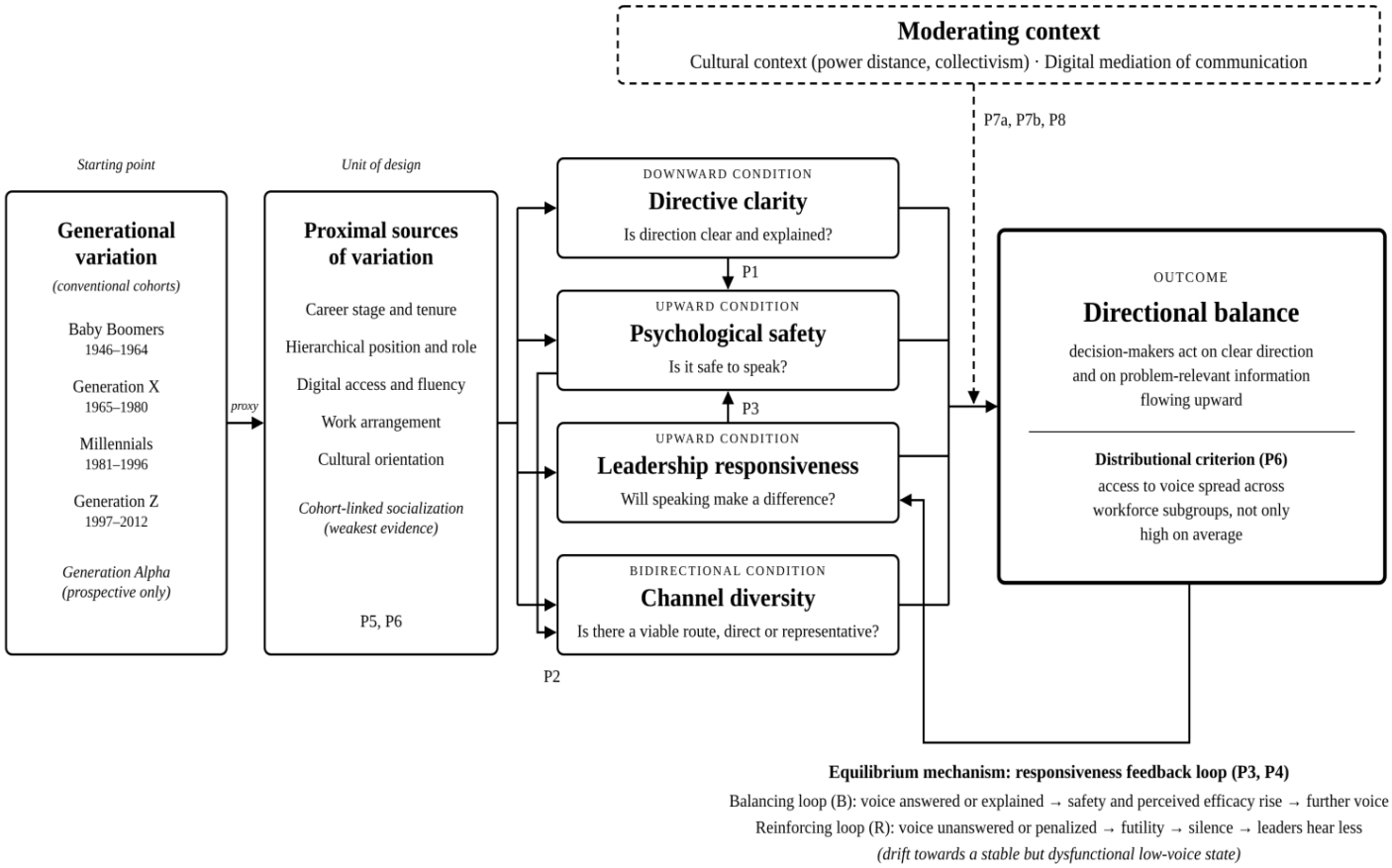


Figure 1: The Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model

Note. Cohort membership is treated as a proxy for five proximal sources of variation (P5, P6). Solid arrows denote hypothesized relationships; the dashed arrow denotes moderation by context. P1–P8 refer to Table 8. Voice that is answered or explained strengthens safety and future voice (balancing loop); unanswered voice weakens them (reinforcing loop).

Relation to Existing Models

Morrison (2011, 2014) models the decision to speak as two judgements: whether speaking up is safe and whether it will be effective. The CEM's safety and responsiveness conditions are the unit-level conditions that shape these judgements, and the model claims no novelty for the underlying mechanisms. Silence theory (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) addresses only the upward flow; integrative voice frameworks (Kaufman, 2015; Mowbray et al., 2015) treat downward communication as context; and internal communication research (Men, 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2012) rarely incorporates voice and silence. The CEM differs in four respects: it treats downward clarity and upward voice as one system (P1); explains a unit-level state rather than an individual decision; adds a distributional criterion (P6); and replaces cohorts with observable sources of variation, with culture as a boundary condition (P5, P7a, P7b).

Core Assumptions

Five assumptions underpin the model. **Assumption 1 (functional complementarity):** direction without upward information yields decisions based on a filtered picture, and upward information without direction cannot be prioritized (Katz & Kahn, 1978). **Assumption 2 (voice as a judged risk):** employees speak when they judge speaking to be safe and effective (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2014). **Assumption 3 (learned expectations):** these judgements are updated from leaders' observed responses to voice (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). **Assumption 4 (variation over typology):** communicative needs vary more within cohorts than between them and are better indexed by proximal attributes than by birth year (Costanza et al.,

2012; Rudolph et al., 2021). **Assumption 5 (context dependence):** the mechanisms are general in form but vary in strength and configuration with culture and medium (Fleetwood, 2005; Huang et al., 2005).

Core Dimensions and Components

Directional balance, the outcome, is distinct from responsiveness and implies functional rather than nominal bidirectionality: an organization may have formal upward channels that employees have learned not to use (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). *Directive clarity*, the downward condition, is the degree to which downward communication makes priorities, roles, and rationale clear; it rests on evidence that role clarity is an antecedent of psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017), that leaders using information-rich channels build two-way systems (Men, 2014), and that explanations shape fairness (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Colquitt, 2001).

Psychological safety is the shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking will not be punished (Edmondson, 1999); it determines whether channels carry candid or token communication. *Leadership responsiveness* is the degree to which leaders acknowledge input, act on it, or explain why they have not; it requires a reasoned response, not agreement. Explained non-adoption is expected to preserve fairness (Bies & Shapiro, 1988), and Indonesian fintech employees reported that explanations of why ideas could not be adopted kept them speaking up (Rosnani et al., 2026). *Channel diversity* is the range of viable formal and informal, synchronous and asynchronous, identified and anonymous, and direct and representative pathways, together with shared norms about which is authoritative for which purpose.

Table 7: Dimensions of the Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model

Dimension	Element(s)	Role in the model	Propositions
Input	Five proximal sources of variation (cohort-linked socialization as a weakly evidenced sixth)	Range of communicative needs and unequal access to voice	P5, P6
Downward condition	Directive clarity	Priorities, roles, and rationale; frames upward input	P1
Upward conditions	Psychological safety; leadership responsiveness	Lower the cost and raise the benefit of voice	P2, P3, P4
Bidirectional condition	Channel diversity	Viable routes in both directions	P2, P7b, P8
Outcome	Directional balance; distributional criterion	Accurate picture for decision-makers across all subgroups	P6
Context	Cultural context; digital mediation	Moderate the strength and configuration of relationships	P7a, P7b, P8
Regulation	Balancing and reinforcing feedback loops	Maintain or erode equilibrium over time	P3, P4

Equilibrium Mechanisms

Equilibrium is a dynamic state maintained by feedback (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Senge, 1990), governed by four mechanisms. The central one is a *balancing loop*: when leaders acknowledge, act on, or explain their response to upward information, employees' judgements of safety and efficacy are confirmed and voice continues, so new problems surface and are corrected (P3, P4). When responsiveness fails, a *reinforcing loop* takes over: unanswered or penalized voice teaches futility and fear (Milliken et al., 2003), employees withhold more, and leaders hear less and invite less (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tourish & Robson, 2006), driving the system to a stable low-voice state that additional channels alone will not reverse (P2). *Downward framing* gives employees a reference for recognizing problems and leaders a frame for prioritizing input, guarding against uncoordinated input (P1). *Distributional adjustment* recognizes that the loops can run at different strengths for different subgroups, so equilibrium requires the balancing loop to operate for each subgroup and monitoring by subgroup (P6).

Levels of Analysis and Operationalization

Voice is individual behaviour; psychological safety is a team-level belief (Edmondson, 1999); responsiveness is a property of leaders' behaviour towards a unit; directive clarity and channel diversity are properties of a unit's communication system; and directional balance is a unit-level state. Propositions linking unit conditions to individual voice are therefore cross-level (Morrison et al., 2011). Beyond the flow indicators in Table 5, safety can be measured with Edmondson's (1999) scale; responsiveness through employee reports of acknowledgement, action, and explanation and managers' endorsement of input (Burris, 2012); channel diversity through a channel inventory and its norms; and directional balance through manager–employee agreement about voice (Burris et al., 2013) or the share of decisions informed by those closest to the work. Dispersion across subgroups can be indexed with disparity measures (Harrison & Klein, 2007) and climate-strength logic (Schneider et al., 2002).

Designing for Variation Rather Than for Cohorts

Much guidance implies calibrating communication to cohort preferences (e.g., Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), but between-cohort differences are small and confounded (Costanza et al., 2012; NASEM, 2020). The CEM therefore designs for five observable sources of variation. *Career stage and tenure* affect familiarity with norms, relationships, and job security, and hence the perceived risk of voice (Ng & Feldman, 2010; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). *Hierarchical position and role* determine what information employees hold and how far it must travel. *Digital access and fluency* determine which channels are usable and vary with role and infrastructure as well as age. *Work arrangement* affects access to informal channels (Yang et al., 2022). *Cultural orientation* affects the forms voice takes (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Huang et al., 2005). Cohort-linked socialization is retained as a weakly evidenced sixth source. A unit with high average voice can still contain subgroups that rarely speak or are rarely heard, a disparity in a valued resource (Harrison & Klein, 2007) that leaves blind spots; designing for variation therefore means assessing communication health by these groups, not by generation.

Propositions

Eight propositions specify the model's relationships: direct effects (P1, P3), contingent effects (P2, P7a), the form of response that sustains the balancing loop (P4), generational versus proximal variation (P5), distribution (P6), and context (P7b, P8). Table 8 states each with its grounding, level of analysis, and evidential status.

Table 8: Propositions of the Communication Equilibrium Model: Grounding, Level of Analysis, and Evidential Status

Proposition	Principal grounding	Level	Status
P1. Directive clarity increases prohibitive voice indirectly, by strengthening role clarity and psychological safety and by providing a shared reference for recognizing problems.	Frazier et al. (2017); Liang et al. (2012); Men (2014); Colquitt (2001)	Cross-level (unit to individual)	Component links supported; full path conjectural
P2. The effect of channel diversity on upward voice is contingent on psychological safety: where safety is low, more channels carry little candid communication.	Huang et al. (2005); Detert & Burris (2007); Liang et al. (2012)	Cross-level	Supported for formal mechanisms in higher-power-distance settings; general form conjectural
P3. Leadership responsiveness increases subsequent psychological safety and voice; repeated non-response produces futility-based silence.	Milliken et al. (2003); Morrison (2011, 2014); Detert et al. (2013); Onyango (2021)	Cross-level, over time	Mechanism supported; longitudinal test needed

P4. Explained non-adoption of input sustains voice more effectively than unexplained non-response.	Bies & Shapiro (1988); Colquitt (2001); Rosnani et al. (2026)	Individual	Supported for fairness; qualitative support for voice; untested
P5. Variation in communicative needs and voice is better explained by career stage, role, digital access, work arrangement, and cultural orientation than by generation.	Costanza et al. (2012); Ng & Feldman (2010); NASEM (2020); Rudolph et al. (2021)	Individual	Established for attitudes; extension to communication conjectural
P6. For a given average level of voice, greater disparity in access to voice across subgroups lowers directional balance.	Harrison & Klein (2007); Schneider et al. (2002); Morrison et al. (2011)	Unit (dispersion)	Conjectural
P7a. In higher-power-distance contexts, formal voice mechanisms increase upward communication only where employees perceive a participative climate.	Huang et al. (2005); Botero & Van Dyne (2009)	Cross-level, cross-national	Supported
P7b. In higher-power-distance and more collective contexts, collective and representative channels carry a larger share of upward information.	Freeman & Medoff (1984); Mowbray et al. (2015); Kwon & Farndale (2020); Emelifeonwu & Valk (2019); Dibben et al. (2023)	Unit	Conjectural
P8. Remote and hybrid work reduce directional balance by weakening informal cross-boundary ties, unless compensating channels and visible responsiveness are provided.	Kniffin et al. (2021); Yang et al. (2022); Mohase et al. (2025)	Unit	Tie attrition supported; effect on balance conjectural

Note. NASEM = National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

The review makes three contributions. First, it relocates the problem of communication in age-diverse workplaces from generational types to mechanisms that are well evidenced and independent of generation, aligning organizational communication research with lifespan and variation-based approaches (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2021) while acknowledging modest cohort change (Campbell et al., 2017). Second, it integrates voice, psychological safety, justice, and internal communication research into one system with explicit assumptions, a distributional criterion, and equilibrium mechanisms, and it implies a sequencing hypothesis: channel investments will not yield candid voice until safety and responsiveness are in place (P2, P3), consistent with Huang et al. (2005). Third, it makes cultural context a boundary condition rather than a footnote and treats African and other Global South employees as agents whose collective and relational voice practices extend the model (George et al., 2016; Jackson, 2011).

Implications for Practice

The best-supported implication is to develop and assess leaders on openness, explicit invitation of input, and visible follow-through (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), closing the feedback loop and explaining decisions (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Colquitt, 2001). Organizations should audit communication health by role, location, work arrangement, and tenure rather than by generation, attending to the spread of voice as well as its average, giving particular attention to hybrid and remote staff (Yang et al., 2022), and making explicit which channel is authoritative for which purpose. Intergenerational programmes should be framed around skills rather than generational profiles (NASEM, 2020): reverse mentoring has been modelled conceptually (Murphy,

2012), and in one digital skills programme younger mentors were driven mainly by extrinsic and older learners by intrinsic motivation (Kaše et al., 2019), but effects on communication are untested. In higher-power-distance settings, formal voice mechanisms should be paired with leadership practices that build a participative climate (Huang et al., 2005), and representative channels should be evaluated locally.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As an integrative review, the study does not claim exhaustive coverage: selection was iterative, so screening counts are not reported and relevant work may have been missed, and a systematic review or meta-analysis of the relationship between age and voice would be a valuable complement. African searches were targeted rather than systematic, Kenyan university repositories and local journals were not screened, and only English-language sources were included. Several propositions are conjectural, and the strongest evidence comes from North American, European, and East Asian samples.

Future research should use designs that separate age, period, and cohort effects and should measure the proximal sources of variation rather than generational labels (Rudolph et al., 2021). The propositions require multi-level, multi-wave, and field-experimental tests, including variation in how leaders respond to input (P3, P4) and samples large enough to estimate dispersion (P6); P7a and P7b require multi-country designs that include African organizations. Most urgently, original research is needed in Kenyan and other sub-Saharan African organizations across sectors (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019; Mohase et al., 2025), treating local voice practices as sources of theory rather than departures from it (Jackson, 2011). Whether algorithmic aggregation of input is experienced as being heard or as surveillance (Kellogg et al., 2020) also requires field evidence and ethical analysis.

CONCLUSION

Balancing downward and upward communication is a structural problem with consequences for learning, error detection, and retention, and this review has argued that it is poorly framed in generational terms. Differences between generations in work attitudes are small and confounded with age and period, whereas the mechanisms that determine whether upward information reaches decision-makers, namely psychological safety, leadership responsiveness, and viable channels, are well evidenced and contingent on cultural context. The Generational Variation-Based Communication Equilibrium Model treats directional balance as a state sustained by clear direction and these upward conditions, regulated by a responsiveness loop that counters a self-reinforcing spiral of silence, and it directs design attention to the variation between people that shapes access to voice. Its propositions are offered for testing, particularly in African organizational contexts, where evidence is thinnest and from which new theory can come.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval. This article is a conceptual review of published literature. It involved no human participants, animals, or personal data, and ethical approval was therefore not required.

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