

University of Strathclyde



Department of Work, Employment and Organisation

Line managers' role in the effective implementation of voice-related HRM practices in public sector contexts. The case of public utilities in Malawi

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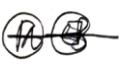
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## **DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY**

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Signed: 

Date: **17<sup>th</sup> April, 2025**

## **DEDICATION**

To my friend and grandmother, Macrina, continue being my guardian angel. Memories of you always gave me an extra drive throughout my PhD journey.

and

To my mentor, boss and friend, Dongakhulu Hlongo (ACG), herewith the thesis which you supported. I hope you can smile from above and read my appreciation for the important role you played in my PhD project and my career. Continue resting in peace, Sir.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the factors influencing line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within an organisational and national context – the African public sector. Earlier research on HRM implementation and employee voice has established the facilitative role of line managers; yet this has mostly ignored the influence of context. This thesis argues that it is also important to deepen theorisation and incorporate the multiple layers of context at the organisational, public sector and wider national level. The thesis, therefore, seeks to explore the factors, within the public sector organisations of an African context, which influence line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices. The empirical study employed a national case study methodology in which multiple sources of data were utilised. This involved semi-structured interviews with 35 line managers, senior managers and HR personnel, drawn from two Malawi public sector utility organisations. The Questerview' method was also utilised in which a questionnaire was used as part of the interviews. Additional data was drawn from organisational documents such as conditions of service, performance assessment forms, job descriptions and training plans. The findings revealed that voice opportunities in public sector organisations were limited to individualised and management-led voice channels namely, non-union grievance procedures, meetings, WhatsApp, Phone calls and written communications. These mechanisms, however, appeared to be limited by the divergent interests of management who held promotive voice intentions and employees with remedial voice intentions. With remedial intentions, employees preferred voicing individual issues outside management-led mechanisms to senior managers, HR, and unions by anonymous means. Line managers' roles in closing the 'voice gap' were shaped by an interplay of organisational, public sector and Malawi national cultural context. The thesis' primary contribution is to challenge HRM's unitary conceptualisation of employee voice while suggesting consideration of the conflicting nature of employment relationship. Second, it offers a quasi-ideal type of HRM implementation by providing a clear account of the role of line managers and that of other actors in the implementation of voice-related HRM practices. Lastly, it challenges HRM's universality of context arguments by showing the importance of multi-level national context shaping HRM implementation. The thesis also contributes to management practice through offering people management approaches in a non-western context.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The growing research interest in employee voice and how it should be facilitated in organisations emanates from its importance for organisations, employees, and the workplace in general. For employees, employee voice is important at both individual and collective level. At the individual level, the importance of employee voice can be understood through the concepts of 'promotive' and 'remedial' voice (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014; Pohler et al., 2020). Promotively, at the individual level, employees can use their voice to voluntarily support or defend worthwhile objectives of the organisation, improve deteriorating relations with supervisors or suggest improvements in the work processes, policies or programs (Dundon et al. 2004; Maynes & Podsakoff 2014). In the same promotive sense, employees can also use voice to understand what their supervisor expects them to do (Townsend, 2014). In a prohibitive or remedial sense, employees can use voice to safeguard their own interests (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Pohler et al., 2020; Harley, 2020) or preserve the status quo from potential changes (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014). For example, employees would use voice to express dissatisfaction with certain elements of their work or organisation or how they have been treated by the supervisor (Dundon et al. 2004). In this remedial sense, voice becomes a tool, as Kaufman (2020;21) argues, for '*[safeguarding]...human capital from wear, tear and exploitation*'.

At a collective employee level, the tendency has been to largely see the importance of employee voice in a remedial sense. The value of employee voice is understood in three main ways namely, asserting employees' interests, balancing managerial power and safeguarding against managerial unilateral actions (Harley 2020; Avgar et al. 2020). In asserting employees' interests, a collective force of employees, for example through unionisation, would fight for the improvement of the workplace conditions such as reduction of pay inequalities (Batt et al. 2002; Wilkinson et al. 2020). In terms of balancing managerial power, through the collective strength of employees, employee voice acts as a tool for countering the 'otherwise unfettered power of the employer' (Leat 2007). Apart from countering the excessive power of management, at a collective level, employee voice also serves the purpose of checking the unilateral actions or decisions that management undertake (Leat, 2007; Morrison, 2011; Avgar et al. 2020).

At the organisational level, the importance of employee voice is largely understood in a promotive sense. In this sense, employee voice is regarded as a tool for driving business success (Gennard & Judge 2005). The argument is that giving employees opportunities to speak up enables them to contribute towards the improvement of organisational processes and viability (Harley 2020 & Nechanska et al. 2020). Through voice, employees can suggest improvements in the existing practices and the general performance of the organisation which becomes valuable in decision making (Rees et al. 2013; Fu et al. 2017). There is also an understanding that with promotive voice culture in the organisation, productive interactions would be created between management and employees which would lead to good execution of organisational objectives as well as improvements in work organisation, productivity, and quality (Dundon et al. 2004; Leat 2007; Townsend & Mowbray 2020).

Beyond the importance at the employee and organisational level, employee voice has also been deemed important to the workplace in general. The workplace has been regarded as an important arena for participation in modern democracies in the sense that voice structures through trade unions can broaden democratic participation and give employees a greater say in their workplaces and country, at large, depending on the linkage between the firm and other governance structures (Davidov 2014; Cockburn & Preminger 2023). Employee voice, in this case, is viewed as key in modern democracies which prompts states to put in place and enforce laws and regulations which organisations need to adhere to for the thriving of employee voice (Patmore, 2020).

Despite employee voice being important at the employee, organisational and national level via the idea of democratic citizenship, support in organisations is contested. What organisations intend in terms of employees raising new ideas and those ideas being considered in decision making is not what is practised (Kochan et al. 2019 & O’Shea & Murphy 2020). The blame is often individualised towards a specific role: line managers (William and Yecalo-Tecle 2020). This narrows down the influence of the organisational and national context towards line managers’ support for voice opportunities (Nechanska et al. 2020). This thesis, therefore, seeks to unpack the influence of organisational and national context, focusing on the African public sector - to understand the different actors, factors and agency in supporting voice opportunities.

Literature on line managers’ role in facilitating employee voice comes mainly from scholars in human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB). The HRM perspective starts from a unitarist assumption and considers voice mechanisms and their

implementation as key in aligning employee and organisational objectives (Nechanska et al. 2020). The key interest here is in how the implementation of management-led voice mechanisms specifically enhance ideas from employees to improve organisational processes (Nechanska et al. 2020). Line managers are placed at the centre of this implementation process of management-led voice mechanisms through what is characterised as a devolution process (Garner 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018; Townsend & Mowbray 2020). Specifically, HR is considered crucial to employee voice based on the assumption that for line managers to operate voice related HRM practices, they rely upon HR guidance and concepts (Ibid). Emphasis has also been on the desire, capacity and opportunities of line managers, often with reference to the Ability, Motivation, Opportunity (AMO) model (Mowbray et al., 2021). Each of these elements is regarded as a constraint or enabler that may stop or support line managers facilitating employee voice (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). Organisational behaviour (OB) literature focuses on how voice opportunities can be provided in organisations by management-led voice mechanisms (LePine and Van Dyne, 2001; Fast et al. 2014; Bysted & Hansen, 2015). However, their line of departure from HRM research is their orientation to behaviours of organisational actors such as line managers (Ibid).

Albeit the existence of critical HRM and OB Literature, both HRM and OB have taken greater strides in developing the unitarist perspective to employee voice that assumes that there are common interests and shared goals between employees and managers. This unitary assumption often leads to the focus on promotive voice for organisational improvement as the main area of interest. In this perspective, line managers are supposed to espouse behaviours aimed at considering voices of employees into decision making processes (Nechanska et al. 2020; Fu et al. 2017), and the research aims at understanding why the support of promotive voice is missing.

In this thesis, note is taken of these rich research outcomes. It is argued, nevertheless, that a focus on the organisation and the workplace which allows an understanding of conflicting tensions among organisational actors, and their respective roles, is required (Nechanska et al. 2020). Line managers' role expands beyond supporting employee voice, as they have other demands to satisfy such as delivering organisational goals and more immediate outcomes. In line with the 'disconnected capitalism' thesis, for example, this would explain why sophisticated HRM systems such as high-performance work systems failed to be supported by management given the demands of meeting shareholder expectations (Thompson, 2003).

This thesis also proposes that an organisational focus on HRM practices neglects sectoral or labour process related differences. The unitary perspective also gives less depth to the broader sectoral characteristics such as institutional structures, regulations and other macro-level factors while it might be questionable that management-led mechanisms can be applied uniformly for example in the private and public sectors (Knies et al. 2018). This also holds true for the assumption that line managers' ability, motivation and opportunity would have the same impact in the public sector (*Ibid*) that is supposed to be shaped by different motivations in the first place. It is also argued that universal approaches and generalising assumptions are made based on models developed and tested in mostly Western contexts such as in Anglo-Saxon countries (Yanguas & Bukenya 2015; Bennett 2020).

In terms of the public sector, literature suggests that it differs from the private sector in ways that would potentially constrain line managers to support promotive voice. For example, the public sector is regarded as having bureaucratic structures, as compared to relatively more flexible ones in the private sector, which could deprive line managers of the autonomy in incorporating ideas from employees into decision making processes (Knies et al. 2018). These structures, along with a multiplicity of actors in the public sector are viewed as obstructing line managers to either access resources for handling voice issues or to address subordinates' voice issues in a timely manner (Alford et al. 2017). The rule-based structures are also considered as transmitting prohibitive voice behaviours to line managers since other new ideas may be regarded as contravening rules (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). Public sector organisations also have been exposed to systemic austerity measures for decades now, leading to shrinking budgets and scarcity of resources, which place line managers under increased pressure (Burke et al. 2013; Lavigna 2017).

Other research (for example, Kalleberg et al. 2006) has suggested that there are voice mechanisms that work in the private sector but would not in the public sector such as self-directed work teams. Beyond that, these scholars have found that what line managers need to have in the private sector to implement voice mechanisms differs from what line managers in the public sector need to have. The AMO model of line manager HRM implementation offers one lens through which to understand these processes. For example, motivating-enhancing practices are found to work better in the private sector because managers in the public sector are more driven by humanistic and public value goals unlike profit-oriented goals of the private (Knies et al. 2018). In other words, motivating-enhancing practices would not motivate line managers in the public sector to offer a facilitating context for promotive voice to thrive.

Similarly, private sector-based reforms aimed at ensuring that line managers offer a facilitative context to subordinates' voice are resisted in the public sector (Brown 2004; Bryson et al. 2014; Knies et al. 2018). All these arguments contrast to HRM's universality arguments and offer evidence that the public sector has unique and challenging features, different from the private sector, which would potentially limit line managers' capacity to implement voice related HRM practices.

The African national context – the specific focus of this thesis - also offers a unique macro-level context for line managers' voice facilitation, different from western national contexts. The 'catching up thesis' argues that the private sector and western ideals that shaped public sector reforms imposed on most African countries contradicted the values of most African countries that are advanced through the 'cultural uniqueness thesis' (Kuada 2006; Pitcher et al. 2009). At the same time, during the colonial time, the said African values had been co-opted by the colonising countries. Post-colonial times saw an immediate economic constraint on the then independent countries, that left no time or resources to re-evaluate and democratically assess the African-centric cultural and materialistic values, and how to reintegrate specifically in the public sector that had to deliver towards internationally set agendas and deficit goals (Mkomo 2011; Pitcher et al. 2009). In this context, the finding that managers would operate in an informal structure, the so called prebendal system, is less surprising and more related to the colonial context than to African values (Joseph 1987). Managers demonstrated a strong focus on maximising material self-interests and lacked commitment to achieving organisational objectives (Pitcher et al. 2009; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020), just as the colonising forces had. Managers in Africa were said to demonstrate authoritarian behaviours, hence working within the same mindset as the colonisers, bringing fear among employees to speak but also limiting options available to employees to raise their ideas (Kuada, 2006). The public sector in most African countries, therefore, should be characterised as having what William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020;790-805) call the structural, material and cultural factors that by necessity need to include the colonial period and question the newly achieved 'liberation'. The antecedents of the public sector in an African context would serve as a constraint for line managers to facilitate employee voice, yet this context, compared to the western counterpart, continues to be ignored in employee voice research (Wilkinson et al. 2020; McKearney et al. 2023). This thesis, therefore, intends to cover this gap through exploring factors which influence line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within the African public sector.

## Thesis summary

The thesis seeks to explore factors influencing line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within the specific African public sector and national context-Malawi public sector. This is done through exploring three main research questions related to; the nature and quality of voice-related HR practices that are adopted in the public sector organisations, ways in which line managers contribute to the implementation process of these voice-related HR practices, ways in which multiple layers of organisational, public sector and national African context influence line managers' voice facilitation. In terms of research design, the study employed a qualitative national case study approach. Two Malawi public sector utility organisations are purposively selected from the Malawi. Public utility organisations are from Malawi because it presents an African national context which has been discussed in this introduction as offering a unique macro-level context for line managers' voice facilitation, different from western national contexts such as in Anglo-Saxon countries. The public utilities in Malawi (see Chapter 5), as well, are shaped by the colonial and postcolonial legacy as well as cultural values which presents a unique context of barriers to line managers' voice facilitation. This is what explains why the study selected the organisations from the public utilities sector in Malawi. The two public utility organisations are considered to deepen the understanding of the implementation process and the contextual differences in implementing voice practices.

Multiple sources of data were utilised in the study. This included semi-structured interviews as a primary data source and a 'Questerview' method in which a questionnaire was used as part of the interviews which were conducted in the two public utility organisations. The study also made use of organisational documents such as conditions of service, performance assessment forms, job descriptions and training plans. Data analysis involved abductive coding through the Gioia et al.'s (2013) approach in which both deductive and inductive coding approaches were utilised (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The thesis findings, first, suggest that voice-related HR practices in the Malawi public sector organisations were adopted on management or unitary terms in which voicing was limited to voice channels such as grievance procedure, meetings, WhatsApp, Phone calls as well as other written means. The quality of these management-led mechanisms, however, appeared to be thwarted by the divergent interests between management who adopted voice mechanisms for

promotive intentions and employees who wanted to use employee voice to attain remedial intentions. With the remedial intentions, employees preferred voicing outside the management-led mechanisms to senior managers, HR, anonymous means, and union. The role of line managers as engineers of adaptability which was found appeared to do less to improve this ‘voice gap’ or enhance the ‘voice quality’ in terms of driving employees towards attaching importance and legitimacy in using the management-led voice mechanisms. The findings also suggest that line managers’ practice of adaptability roles was contextual in nature, shaped by the interplay of three layers of context namely, immediate organisational, public sector and Malawi national cultural context.

The thesis makes theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions. In terms of the theoretical contributions, the findings expand understanding of the nature of employee voice mechanisms in the public sector context through considering institutional and non-western contexts. It also offers insights on HRM implementation in such contexts. This includes understanding what line managers are expected to do or actually do in implementing voice mechanisms and how this role contributes towards the implementation of voice-related HR practices. Empirically, the study provides an understanding of the step-by-step stages which line managers go through in the implementation of HRM practices such as those on voice as well as the impact of non-Westernised administrative experiences on dimensions that are used in mainly Western centric approaches. These areas of contribution are further elaborated in sections 11.6, 11.7 and 11.8.

In terms of management practice, the study demonstrates how HRM implementation is undertaken in the organisations within the non-western contexts which have different financial, cultural and materialistic conditions from the western contexts. The thesis, for example, suggests higher level of prioritisation in resource allocation to line managers for HRM implementation. Furthermore, the thesis highlights the complications of managing employees in the organisations with the national context characterised by the culture of too much respect, the breadwinner expectations and humanistic ideals in which a difficult balance needs to be stricken between resource constraints and those cultural values. The thesis also offers good lessons that would inform people management related trainings for both line managers and senior managers to aid them towards not only voice facilitation but also HRM implementation, in general.

The thesis is organised in 11 chapters including this introductory chapter. The second chapter integrates and distinguishes multiple perspectives relating to the conceptualisation of employee voice in framing the analysis of the role of line managers and how it can drive employees towards utilising voice practices in view of key influences at the organisational, sectoral and national levels. Chapter 3 delves into the public sector context to uncover its unique features, different from the private sector, and how they shape HRM, employee voice and line managers' voice facilitation role. Chapter 4 analyses the African context in terms of its diversity and how it has been shaped by a mix of forces which include colonialism and the societal values presents the difficult context for employee voice, HRM and line managers' role. Chapter 5 narrows down the discussion of the African culture in Chapter 4 to the Malawi public sector, demonstrating its relevance as national context for understanding employee voice and line managers' role. Chapter 6 integrates the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 to develop the conceptual framework, objectives and research questions for the thesis. Chapter 7 provides the research design for the study, elaborating how the research questions discussed in Chapter 5 are actualised. Chapters 8 presents research findings on the nature of the adopted voice mechanisms and the perceived aims for implementation in the problem sector. Chapter 9 presents findings on the actual line managers' implementation and quality of the voice-related HRM practices. Chapter 10 presents findings on the contextual influences on line managers' practice of adaptability roles. Chapter 10 discusses the findings and interprets them in terms of how they contribute to the theoretical, empirical and methodological debates.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUALISING EMPLOYEE VOICE

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter conceptualises employee voice through framing the analysis of the role of line managers and how it can drive employees towards utilising voice practices. The chapter uses multiple perspectives in conceptualising employee voice but highlights the research's adoption of the unitary approach in the framing of the study while acknowledging the critical perspectives to this approach which are found in pluralist and radical perspectives. The chapter argues that this understanding enables the deep HRM theorisation of employee voice. Then the chapter delves into the key influences on the role of line managers in voice facilitation at the three levels of analysis namely individual line manager, organisational, sectoral and national.

### 2.2. Conceptualisation of employee voice from multiple perspectives

Scholars from different fields of study, including human resource management, organisational behaviour, industrial relations, and labour process, have taken up interest in conceptualising employee voice (Nechanska et al. 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020). These disciplinary approaches present what appears as scattered or competing strands of literature aiming at enhancing the understanding of the employment relationship, in general, and employee voice, in particular (Kwon et al. 2016; Hyman 2018; Wilkinson et al. 2021). Four frames of reference – unitary (unity and common purpose), pluralist (divergence and conflict), radical (extreme case of divergence and conflict) and hybrid (a combination of pluralist and unitarist views) – reflect these competing approaches or interests of different parties to the employment relationship and how these interests are reconciled (Heery, 2016). The sections below, discuss all four frames of reference and illustrate how they offer different ways of understanding how the opportunities for employee voice practices and the role of line managers can drive employees' decision to voice.

The unitary perspective views an organisation as a team unified by common purpose with no conflict and third parties (Lewis et al., 2003 & Heery, 2016). In other words, individuals within organisations are viewed as having common interests which are integrated and harmonious such that conflict is viewed as dysfunctional (Nechanska et al., 2020). HRM and OB largely adopt a unitarist perspective to employee voice in which emphasis is on the promotive dimension of voice (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014). HRM deals with managing people within the employer–employee relationship and involves marshalling the productive capacity of

organization's members (Stone 1995). For HRM to contribute towards the achievement of strategic aims of organisations, there has been an emergence of strategic human resource management (SHRM) as a subfield of HRM which deals with '*a concern with the ways in which HRM is critical to organizational effectiveness*' (Boxall & Purcell 2000: 84). This is viewed as a way of dealing with competing role demands and trade-offs between employee needs and organizational objectives as well as response to the diverse contextual goals such as economic and socio-political (O'Brien & Linehan 2014; Malik 2018). With this purpose, HRM researchers have taken up interest in employee voice because they see it as a central tool for organisations to achieve strategic aims (Chillas & Marks 2020). As Townsend (2014:155) argues, voice allows employees to have the productive interaction with employers which results in a better understanding of what is expected from each party and, consequently, benefits flow for either side.

Through the unitarist perspective to employee voice, HRM scholars perceive employee voice as reflecting organisational actors having shared interests and goals such that conflict is dysfunctional and anything which does not support organisational goals such as employee complaints is not regarded as voice (Farnham, 2002, Shaista et al., 2006; Boxall et al., 2008; Jiang & Messersmith, 2018; Nechanska et al. 2020). Emphasis is on employees' individual articulation of dissatisfaction or expression of support for worthwhile organisational objectives to either address an issue with management or improve deterioration in relations (Dundon et al. 2004; Maynes & Podsakoff 2014). Through HRM's managerial perspective, focus is on the management-sponsored and direct types of voice channels which are regarded as key to allowing employees to exchange knowledge and contribute towards improvements in existing practices and the general performance of the organisation (Rees et al. 2013, Fu et al. 2017 & Nechanska et al. 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020). In other words, emphasis is on how opportunities for the formalised, management-led and direct forms of voice would help support the goals of the organisations (Fu et al. 2017 & Wilkinson et al. 2020). In their formalised format, these management-led voice practices relate to being the codified, pre-arranged, and regular/concrete structures that can be distinguished through their legal bases, contractual bases and emergence from the organisational-based policies' (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978; Harlos, 2001). They also involve a dialogue between management and employees as individuals, without the mediation of representatives (Dachler & Wilpert 1978; Richardson et al. 2010; Gollan & Patmore 2013; Huang et al. 2023). These management-led voice practices involve employees voicing through channels such as meetings, written mechanisms (such as surveys, emails, grievance processes

and suggestion schemes) and downward mechanisms (such as noticeboards) (Harlos 2001; Kersley et al. 2006; Marchington & Suter 2013). To enact management-initiated voice practices, HRM scholars emphasise that organisations can rely on the important role played by line managers (Jiang & Messersmith 2018, Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Harley 2020 & Mowbray et al., 2021). These line managers are expected to consistently, with reduced discretionary behaviours, implement these management-led voice mechanisms for employees to utilise them and have voice opportunities contribute towards achieving organisational objectives (Harlos, 2001; Marchington and Suter, 2013). Researchers in HRM, to sum up, look at how the opportunities for management-led or direct voice practices and the role of line managers can help in facilitating employee voice in organisations.

OB researchers conceptualise employee voice as the prosocial or organisational citizenship behaviour which involves employees' expression of ideas for organisational improvement (Morrison 2011; Grant, 2013). With the unitary perspective, OB research, just like HRM, emphasises how voice opportunities in organisations are provided by management-led or direct voice practices with the purpose of organisational improvement (Ashford & Barton, 2007; Morrison 2011). As a prosocial behaviour and to improve organisational effectiveness, employee voice is suggested as involving employees' three voice flows, to (1) peers, (2) immediate supervisors and (3) other managers (Detert et al., 2013). However, as Detert et al., (2013) admit and as also argued by Morrison (2014), voicing to peers or outside the formally established voice structures may disrupt the organisation's harmony and prevent it from achieving positive change or improvement. Focus in OB, thus, is on understanding how organisational actors' behaviours and the psychological safety climate creates a conducive context in which employee voice contributes to organisational improvement (Leat 2007; Morrison 2011; Nechanska et al. 2020). As Huang et al. (2023) puts it, focus is on the 'group (e.g., managers' openness) and individual (e.g., prosocial motives) antecedents of workers' decision to voice'. In simple terms, OB research focuses on the behaviours of organisational actors in ensuring that opportunities for management-led voice practices are contributing towards realising organisational objectives.

The unitary perspective has been criticised on several grounds. First, the unitary perspective is questioned for being narrow and overemphasising on the availability of management-led voice practices and the perceptions of voice in organisations while ignoring the depth, breadth, and extensiveness of the arrangements of employee voice in organisations (Holland et al., 2011;

Nechanska et al., 2020, Kaufman 2020). Second, a unitarist perspective is challenged on the basis that the efficacy of management-led voice mechanisms only serves interests of management and under management's control (Marsden 2007; Gollan 2007; Van Wanrooy et al. 2013; Avgar et al. 2020) hence not about employees' means of expressing voice which can influence decision making (Olson-Buchanan, 1997; Klaas et al., 2012; Huang et al. 2023). The argument is that with the direct voice forms, employees are restricted to the expression of job-related issues rather than wider employment issues (Guest & Pecce. 2001). Lastly, a unitarist voice perspective is also criticised as being premised on what Gennard and Judge (2005;62) calls 'unsubstantiated myths' that non-unionism or individualised voice practices would drive business success. These criticisms of the unitary approach to voice lay foundation for the pluralist perspective which is discussed below.

Pluralism views an organisation as comprising sectional groups with divergent or conflicting interests which requires maintaining equilibrium under management direction to achieve common purpose (Guest & Peccei, 2001, Lewis et al., 2003; Heery, 2016; Kaufman et al. 2021). In a pluralist organisation, as mostly advanced by IR researchers, the differing interests between employees and employers suggest that employers hold the advantaged position in power and authority which requires, as argued by Kaufman et al. (2021;213), '*...[incorporation] of democratic principles of stakeholder interest representation [and] employee voice*' to check and balance power and authority for attainment of common purpose. The pluralist perspective, in this case, focuses more on the remedial dimension which deals with, *inter alia*, employees' escape from the objectionable state of affairs (Hirschman, 1970) such as poor working conditions, assertion of workers' interests (Harley, 2020; Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Pohler et al., 2020) and countering management's excessive use of power or mistreatment of employees (Leat, 2007; Morrison, 2011; Avgar et al., 2020). Voice is understood as being concerned with the collective organisation of employees with an aim of either asserting workers' interests or providing the countervailing source of power to management (Harley, 2020; Avgar et al., 2020). This involves employees demonstrating prohibitive voice behaviours which may not always be comfortable to management. For example, defensive voice relates to vocally opposing organisational changes and destructive voice, involves bad mouthing or being overly critical to organisational polices (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Johnstone, 2024). For employees to express this remedial voice, in the pluralist perspective, they mostly utilise the collective, employee-led or indirect voice forms involving mediated involvement of organisational members such as through unionisation

(Guest & Peccei. 2001; Geary & Trif, 2011; Gollan & Patmore, 2013; Pohler et al., 2020; Nechanska et al., 2020). These voice forms may either fall within organisational policies or structures such as unions and works councils or fall outside formal structures such as social media, open door policy, word of mouth and gossip (Dachler & Wilpert 1978; Harlos 2001; Klaas et al. 2012; Marchington & Suter, 2013, Huang et al., 2023). One would note that the remedial dimension of a pluralist organisation emphasises various forms of collective and indirect voice aimed at safeguarding employees' voice on wider employment issues and balance power and authority to achieve common purpose.

While the pluralist view of voice gives more emphasis on remedial dimension, the promotive dimension is not completely ignored (Guest & Peccei. 2001). In the promotive dimension, pluralist perspectives suggest that employers become more interested in emphasising direct voice forms as discussed in unitary perspectives above (Sisson, 1997). In this venture, Benson, and Brown (2010) and Alang et al. (2020) explain that organisations have tended to, for example, preoccupy the representative or indirect voice types with management-initiated activities such as welfare-based issues such that they cease representing or safeguarding the interests of employees. Indirect mechanisms, thus, are changed from being employee-initiated and serving employee interests to being management-initiated and reinforcing the power and authority of employers in a unitary sense (Marsden 2007; Van Wanrooy et al. 2013; Avgar et al. 2020). To sum up, while the pluralist perspective traditionally emphasises the remedial dimension with an orientation towards collective and representative voice forms, it also acknowledges the promotive dimension in which employers become interested in pursuing the direct, individualised, or management-led voice forms.

Beyond emphasis on the organisational level, the pluralist perspective also captures the links that exist between the workplace level voice to the different levels of external structures (Nechanska et al., 2020). The argument centres on how differences in the institutional structures in terms of social, political, economic, and legal characteristics influence the depth of voice at the workplace (Barry et al. 2014). For example, in liberal market economies such as UK and Australia, voice becomes shallower because it lacks mandated regulation than in coordinated market economies such as Germany where there is strong legal backing and voice becomes expansive (Gallie, 2011; Dobbins et al., 2017; Nechanska et al., 2020). In this sense, pluralism brings the contextual diversity in conceptualising employee voice through connecting the behaviours of organisational actors and voice practices to macro-level factors,

such as legal and labour market institutions of collective bargaining and legislation (Wilkinson et al., 2018; Nechanska et al., 2020). With these multiple levels of analysis, therefore, IR intends to capture organisational actors' behaviours, voice influence and depth, diversity of voice forms as well as how these link to the external influences (also, Williams et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2014). In other words, pluralism offers the critical perspective to the unitary conceptualisation of employee voice.

The pluralist approach to employee voice has also been criticised. The first argument relates to the emergence of what has been regarded as 'new industrial relations' which advocates for organisational approaches to voice based on single union, no strike deals or even no unions at all (Farnham 2002). Studies by Benson and Kochan et al. (2019) are some which advance this idea of new industrial relations. The emergence of new industrial relations suggests that organisations are now strategically finding individualised voice approaches as being more relevant and applicable to the competitive business environment which challenges a pluralist approach. With a conflict orientation, the pluralist perspective to voice also appears to romanticise remedial voice over promotive voice - what is good for the employee must be good for the organisation - which does not offer depth to voice and positive outcomes to the organisation (Goodman et al., 1998; Geary & Trif, 2011; Woodcock, 2017). Furthermore, though the pluralist approach promises a greater deal of attention to both direct and indirect voice forms, more attention is given to indirect voice forms at the neglect of direct or individualised forms (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016). Moreover, with strong evidence for the decline in effectiveness and use of the indirect voice forms (Kersley et al., 2006, Dundon & Gollan 2007; Kochan et al. 2019), the pluralist perspective to voice is challenged. This is regardless of the benefits to employees which these indirect voice forms promise such as increases in pay, employment security and a greater say in workplace governance (Geary & Trif, 2011). Just like unitary perspectives, pluralist IR researchers do not ascribe to the full structural contradictions between actors to the employment relationship since the idea of expansive voice in pluralism is viewed as important for achieving common purpose, despite opposing interests, in terms of positive employee and organisational outcomes (Goodman et al. 1998; Dundon & Dobbins. 2015). Lastly, the pluralist approach to voice underpins OB's individual level factors such as organisational actors' behaviours as well as HRM's emphasis on line management's involvement in voice facilitation (Nechanska et al. 2020), which are all equally important towards facilitating employee voice in organisations.

The radical frame of reference is assuming divergence of interests between actors to the employment relationship in organisations. Unlike the pluralist perspective which emphasises a '*...mix of common and opposed interests*', a radical view focuses on, '*...fully opposed/conflicting interests*' (Kaufman et al. 2021; 2012). The two opposing classes, which comprises, on the one hand, a powerful and highly paid management and, on the other hand, the low paid and dependent employee, fight to gain on top of the other at the detriment of organisational performance and hostile employment relationship (*Ibid*). The labour process theorists adopt this radical perspective in which employee voice becomes an obstruction to the attainment of positive organisational outcomes such as improved work processes (Kaufman, 2014). Employers may, therefore, put in place ways of either limiting the platforms for voice opportunities or instilling fear to voice among employees to preserve their power and authority in the employment relationship (Artus, 2013; MacMahon et al. 2018). However, the employer or manager interest to either limit or amplify opportunities for employees to have a say may depend on societal or contextual influences (Nechanska et al. 2020). For example, due to labour or legal compliance, employers may be forced to provide voice opportunities even if it goes against their will (*Ibid*). The radical perspective hence argues that voice forms at the workplace may not always produce positive outcomes in view of the tensions between actors in employment relationship, and the influence of societal and institutional forces (Chillas & Marks, 2020).

The last frame of reference is the hybrid one. This perspective criticises the radical view while combining pluralist and unitarist views of voice (Guest & Peccei 2001). A mutual gains agenda falls under this frame of reference in which emphasis is on combining both direct and indirect voice forms (Hall et al. 2010; Barnes & Macmillan 2015; Huang et al., 2016). In this perspective, thus, there is a partnership approach to employee voice where voice is regarded as a tool which employees and employers can use to attain mutual gains (Cooke 1990: 35–40, Guest and Peccei 2001; Avgar et al. 2020). In other words, the mutual gains perspective advances the idea that giving employees multiple options for employee voice through both collective and individual means, for example, would enable the attainment of mutual gains to employers and employees such as fewer grievances, improved job security or increased productivity (Cooke 1990; Kochan et al. 2019; Avgar et al. 2020). The mutual gains perspective advances the use of both direct and indirect types of voice to achieve gains for both employees and employers.

Critics of a mutual gains approach argue that it is either an employee or the organisation which benefits more than the other. In relation to voice, many studies (Marsden 2007; Geary & Trif 2011; Saridakis et al. 2020; Avgar et al. 2020) have shown inconclusive findings relating to whose purpose or interest voice opportunities serve. The ‘pessimistic thesis’ argues that employees may not derive any gains from voice opportunities (Guest & Peccei 2001 & Geary & Trif 2011 & Saridakis et al. 2020). Similarly, the ‘constrained mutuality’ thesis argues that though workers stand to benefit, potential gains are generally skewed in favour of employers (Guest & Peccei 2001; Geary & Trif 2011; Saridakis et al. 2020). This issue about who stands to receive most gains from the voice mechanisms appears to be an important factor, according to OB researchers, which motivates employees to decide whether they should utilise adopted voice practices or not (Huang et al. 2023).

From the discussion above, the present research adopts the unitary perspective to employee voice for several reasons. The first relates to the emergence of what is regarded as ‘new industrial relations’ which emphasises more cooperative employment relations in which employers and employees (or their representatives) work together to support overall organisational success (Johnstone et al., 2025). This has involved organisational approaches to voice based on single union, no strike deals or even no unions at all (Farnham 2002, Kochan et al. 2019). The idea is that organisations are now strategically finding individualised or unitarized voice approaches as being more relevant and applicable to the competitive business environment as compared to the use of purely indirect or collective voice forms (Kersley et al., 2006, Dundon & Gollan 2007; Kochan et al. 2019). The unitary approach to employee voice also provides an in-depth understanding of how voice related HR practices and the role of line managers can provide voice opportunities in organisations (Nechanska et al. 2020). In other words, it illustrates how HRM’s management-led voice practices and line management’s involvement as well as OB’s individual level factors such as organisational actors’ behaviours act as important aspects in the employee voice facilitation. Aligning with the unitary approach does not ignore the critical perspectives discussed in the pluralist and radical approaches such as the influence of macro-level forces. Some scholars (see Nechanska et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2023) have supported this consideration of contextual diversity with an argument that it enables deep HRM theorisation of employee voice. The next section, therefore, discusses the different levels of contextual analysis in terms of how they influence the nature of voice-related HRM practices and their implementation by line managers.

## **2.3. Levels of analysis in the study of employee voice**

### **2.3.1. Macro-level analysis: comparative institutional context for employee voice**

The nature of the voice-related HRM practices and the role of line managers in voice facilitation in organisations are shaped by the macro-level context. While there is no consensus on how this macro-level context should be defined (Cooke, 2018), scholars (see, Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Paauwe & Boselie, 2003; Wilkinson et al, 2020) appear to agree that for organisations to gain competitive advantage, they need to conform to the demands of the wider national institutional and cultural environments within which they operate. This suggests that HRM practices such as those relating to employee voice and how they are implemented in organisations, become the direct or indirect reflections or responses to the national institutional pressures in terms of legal structures, economic pressures, trade union structures and cultural forces (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Cristiani & Peiró, 2018; Kwon & Farndale, 2020). While there have been calls (for example, Matsunaga 2015; Kwon & Farndale 2020) for more research into how these national institutional and cultural factors influence how line managers implement voice-related HRM practices in organisations, many scholars (Wilkinson et al. 2020; McKearney et al. 2023) agree that extensive research on employee voice has largely been done in the Anglo-Saxon countries such as United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand with less known in most African countries. Despite this narrowed research, there are significant national institutional differences than similarities between these countries which also reflect on the nature of employee voice arrangements and mechanisms in organisations (Cristiani & Peiró, 2018; Wilkinson et al, 2020). This is further discussed below.

To capture the institutional differences and complementarities in terms of industrial relations, the varieties of capitalism (VoC) approach by Hall and Soskice (2001) has been applied. In this approach, capitalistic economies are clustered into either liberal market economies (LMEs) or coordinated market economies (CMEs). The LME category represents countries such as those in the Anglo-Saxon world such as the UK and Australia which rely on competitive market arrangements in the coordination of activities, unlike CMEs such as Germany which rely on non-market arrangements (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Schneider, 2021). Although Hall and Soskice (2001) do not claim that there are significant economic performance differences between countries clustered under either LMEs and CMEs, there are claimed differences in terms of legal structures, industrial relations, and union presence. Due to reliance on market coordination, LMEs are regarded as having weaker legal institutions which translate into

weaker union structures and flexible labour markets (Soskice, 1999; Hamann & Kelly, 2008). The case is different in CMEs where reliance on non-market arrangements implies that legal institutions are strong; this also supports strong union presence (Ibid). With strong employment legislation and union presence, employees may be consulted more by employers allowing greater voice in CMEs as compared to LMEs (Brewster et al 2015; Cristiani & Peiró, 2018). However, the strong power of unions and legal institutions in CMEs, as compared to LMEs, may also mean employer representatives such as line managers experience delays in decision making in the process of consulting employees or facilitating employee voice (Brewster, 1995; Barry et al, 2014)

The VoC literature enables to understand the variations across the developed Anglo-Saxon countries based on the political, economic, legal institutions as well as the historical legacies of those countries (Painter and Peters 2010; Lodge 2012; Barry et al 2014; Gottschall et al. 2015). For example, the Australian centralised conciliation and arbitration system are viewed as being influenced by historical and legal legacies and post-World War II events which led to the enactment of the supporting law in 1904 (Painter and Peters 2010). In the same vein, existing voice systems such as shop committees and joint consultative committees in the UK also have a long history (e.g., from Cadburys' establishment of the employee welfare department in 1902 (Painter and Peters 2010)). The successful adoption of NPM reforms which included devolution of HRM responsibilities to line managers and introduction of a managerially oriented set of voice structures in Anglo-Saxon countries also depended on countries' institutional structures (Stoker 2006; Pichault, F. 2007; McGuire et al. 2008; Bryson et al. 2014). The Anglo-Saxon countries which fell under LMEs with weak institutions for collective voice meant more support for reforms while under CMEs with strong institutions for collective voice meant less support for reforms (Knill 1999; Bach & Kessler 2008; Gould-Williams, 2004).

The VOC literature places emphasis on distinguishing different models of capitalism on such dimensions as economic, psychological, political and societal (Nolke & Claar, 2013; Barry et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2015). The extended strands of VoC literature consider diversity within capitalism and complementarities of institutions within not only developed economies but also within emerging economies and between developed and emerging economies (Dibben et al, 2012; Leszczyński, 2015). The idea is to provide a deep understanding of how diverse institutions interact - even outside the developed world - and evolve through social action and

political means (Morgan, 2007). Through using the extended strand of VoCs, therefore, this section provides a deeper understanding of the institutional complementarities in emerging economies and how these shape employee voice and the role of line managers.

In most African countries, the post-colonial legacy presents distinct and unique features from the Anglo-Saxon countries. Using path dependency and post-colonial theories, of course, the temptation is to generalise that the ex-colonial developing countries maintain(ed) the attributes of the colonial master (*Ibid*). In other words, if a country was colonialised by a country within the LMEs, then it is likely to maintain the nature of employment relations of that country. This argument assumes that colonialism was aimed at replicating the institutional arrangements of the colonising country on the colonised country. The comparative institutional literature (for example, Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012), however, criticises this assumption. The key issue is that after independence, most post-colonial African countries were set under immediate pressure and could not develop specific administrative, cultural and legal institutions that could offer a conducive climate for employment relations or employee voice as compared to Anglo-Saxon countries.

The legal and administrative institutions in developing African countries also significantly differ from those of Anglo-Saxon countries due to the postcolonial legacy and socio-cultural context. As previously discussed, the comparative institutional analysis suggests that the strength of legal institutions differs between LMEs and CMEs in terms of shaping voice structures in organisations. The case of developing African countries presents a unique case in which the western-based and rational bureaucratic rules which were imposed during the colonial period operate alongside the prebendal system of patronage and clientelism which are rooted in African cultural traditions and the ‘divide and conquer’ approaches of the colonial masters (Otenyo 2006; Conroy 2006; Kuada 2006; O’Flynn 2007; Dibben et al., 2017). This prebendal system implies that most African countries are faced with “administrative patrimonialism, public corruption and political capture” (Yanguas and Bukenya, 2015:138). This creates a unique institutional context for HRM and employment relations which is characterised largely by the state’s hostility to employment relations or voice structures since, borrowing from the colonial regimes, legal and administrative structures are still aimed at ‘...creating loyal followers’ (Newbury 2003:8). Employees, in this context, fear to voice their issues (Kuada, 2006).

The discussion above does not in any way suggest that developed economies do not face any economic, legal or administrative challenges that impact on employee voice or the role of line managers in voice facilitation. However, the argument is that the colonial historical experiences of most African countries made it difficult for such countries to have strong economic, legal and administrative institutions in the postcolonial era to support organisations' drive for support towards employee voice. Dibben et al (2017) provides a comparative case of Mozambique and Portugal to illustrate further how the post-colonial legacy has led to institutional challenges such as employers' inability to deliver on employees' concerns and weak enforcement of regulations. Chapter 5 in this thesis also delves into a similar postcolonial effect in Malawi which is the case for this research. To sum up, this section uses the extended strand of VoC to explain institutional complementarities in emerging economies and how these transmit influences on employee voice and the role of line managers in voice facilitation.

### **2.3.2. Organisational level analysis: employee voice and HRM**

HRM deals with the management of employment relationship as well as enabling the productivity of organisational members to contribute towards attainment of organisational objectives (Stone 1995; Boxall & Purcell 2000). HRM literature suggests that for HRM to have an effective impact on organisational performance, it calls for satisfying three main dimensions namely vertical integration, horizontal integration and effective action and implementation (Gratton & Truss, 2003). These are discussed below.

In terms of vertical integration, focus is fitting HR strategies or practices with the broader organisational objectives (Knies & Leisink, 2018). The argument is that HRM strategies can only have an effective impact on organisational performance, if it "reflects, reinforces and supports" organisational goals and objectives (Paauwe et al., 2013). HRM scholarship is, therefore, interested in employee voice because it is regarded as a tool that can reconcile employee and organisational goals, enable high performance as well as improve organisational processes and objectives (Farndale et al., 2011; Fu et al., 2017). As discussed in section 2.1, the unitarized HRM's view of employee voice acknowledges voice as an enabler of productive interactions between employees and the organisation such that each party knows what is expected and works towards achieving organisational goals (Townsend, 2014). Employee voice opportunities on their own, however, are regarded as not being adequate in realising these

employee and organisational outcomes (Harley, 2020; Mowbray et al, 2021). Instead, the voice-related HR practices need to be incorporated and fitted into a coherent system of what are called ‘HRM bundles’ to have an effective impact on desirable employee behaviours and good organisational performance (Knies & Leisink, 2018). This is the argument of the horizontal dimension of HRM impact on performance which is discussed further in the below sections.

The horizontal HRM dimension relates to a fit between HR bundles (Knies & Leisink, 2018). It is suggested that when individual HR practices are integrated into a coherent or consistent system, they transmit consistent messages to employees on the behaviours they are expected to demonstrate for the good of the organisation (Ibid). The high-performance work systems (HPWS) literature has been central in this integration of voice-related HR practices into a consistent system to realise employee and organisational outcomes (Harley, 2020). The argument is that when voice opportunities are integrated with the ability-enhancing practices such as training and motivating-enhancing HR practices such as rewards, they transmit the ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO) to employees for them to demonstrate good performance behaviours (Fu et al. 2017; Malik 2018; Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Siddique et al. 2019; Mowbray et al, 2021). While HPWS literature’s initial orientation is on how the cumulative effect of these practices can realise performance gains, Mowbray et al, (2021) advances the idea that when voice opportunities are integrated to the ability-enhancing and motivating-enhancing HR practices, they can create positive employee voice behaviours through enabling line managers’ and employees’ AMO.

In the HPWS, employee voice practices are regarded as being part of the opportunity-enhancing practices (Fu et al. 2017; Harley 2020). Through these opportunity enhancing practices, three forms of employee voice have been considered: high-autonomy jobs, work organisation into autonomous or semi-autonomous teams and direct forms of employee voice (Harley, 2020). The high-autonomy jobs and work organisation do not involve input into decisions, but the argument is that they involve shifting decision making to individual employees or teams such that employees are able to have an input into management decisions (Ibid). With the unitary focus in HRM, the nature of voice practices that are incorporated into the opportunity-enhancing practices are the direct or employer-sponsored mechanisms such as communication programmes, suggestion schemes, as well as information sharing meetings (Knoll & Redman, 2016; Nechanska et al, 2020; Harley, 2020) The role of voice practices within the opportunity-enhancing practices, therefore, is reduced to, among other things,

capturing employees' ideas or suggestions on how to make improvements and management's sharing of information about the organization's performance (Wood & Wall 2007; 1366; Budd et al. 2010; Harley 2020).

The ability-enhancing and motivating-enhancing HRM practices, within HPWS, are viewed as a critical source of competitive advantage according to the resource-based view (Do et al. 2019; Iqbal, 2019). A resource-based view advocates for creation of unique strengths and capabilities of employees as a critical internal resource based on their value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability (Rasheed et al., 2017). In HPWS, when employees are provided with training or other motivation aspects, they are turned into a critical internal resource that has adequate skills to either perform well or engage in positive voice behaviours in the case of employees or facilitate employee voice in the case of line managers (Wood & Wall 2007; Mowbray et al, 2021).

Integration of voice opportunities into the HPWS to influence voice behaviours, however, is criticised based on several grounds. First, by only considering the direct or employer-sponsored forms of voice practices, the integration of voice opportunities into HPWS ignores other voice forms including representative voice forms such as unions which may also act as options to employees for expressing their grievances or complaints to the organisation (Wilkinson et al, 2020; Harley, 2020). Second, other scholars (HPWS (for example, Wood & Wall 2007; Harley 2020) argue that the ability-enhancing and motivating-enhancing HR practices tend to substitute the opportunity-enhancing HR practices when integrated into the HPWS such that the effect on voice behaviours of the opportunity-enhancing practices which include voice practices are obscured. In other words, once organisations provide sophisticated training and other ensure motivational aspects for employees, there is a belief of having achieved the strength and capabilities of employees to contribute to organisational goals (Ibid). This involves ignoring organisational measures for employee voice since the whole essence of incorporating voice is to add value to employees, as a critical and inimitable resource, to be able to work well and contribute to organisational goals (Ibid). Lastly, integrating HR practices into HPWS has also been challenged on the basis that different practices may lead into different outcomes such that there are suggestions of organisations moving towards fragmented HRM practices (Harley et al. 2010). In a system, in other words, it becomes unclear how individual practices such as opportunity-enhancing would integrate with others to influence desirable employee outcomes such as those relating to employee voice (Messersmith et al. 2011; Boon et al. 2018). That is why other studies (for example, Harley et al., 2010) propose focusing on

voice related HRM practices on their own and not augmenting them to other practices as is the case in HPWS. In analysing the voice antecedents, for example, a study by Chamberlin and others (2017) found that the opportunity-enhancing HR practices on their own increase employee voice. This strengthens further the need to explore how the voice-related HR practices, on their own, can influence the desirable employee voice behaviours.

Apart from horizontal integration, the third dimension of HRM impact relates to action and implementation (Knies & Leisink, 2018). The argument is that when HRM policies or practices such as those on employee voice are designed, they can only produce the desirable employee or organisational outcomes if they are effectively implemented (Wright & Nishii, 2013). This brings the role of line managers in implementation which is the theme discussed in the next section 2.2.3.

### **2.3.3. The role of line managers in implementing voice mechanisms**

In applying the devolution of HR thesis, to ensure that voice related HR practices influence voice behaviours, implementation responsibilities of those practices need to be delegated to line managers (Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray, 2020). Line managers are those employees who occupy positions which represent the first level of management to whom non-managerial employees report such that they lie between top strategic managers and first level supervisors (Hay 2005; Townsend 2014). However, as Townsend (2014;156) rightly observes, a controversy in this definition lies in the fact that organisations differ in terms of what the ‘strategic apex’ and ‘operating core’ would entail which also affects the definition of who would be regarded as line managers.

The devolution of HR thesis (Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020) proposes that HR is tasked with informing line managers of the formal norms relating to what line managers should do in implementing HRM practices (Van Mierlo et al. 2018). Formal norms relate to tasks, responsibilities and expected behaviours to avoid the discretionary behaviours of line managers (Ibid). However, it is also acknowledged that managers are still, in practice, guided by their discretionary behaviours which Van Mierlo et al. (2018;3035) calls ‘*informal norms*’ in terms of what they see to be the expected behaviours within the organisation and among employees. In the roles of line managers, therefore, line managers end up having formal roles instructed by HR and other informal roles which line managers, themselves, devise and feel can help them in implementation process. There are different and varied typologies capturing these line managers’ roles which can be applicable to understanding what line

managers do or are expected to do in the implementation of voice related HRM practices (Kehoe & Han 2020). The first model to consider is the one by Floyd and Wooldrid (1992;154). In a quantitative study, these scholars developed a typology of line managers' roles, '*...in the creation of realised strategy*', consisting of '*upward influence*' and '*downward influence*' (;165). These are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Typology of line managers' implementation roles**

<b>Upward influence</b>	<b>Downward influence</b>
<p><b>Synthesizing information</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gather information on the feasibility of new programmes</li> <li>2. Communicate the activities of competitors, suppliers, etc.</li> <li>3. Assess changes in the external environment</li> </ol>	<p><b>Facilitating adaptability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relax regulations to get new projects started</li> <li>• 'Buy time' for experimental programmes</li> <li>• Locate and provide resources for trial projects</li> <li>• Provide a safe haven for experimental programmes</li> <li>• Encourage informal discussion and information sharing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Championing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Justify and define new programmes</li> <li>• Evaluate the merits of new proposals</li> <li>• Search for new opportunities</li> <li>• Propose programmes or projects to higher level managers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Implementing deliberate strategy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor activities to support top management objectives</li> <li>• Translate goals into action plans</li> <li>• Translate goals into individual objectives</li> <li>• Sell top management initiatives to subordinates</li> </ul>

Source: Floyd and Wooldridge (1992;154); Floyd and Wooldridge (1997;467)

The upward influence presented in Table 1 comprises the roles relating to providing line managers with interpretations of emerging issues and propositions on new initiatives categorised into line managers as synthesisers of information and champions for the organisations' strategic agenda (Floyd & Wooldridge 1997;467). One would note that these roles mainly relate to managers dealing with external stakeholders in communicating with suppliers and customers as well as searching for opportunities. These may not be applicable to the management of employees or facilitating that employees have voice opportunities.

The downward influence category of roles comprises roles relating to how line managers can engineer adaptability and implementation of the set strategies in the organisation (Ibid). In engineering adaptability, line managers are expected to create an environment in which new ideas are implemented, provide resources, encourage informal discussions among employees and sharing information to employees. Through implementing deliberate strategy, line managers are expected to monitor that employees are doing what is expected, translating organisational goals into action plans and employees' individual objectives as well as getting buy-in from employees in terms of organisational initiatives. These line manager roles as engineers of adaptability and implementers of deliberate strategy enable one to understand what line managers do in implementing strategies such as those relating to HRM within the organisation. For example, Harney and Yi Lee (2022) redefined and applied these downward influence roles to line managers' implementation of performance management. Similarly, one would apply these roles to the understanding of what line managers do in implementing voice related HRM practices. In this application, borrowing from Harney and Yi Lee (2022), these roles can be categorised into three types: conduit, adaptability, and translator roles. This categorisation of line managers' role is chosen because, as will be demonstrated below, it offers not only an account of the set of interventions which line managers engage in to implement HR practices as intended but also points to the context or influences within which line managers undertake these roles (Harney & Yi Lee, 2022)

The roles of line managers as 'conduits' of voice related HRM practices are defined as official roles which line managers undertake to ensure uniformity, compliance, and consistency (Harney & Yi Lee 2022). These comprise roles which Floyd and Wooldrid (1992) regard as falling under 'implementing deliberate strategy' (Ibid). The assumption is that there is clarity and consensus in the messages which HR transmits to line managers on what the intended voice practices are and how they should be implemented (Ibid). In other words, line managers are viewed as 'robotic conformists' who would be able to implement exactly the voice related HRM practices in the ways intended or instructed by HR as specialists (Townsend & Mowbray 2020). Another assumption is that there would be adequate support from the organisation in terms of what Van Mierlo et al. (2018;3035) calls '*allocative facilities*' such as money and other resources for line managers to implement exactly the voice practices as intended.

A second category of roles relates to engineering adaptability. This comprises roles which Floyd and Wooldrid (1992) regard as falling under 'facilitating adaptability as per table 1 above. These roles emphasise relaxing regulations and encouraging informal discussions apart

from providing resources. These roles emphasise that line managers are not always robotic conformists but that, through emergent leadership and ongoing negotiation, they may introduce their own interventions to implement voice mechanisms to secure informal cooperation from employees (Harney & Jordan 2008). They may also do this through sponsoring experimentation or indeed looking for leeway in the way they enact voice practices (Harney & Yi Lee 2022). What is important to also note is that the discretion operated by line managers can over time become a binding common practice (Brown, 1972: 48). This means HR may start to recognise the discretion operated by managers (see Harney & Jordan (2008; 289-290) for an example from call centres). Similarly, employees would start regarding line managers' discretion as a binding precedent (Harney & Yi Lee 2022).

The final category of roles relates to line managers as translators. This is where line managers devise their own discretionary roles which are unofficial and are not recognised by HR but find them essential to implementing HR practices such as voice mechanisms (Harney & Yi Lee 2022). Line managers utilise their interpretive schemes to make sense of what they have learnt from HR and devise their own approaches in implementing practices such as those on voice based on other organisational demands they see such as employee attitudes (Giddens, 1984; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). In other words, they employ agency and managerial discretion in coming up with their own ways on how they implement voice practices (Mowbray et al. 2022). These translating tasks, which are not recognised by HR, also demonstrate how line managers, in their performance of implementation roles, need to balance and navigate around the conflicting and emerging organisational contextual demands that exist on a day-to-day basis (Harney & Yi Lee 2022). One way in which line managers execute these translating roles is through what Nishii and Paluch (2018) call, '*HR sense [giving]*'.

HR sense giving is defined by Nishii and Paluch (2018: 319) as '*a process through which [line managers] shape the development of followers' cognitive representations or schemas that make the retention and later application of learned information possible*'. In other words, it involves translating the broader messages that are contained in the voice practices into patterns or ways that can easily be understood by employees. In an integrative review, Nishii and Paluch (2018) present four main tasks which represent line managers as HR sense givers. The first task relates to the articulation of HR messages. The idea in this role is to interpret the most important aspects of HR practices which should be prioritised in relation to how those practices link to strategic goals of the organisation (Ibid). Thus, line managers pass on not only what has been written down about the voice practices, but also why they are important for the organisation

and individual employee (Ibid). Undertaking this role is viewed as a way of reducing uncertainty for employees and enabling internalisation of rules emerging from the voice related HRM practices hence making it easy for those employees to utilise them (Ibid).

The second task of line managers as HR sense givers relates to role modelling HR system expectations for behaviour. Through either their own behaviours or informal interactions, line managers model to their subordinates which patterns of behaviours are appropriate and which aspects of the voice practices need to be given priority (Nishii & Paluch 2018). For example, a line manager who usually does not, through staff meetings, accommodate input from subordinates in decision-making risks sending a message that using meetings as a voice channel is only staged or symbolic (also see, Zohar & Polacheck 2014). The third task in HR sense giving is reinforcing HR expectations for behaviour. Since line managers are close to employees and can assess the day-to-day behaviours relating to voice practices, they can play a role in reinforcing the positive behaviours through either formal or informal means (Nishii & Paluch 2018;32). For example, through providing consistent feedback with justification to subordinates about the expected behaviours in relation to the voice practices, those subordinates can master the positive behaviours that are encouraged. Harney and Yi Lee (2022;21) also suggest that line managers would also coach their subordinates on the expected positive behaviours that can align with voice practices, for example, relating to how line managers may wish subordinates to voice.

The last task on HR sense-giving relates to assessing followers' understanding of HR messages. This role involves perceiving and evaluating explicit and implied cues from employees to establish which changes should be made to the previous role modelling and reinforcing roles (Nishii & Paluch 2018). The idea in this is to modify or change the behaviour expectations emerging from the voice practices so that intended practices are implemented (Ibid). Engaging in a careful and honest dialogue with subordinates in assessing their understanding is regarded as an important and challenging task and is what also distinguishes one line manager from the other in terms of the behavioural expectations for voice practices that are constructed and reinforced in the organisation (Ibid). Other studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2019) suggest that line managers adopting transformational leadership styles can ably create and reinforce the positive expected behaviours for employees to utilise voice practices. Detert and Burris (2007) also suggest that line managers who are open-minded can ably understand their subordinates' perspective to create and reinforce positive behaviours which clarify the intention of the voice

practices to enable that those subordinates adapt to what Nishii and Paluch (2018: 322) call, ‘their cognitive representation of the [practices]’.

For line managers to successfully undertake the implementation tasks discussed above of the voice related HR practices, HRM literature (see, Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Fu et al. 2017; Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Mowbray et al. 2021) suggests that they require to have the ability, motivation and the opportunities (AMO). Ability relates to ‘*the HRM-related competences necessary to successfully implement HRM practices on the work floor*’ (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013). It includes what HR is tasked to provide to line managers to implement the devolved responsibilities as we saw in conduit roles. HR support comprises content-related advice and coaching on tasks that they need to do as well as ‘allocative facilities’ for line managers to use in enacting voice mechanisms (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). The idea is that line managers should have the necessary skills and knowledge for them to be able to implement the voice practices.

Having the ability, however, only enables line managers to be able to execute their conduit roles where they are regarded as ‘robotic conformists’ who need to do as instructed by HR (Townsend & Mowbray 2020:141). However, in the execution of their roles as both engineers of adaptability and translators, much more than ability is required since they need to navigate conflicting organisational dynamics to give employees a sense of what voice mechanisms entail (Harney and Yi Lee 2022). Motivation is defined by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013:865) as the line manager’s desire and willingness to perform HRM tasks. This is viewed as a function of both intrinsic factors such as the line managers’ personal incentives or their personal interest in the subject of implementing voice and extrinsic factors such as institutionalised incentives (Ibid). These personal incentives are regarded as important in driving line managers towards implementing voice related HRM practices.

In terms of Opportunity, Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) argues that it involves having good HR support, adequate capacity in terms of time to implement voice and clear definition of roles in the policies and procedures such that role ambiguity is minimised. In the four stages of implementing HRM practices, Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) also agrees that the design and quality of the policies and practices plays an important role on how line managers will implement HR practices through the third and fourth stages of implementation. Opportunity, comprises, ‘*situational support from HR professionals, the capacity to spend sufficient time on HRM responsibilities, and clear and valuable policies and procedures for performing the HRM*

*role*' (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013:866). Beyond just HR support, time for implementation and policy support, opportunity may also encompass interactions of line managers with other organisational actors such as senior managers and HR in terms of how these create opportunities for them to implement voice practices (Op de Beeck et al. 2016). Role theory emphasises the role of actors' perceptions of individual capacity and organisational support and how that offers implementation opportunities for line managers (Op de Beeck et al. 2016; Evans, 2022). The perceptions of HR and senior managers, on the one hand, and line managers, on the other hand, are viewed as affecting discrepancies in the degree of devolution and line managers' implementation responsibilities (Op de Beeck et al. 2016). If line managers perceive that as part of organisational support, voice practices need to be designed well, they may show some level of resistance to implement if they realise that, in practice, the voice mechanisms are hard to implement (Townsend & Mowbray, 2020). Relating to individual capacity, Op de Beeck et al. (2016; 1914) observe that,

*'The more HR professionals differ in opinion from line managers on the latter's individual capacity, the smaller the discrepancy on the degree of HR devolution and [implementation]. A possible explanation could be that one party under/overestimates the capacity of the other party. For instance, it could be that HR professionals underestimate line management's HR capacity, leading them to give line managers a low responsibility on specific HR tasks. Line managers themselves, on the other hand, may acknowledge these 'low' HRM responsibilities but [may not] necessarily share the negative view of HR professionals on their individual HR capacity. In other words, they might feel more competent and motivated than the HR professionals want them to be'*

This means that if HR overestimates the individual capacity of line managers to execute line managers' responsibilities, they may do less to equip those line managers with necessary skills to implement voice systems. The irony is that rarely do line managers, themselves, identify their own lack of skills or knowledge of HR practices (Townsend & Mowbray 2020). This would mean that if line managers are, through interactions with HR, asked about their individual capacity to implement HR responsibilities, they would mostly provide positive responses. HR would then not be able to, as Bos-Nehles et al. (2013:866) argues, '*provide line managers with [clarity on] policies and procedures...[and] their role and responsibilities regarding HRM implementation*'. The danger to this is that if, contrary to the HR perceptions emerging from those interactions, line managers indeed do not have the skills and knowledge as claimed in many studies (e.g., Wilkinson et al. 2004; Dundon et al. 2005; Townsend 2014)

they may have difficulties in implementing voice practices. As a result, they may be implementing '*implied*' rather than '*actual*' voice practices (Mowbray et al. 2022:1056).

In the same interactions with other actors, line managers are also expected to navigate micro-dynamics of inclusion and conflict. This is based on an argument by Westley (1990:337) that line managers mostly perceive that attempts are made by other actors such as senior managers and HR to exclude them from the HRM implementation process. Kay (1974: 2) viewed this as a crisis in which senior managers and HR are not willing to share the influence and ownership in the implementation of HR practices such as those on voice. It may also be that employees or their representatives are not being receptive to the discretionary methods which line managers use in translating the intended to actual voice practices (Westley 1990; Harley 2020). In all these cases, line managers must seek inclusion and manage role conflicts. Westley (1990) argues that the major way in which line managers can obtain inclusion is through participating in conversations with organisational actors to have an in-depth understanding of the norms, authority patterns, and culture of a given organization. In this way, line managers are seen as going through the organisational ritual which eventually grants them inclusion into the implementation process (Ibid). In other words, line managers will be able to translate intended and actual voice practices in ways that are acceptable to organisational members.

To achieve inclusion and lessen conflict, line managers are also expected to exercise consistency and individual responsiveness. According to Fu et al. (2020:203-233) consistency (uniformity in the treatment of employees) in the implementation of voice practices is very important towards the translation of intended to actual voice systems (Ibid). Consistency, as an aspect of procedural justice, implies that line managers should be able to accurately implement voice mechanisms uniformly to all employees, without bias and in compliance with ethical norms (Ibid). Kehoe and Han (2020:209) argues that for line managers to achieve this consistency, they all need to be subjected to adequate managerial communication and training for all of them to understand the intended voice practices and apply them across organisational members uniformly. They also need to continuously provide their subordinates with adequate coaching and feedback apart from their performance of the HR sense giving roles discussed above (Ibid). Consistency in implementing voice practices is viewed as key to creating positive employee perceptions which are centred on a clear message of the intended voice mechanisms (Ibid). Other studies also argue that if employees perceive fair treatment and procedural justice in the way voice practices are actualised by line managers, they may reciprocate through utilising those practices for voice (Ghosh et al. 2014; Heffernan & Dundon 2016).

While consistency relates to procedural justice, individual responsiveness relates to distributive justice. As compared to fairness-based on rules and procedures as in procedural justice, distributive justice relates to fairness on the distribution of outcomes such as rewards, compensation, and training (Ghosh et al. 2014). Subordinates are mostly likely going to perform at different levels and invest different amounts of effort which raise questions about how equally aspects such as recognition, support, and opportunities should be distributed by line managers across those subordinates (Kehoe and Han 2020). In this argument, '*individual performance is seen as the input—that is, how much effort and capability an individual member puts into the work...line manager's HRM implementation is seen as the output—that is, the amount of resources the individual receives in return*' (Ibid). In terms of employee voice, inputs could include employees being able to utilise the different voice practices to raise critical issues to organisational success and the output would include the kind of rewards, support and even training line managers give those employees to reinforce the voice behaviours. Using equity theory, employees compare inputs and outcomes with those of their colleagues and if they perceive that they are in an inequitable position, they accordingly adjust their inputs for example through reducing their effort in utilising voice systems (see also, Adams 1965).

The discussion above illustrates that for line managers to implement HR-related voice practices, they would choose to employ different interventions as conduits, engineers of adaptability and translators based on the organisational context and resources available to them. It is also argued that while line managers would be able to perform conduit roles with having the ability such as HR support, performing adaptability and translator roles requires the motivation and opportunity. This typology of line managers' implementation roles, therefore, highlights not only implementation interventions which line managers would undertake but also the pre-conditions for these roles to be undertaken.

#### **2.3.4. Line managers' role in voice engagement behaviours**

The way line managers practice their roles to implement management-led voice practices influences whether employees would choose to voice through those practices (Dyne et al., 2003 & Rees et al. 2013). Through attribution theory, the way line managers implement voice practices transmits some attributions to employees which influence them to either voice through those practices or not (Hewett et al. 2018, Beijer et al. 2019, Alfes et al. 2020). Employees may choose not to voice through the formal voice structures because of the gap which they see between what they expect managers to be doing against what they experience. They may, for example, expect that they have access to a wide variety of voice mechanisms

yet, in practice, only a few options are available to them (Gollan et al. 2015; Kochan et al. 2019). Another argument is that employees choose to utilise voice practices because of their perceptions of voice efficacy or psychological risk of voicing out (Bryson et al. 2006; Nechanska et al. 2020; Gruman & Saks 2020). It has also been suggested that employees are motivated to engage in voice behaviours through the adopted voice practices if they perceive that their individual objectives or needs will be attained (Dyne et al. 2003; Dundon et al. 2004; Gollan et al. 2015). It could be that employees want to achieve remedial voice intentions (see section 2.2). If they see that those intentions are going to be achieved through the practices, they are more likely to utilise them. Employees may as well look at the importance that is given to the issues raised through those mechanisms to judge if what they want may be attained voicing through those mechanisms (Gollan & Patmore 2013). Employees may also choose to use the voice practices in place based on the accessibility they have to the line managers as well as the rules or voice structures that are in place for them to go through for their voices to get to the line managers (Dachler & Wilpert 1978 & Gollan & Patmore 2013).

To address all the issues highlighted above, HRM research suggests that line managers are central to performing conduit, adaptability and translator roles in a way that drives employees towards usage of the voice practices (Harlos 2001; Marchington & Suter 2013). These roles, which include positive leadership behaviours like HR sense giving act as resources, as defined in the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) theory and transmit ability and motivating effects for employees to engage in positive voice behaviours (Demerouti et al. 2001, Wang et al. 2019; Mowbray et al. 2021). The Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) theory proposes a stress process in which high demands and low resources can lead to strain and burnout and a motivational process in which abundant job resources such as positive leadership behaviours can foster engagement and performance (Demerouti et al. 2001). In social exchange theory, if, upon line managers' performance of the roles, employees perceive that voice mechanisms offer efficacy, accessibility, guarantee that their issues will be addressed and less psychological risk, they may reciprocate through utilising those formal management-led voice practices for positive voice engagement (Aryee et al. 2002; 267; Boselie, 2010; 55). An alternative framework is social exchange theory which suggests that social relationships are formed and maintained through a cost-benefit analysis, where individuals aim to maximise their rewards and minimise their costs (Ibid). The process may involve weighing tangible (money or other resources) or intangible (such as voice mechanisms efficacy and accessibility) benefits against the emotional or mental costs of a relationship such as lack of voice mechanisms' accessibility. The JD-R and social

exchange theories enable further understanding of the value of line managers' role in creating positive employee perceptions of leadership behaviours and driving them to reciprocate through utilising voice mechanisms in a constructive way for prosocial purposes.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

This chapter provides multiple perspectives relating to the conceptualisation of employee voice, emphasising that the unitary approach guides the framing of this research while paying attention to the critical perspectives in the pluralist and radical approaches. Through the application of four frames of analysis - unitary, pluralist, radical and hybrid - the chapter provides a balanced critique of all the perspectives in terms of explaining how voice related practices can be analysed in their adoption and implementation in organisations. While HRM and OB, under the unitarist perspective, analyse voice practices in organisations focussing on the advancement of employees' individual articulation of promotive issues, IR literatures highlight voice as remedial and relating more to the advancement of collective employee interests. The radical view adopted by labour process theorists presents an extreme case of divergence of interests between employees and management in which employee voice becomes an obstruction to the attainment of organisational objectives. The hybrid frame suggests an integrated approach to conceptualise employee voice and relating organisational tensions. OB related approaches offer an understanding of individual behaviour. HRM research suggests the consideration of organisational context, in terms of how the management-sponsored or direct voice practices are implemented by line managers to influence positive employee voice behaviours. IR offers a perspective that connects the organisational context with the broader political economy, or, macro-level context. In this perspective, both national and sectoral differences are considered through the VoC literature which argues that while there are legal, economic, historical, political and cultural differences between the Anglo-Saxon countries and those in Africa in shaping the nature of employment relations and employee voice structures, the postcolonial legacy, economic pressures and weak legal frameworks of African countries have been ignored in understanding how the institutional context shapes employment relations and voice structures of these non-western African contexts. These perspectives act as a framing for analysing the role of line managers and inform how line managers' practice of three main roles – conduit, adaptability, and translator roles - drive employees towards utilising voice practices.

## CHAPTER 3: ORGANISATIONAL MECHANISMS AND EMPLOYEE VOICE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter builds on the macro-level context discussed in the previous chapter on how they shape HRM, employee voice and line managers' voice facilitation role. The chapter focuses on the public sectoral dimension of the macro-level context by giving attention to the uniqueness of the features of the public sector context in shaping line managers' role in implementing voice-related HRM mechanisms. It is argued in the chapter that, although features of the public sector, which is directly influenced by the role of state discussed in chapter 2, differ from those of the private sector, HRM has been introduced in the public sector based on 'what works' in the private sector while ignoring the traditional features of the public sector. This universalistic approach is criticised, arguing that the public sector presents a unique context, comprising not only a mixture of public and private sector ideals but also country-specific features which all shape HRM, employee voice and line managers' role differently from the private sector.

### 3.2. HRM in the public sector

It is important to first highlight that HRM is significantly under researched in the public sector compared to the private sector (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019). In fact, as argued Knies and Leisink (2018; 19), '*private sector studies tend to dominate the HRM literature*'. However, to understand HRM in the public sector, there is need to first discuss the traditional features of the public sector. Public sector relates to the broad sectoral domain covering organisations delivering specific services to the public such as healthcare, education, and water (Fletcher et al. 2020). The formal criteria in terms of ownership, funding, authority, and creation of public value have been regarded as offering distinctive features of the public sector from private (Knies & Leisink 2018; Knies et al. 2018). These services, usually, are owned and funded by government that acts as primary stakeholder (Ibid). In terms of focus, the public sector is also oriented towards delivering a 'public good' or service in ways that advance legality, impartiality and welfare-focused values as compared to the efficiency and effectiveness values that are synonymous with the private sector (Paauwe & Farndale, 2017; Knies & Leisink, 2018). Emphasis in the public sector is on public service motivation (PSM) which suggests that, 'individuals' prosocial motivation to do good for others and society through the delivery of public services' (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). These values are regarded as the legacy of the Weberian bureaucracy that emerged between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Knies et al., 2020). With these values within the public-service operating context, both the function of the state as

employer on the macro level, and the HR function on the organisational level, were framed to be different to the private sector (Knies et al., 2022). Farnham and Horton (1996) provided a framework of four characteristics which distinguishes public sector HRM from that of the private sector and include paternalistic style of management, standardised employment practices, collectivist industrial relations and the aspiration to be a ‘model employer’ (Ibid). These characteristics are discussed below.

In terms of the paternalistic style of management as the first characteristic, focus in the public sector HRM is on utilising the welfare values with an emphasis on taking care of the health and well-being of employees (Farnham & Horton, 1996; Knies et al., 2022). This represents the soft version HRM in which implementation of HRM practices that are people oriented and committed to enhancing employees’ motivation (Truss et al., 1997; Roan et al., 2001). Employees, in this case, are regarded as key assets who could contribute to organisational performance (Ibid). The role of PSM also dominates HRM practices such as recruitment and selection (Piatak et al., 2020). Within the same soft HRM philosophy, another characteristic of public sector HRM is standardised employment practices which offer job security and lifetime employment (Knies et al., 2022). The public sector is also considered as an arena for the provision of equal opportunities to employees (Knies et al., 2022). This includes equal treatment and pay to employees doing the same tasks such that practices such as pay for performance that are synonymous with the private sector do not hold in the traditional public sector context (Weibel et al., 2010; Knies et al., 2022). Emphasis is on the legality and impartiality principles shaped by the Weberian bureaucracy (Knies et al., 2020).

Public sector HRM is also characterised with collectivist or pluralist nature of industrial relations. In this context, the trade unions have strong influence and voice in terms of the determination of the working conditions (Knies et al., 2022). The environment for managing employees, in this case, involves ‘adversarial, arm’s-length collective bargaining relationship between unions and management’ to improve the employment rights of the workers (Beaumont 1995; Leat 2007; Avgar et al. 2020; Marchington et al., 2021). The last characteristic of public sector HRM relates to the aspiration to be a ‘model employer’ for the private sector organisations. This is largely in terms of setting the standard for how private sector organisations should implement HR practices which is mostly in ‘soft’ ways such as through providing employees with good opportunities for training and workforce participation (Knies et al., 2022).

Application of the above characteristics of the traditional public sector HRM, however, came under scrutiny in the phase of the Fordist Welfare state in around mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century (Loader, 1994; Bryson et al. 2014). These ‘soft’ HRM principles were believed to be the driving force behind public sector’s failure as evidenced by higher levels of unemployment and large share of personnel costs in total public expenditures (Turkyilmaz 2011; Ibrahim & Al Falasi 2014; & Gottschall et al. 2015) In UK, for example, this period was marked by the policies of the conservative governments which led to the decline of the size and scope of public sector employment (Winchester & Bach, 1999;22). This was the same case in France where public firms’ employment had shrunk to 1.5 million by 1994 from 1.852 in 1980s (Mosse & Tchobanian 1992;131). These challenges led to interlinked set of pressures to restructure the public sector and adopt ‘business’ models of HRM which were regarded as suitable for fixing the public sector (Knies & Leisink 2018; Pradhan 2019; Brunetto & Beattie, 2020). The idea in what has been regarded as the post-Fordist phase (see, Loader, 1994), was to make public sector structures more flexible, adopt private sector HRM techniques as well as cut costs and improve efficiency (also, Morris & Farrell, 2007). This restructuring was done through the introduction of new public management (NPM) reforms in most of Anglo-Saxon countries in which focus was on applying the private sector models of HRM to the public sector (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Stoker 2006; Bryson et al. 2014; Knies et al., 2020). The introduction of NPM reforms in the Anglo-Saxon countries is regarded by many scholars (see, Morris & Farrell, 2007; Knies et al., 2020; Brunetto & Beattie, 2020) as a watershed moment for public service delivery as it led to a rethink about the distinct traditional boundaries between the public and private sector contexts and how they shape HRM. This is because NPM acted as an institutional logic based on the private sector ideals that substantially differ from the traditional Weberian bureaucracy logic (Knies et al., 2020).

At the heart of the neo-liberal NPM-based public sector reforms was the need to replace; ‘authority and rigidity with flexibility; the traditional preoccupation with structure with improvements to process; and the comfortable stability of government agencies and budgets with market-style competition’ (Kettl 1997; 447). The idea was to enable public workers in focusing on serving citizens as customers instead of being caught up in the bureaucracy and red tape (*ibid*). The public sector had to also reassert its control and produce a shift in the balance of power in the employment relationship (Marchington et al. 2021;327). To achieve this, unitarized Human Resource functions were introduced and linked to the strategic aims of

the public sector organisations (Pichault, F. 2007; 265). Particularly, HR-based reforms aimed at,

*‘Making HRM in the public sphere similar to business policies; fostering HR decentralisation by giving...line managers greater responsibilities and achieving a new balance between quality and performance within the public sphere via skills development. Life-long careers, based on unilateral appointments, [were] now forced to knuckle under contractual relations; [emphasising that] seniority [was] no longer the basic criterion for promotion, which [opened] the way to mandates, management by objectives, etc’ (Pichault, F. 2007; 265)*

These features relate to the HRM dimensions discussed in section 2.2.2 namely, vertical integration, horizontal integration as well as action and implementation (Gratton & Truss, 2003). First, one would note that NPM reforms were based on the principle that HR strategies should align with the organisational objectives as per vertical integration (also, Knies & Leisink, 2018). Second, the reforms also involved a high performance-driven culture of the private sector that reflects horizontal integration (Morris & Farrel, 2007). Third, NPM reforms emphasised devolving the responsibility of implementing HR strategies or practices to line managers. The expectation was that public services would have a ‘closer relationship between line managers and employees with speedier decision-making and more effective resolution of workplace problems’ (Mcguire et al. 2008;73).

Though in some cases, the application of private sector-based HRM principles into the public sector appeared consistent, unified, and successful, in most cases the adoption of these principles differed based on the national approaches towards public service employment regulation and administrative structures (Burke et al. 2013;23; Gottschall et al. 2015;17). These approaches can be understood through the dichotomies of sovereign employer versus model employer, autonomous versus instrumental administrative systems as well as politico-administrative regimes (Bach & Kessler, 2009; Knill, 1999).

The first dichotomy relates to sovereign employer versus model employer. In the sovereign employer, there is unilateral determination by central government of the terms and conditions of employment with weak systems of collective bargaining and industrial action (Bach & Kessler, 2009). With centralised systems, there is high degree of state control in HR practice with absent or modified approaches to collective bargaining and industrial actions (Ibid). France fits this category because state takes ultimate or unilateral authority in determining

working conditions such as pay for government workers (Bordogna and Winchester 2001: 54). Germany, however, represents a modified version of this category of ‘sovereign employer’ where there is a ‘division between public employees with, and those civil servants, without collective bargaining rights’ (Bach & Kessler, 2009). Countries under this category are expected to be less receptive to NPM reforms that emphasise on strong institutions of collective voice such as the use and empowering of unions and industrial actions. The centralised nature of the model and state control involved also acts as a constrain to the devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers (Bach & Kessler, 2009). In other words, countries under the sovereign employer category are regarded as being more likely to maintain the traditional features of the public sector HRM with less adoption of the private sector-based HR techniques.

The model employer category represents those countries in which state sets an example on how other employers can manage human resources (Bach & Kessler, 2009; Gould-Williams, 2004). In this category, there is strong focus on the strong democratic principles in determining conditions of work (*Ibid*). For example, in the countries characterised by the ‘model employer’ attributes, it has meant that human resource functions, emerging from the NPM reforms, should be based on staff participation, consultation, recognition of trade unions and promotion of equal opportunities and individual development (Farnham and Horton 1996:85; Gould-Williams, 2004:66-67). As Farnham and Giles (1996:118), puts it,

*‘Government. . . [models other] employers to follow and develop the best employment practices in line with those of leading private sector businesses. The state’s objectives [are] to: provide terms and conditions necessary to attract, retain and motivate the most skilled and professional staff’.*

One would also note that in model employer category, there would be an expectation for more reception towards the devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers since there is emphasis on strong democratic principles. In short, the country-specific characteristics, within either the sovereign or model categories, counted towards adoption of private sector-based HRM principles (Burke et al. 2013:22). The aspects of sovereign and model employer are summarised in the table 5 below.

The second dichotomy relates to ‘autonomous’ versus ‘instrumental’ administrative systems. In autonomous administrative systems, ‘... *[change is] restricted to incremental self-*

*adaptations by the bureaucracy*' whereas in instrumental administrative systems, there is, 'high potential to transform substantially existing administrative arrangements, given that there is a government committed to do so' (Knill 1999:115). The capacity for administrative reforms like those of NPM is low in autonomous administrative systems as compared to the instrumental administrative systems (Ibid). The autonomous administrative systems would be likened to the coordinated market economies such as Germany, Denmark and Netherlands which advance economic interdependence among actors such as union representations, organisational leaders and politicians and are less receptive to reforms (Knill 1999:115; Burke et al. 2013:22). The instrumental administrative systems would be likened to the liberal market economies such as the United Kingdom which emphasises on the competitive markets and deregulated labour markets and are more receptive to reforms (Knill 1999:115; Burke et al. 2013:22). However, what is noted is that even countries that fall within the same category such as 'instrumental' or 'liberal market economies' would still differ in how the reforms are implemented (Burke et al. 2013:22; Dobbins et al. 2017: 419-420). This may be because of other context specific characteristics such as politico-administrative aspects which are discussed below.

The last category that presents contextual differences that reflect on the application of NPM reforms in the public sector relates to 'politico-administrative regimes. In this concept, scholars argue that the constitutional, functional, and cultural elements of the specific countries have also played a role on the reform logics and contemporary administrative systems which have emerged in the different countries (Pierre 1995: 207; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011:47). In other words, the interplay of political and administrative systems and the role of legal and historical legacies have determined the emergence of different types of administrative patterns and industrial relations or HRM systems emanating from the public sector reform pressures (Painter and Peters 2010: 4; Lodge 2012: 545-54; Gottschall et al. 2015:17). To sum up, the nature of SHRM application in the public sector has been based on historical, legal, and political aspects of the countries (Boyne et al. 1999: 417; Gould-Williams, J. 2004:67). Table 2 below summarises country-specific context and implications for adopting NPM reforms.

**Table 1: Country context and adoption of NPM reforms**

No	Structural characteristic	Example	Implications in adopting NPM reforms
1a	Sovereign Employer (Unilateral determination working conditions & high state control)	France, Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diminished union involvement and collective bargaining</li> <li>• Less support for devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers</li> </ul>
b	Model employer (strong democratic principles)	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased participation and consultation</li> <li>• presence of multiple voice forms e.g. collective &amp; individualised voice forms</li> <li>• More support for devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers</li> </ul>
2a	Autonomous administrative systems	Germany Denmark Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low reform capacity unreceptive of NPM reforms</li> <li>• Coordinated market economies.</li> <li>• Restrictions on voice mechanisms to allows incremental self-adaptation</li> </ul>
b	Instrumental administrative systems	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High reform capacity-Receptive to NPM reforms</li> <li>• Liberal market economies</li> <li>• more support for multiple voice mechanisms</li> </ul>

Note: Developed from Knill (1999); Bach & Kessler (2008); Gould-Williams (2004)

The discussion above demonstrates that HRM application in the public sector focuses on demonstrating how private sector practices can work and help improve the public sector, but this approach leaves two questions unanswered namely, how do these private sector characteristics thrive within the context of public sector unique features? How do the public sector unique features tell us about HRM in the public sector and how it differs from HRM in the private sector?

The first question appears to be met with mixed evidence (Moynihan 2006;77). While other studies do suggest that the application of NPM reforms enabled to address the challenges of traditional public administration, other scholars do argue that these public sector changes diluted the practices and conditions which distinguished public sectors from their private counterparts (Moynihan 2006; Bryson et al. 2014). Among other things, it has been suggested

that the changes led into challenges such as the cutting of other employees' benefits and staff reductions which posed negative effects on the employees' attitudes and passion for public value as well as the general ability of the public sector to perform well (Brown, 2004). However, another evidence also suggest that the reforms did less to change the traditional features of the public sector. First, some scholars (for example, Harris 2002; Parry et al., 2005; McGuire et al. 2008) argue that there has been greater resistance to do away with the Weberian bureaucratic-based HR systems such that traditional features such as functionalism, uniformity and hierarchy still characterise the public sectors. Second, it has been argued that it is not all the private sector-based HRM practices that have aligned with soft HRM ideals which still appear to remain in the public sector (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019; Knies et al, 2024). For example, HR practices that aim at enabling employees' ability and opportunities are regarded as suiting the humanistic public sector goals while motivating-enhancing practices are viewed as not suitable as they have the potential to eradicate public service motivation which is defined by Perry & Wise (1990;368) as, 'individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations' (also see, Georgellis et al., 2011). Lastly, in the process of HR devolution, line managers in the public sector appear to challenge the wisdom of increasing their responsibilities in an area where they do not have specialist knowledge apart from their other many responsibilities (Harris, 2002). In other words, as McGuire et al. (2008;76) puts it, 'increasing line manager involvement in HR [in the public sector] is [viewed as] problematic as it opposes existing control structures. Oswick and Grant (1996) also argue that transferring HR responsibilities to line managers only serves the purpose of financial and public accountability and does not enable to address public sector challenges for which the NPM reforms were adopted such as cost effectiveness.

The emergence of 'New public Management' by public management scholars attempts to address the second question. This movement of public sector restructuring re-emphasises the value, unique and complex features of the public sector and how they can enable the understanding of HRM in the public sector which is different from the private sector (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Stoker 2006; Osborne, 2010). The public value emerges from the processes of inclusive dialogue and deliberation with citizens who are regarded as citizens (and not clients or customers as in NPM) and become actively engaged in governance (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Bryson et al. 2014). In this democratic citizenship, Denhardt & Denhardt (2000) argue that the public servant is expected to; help citizens articulate and meet their shared interests, rather than to attempt to control or steer society in new directions; value people, not just

productivity; think strategically and act democratically; and value citizenship and public service above entrepreneurship since public servants and citizens are committed to making meaningful contributions to society rather than by entrepreneurial managers. Realising the public mission, thus, becomes the objective of the public sector to produce value for a multiplicity of stakeholders compared to profit maximisation goal of the private sector organisations (Moore, 2000). The objectives can also be sometimes conflicting and multiple such as providing high quality essential public services at a low cost (Ibid). Employment relations in the public sector hence take the form of partnership where actors in employment relationship such as employers and employees can work together to attain gains to multiple stakeholders (Guest and Peccei 2001; & Avgar et al. 2020). With the partnership model, the role of line managers becomes more complex because of strong influences, though indirectly, from many actors in the wider democratic space who include national government, elected or nominated members, law makers, customers, trade unions, employees, and the public (Moore and Fung 2012; Alford et al. 2017; Brunetto & Beattie, 2019). These multiple stakeholders are difficult to manage by managers since power is not equal among them (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019)

The emphasis placed in this section is on how the public sector possesses unique features that are different from those of the private sector and shape HRM differently. It has been highlighted that traditionally the public sector is characterised by soft HRM features such as paternalistic style of management, standardised employment practices, collectivist industrial relations and the aspiration to be a ‘model employer. It has also been highlighted that these attributes were, in the phase of Fordist Welfare state, regarded as contributing towards public sector failure which led to pressures to do away with these features and restructure the public sector by introducing the private sector-based HRM principles. By introducing these hard HRM principles which related to vertical integration, horizontal integration and implementation of HR strategies by line managers, the public sector became governed more like the private sector but to different degrees in different countries. Despite these changes, however, the traditional features of the public sector such as paternalistic style of management, standardised employment practices, collectivist industrial relations and the aspiration to be a ‘model employer still hold true and impacts on collective voice (still higher union density than in private sector), public service motivation as well as better pay and working conditions supported by egalitarian pay structures (Georgellis et al., 2011; Christopoulou & Monastiriotis, 2014; Knies et al; 2024). The presence of accountability to diverse and multiple stakeholders

also exerts strong influence on the implementation of HRM in the public sector as is excessive workloads shaped by the legacy of NPM reforms (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019; Knies et al; 2024). All these factors impact on the role for HRM, nature of voice-related HRM practices and the role for line managers in the public sector.

### **3.3.Employee voice in the public sector**

Employee voice has been largely under researched in public sector organisations as compared to private sector organisations (Bennet, 2010; Kim & Cho, 2024). This has meant inferring research evidence from the private sector in explaining voice conditions of the public sector, yet '*employee voice needs to be understood within the broader context of the employment relationship and with the associated power imbalance*' (Townsend et al., 2022). In the context of the public sector, as discussed in section 3.1, literature suggests that there are many features which uniquely shape employee voice, different from the private sector. The ways in which these features shape employee voice is discussed below.

The first argument is that regardless of the numerous changes which the public sector has undergone, there is still evidence of the existence of the formalised, routine and bureaucratic structures (Brown 2004; Knies and Leisink 2018). The bureaucratic structures create a fertile ground for more formalised or collectivised voice mechanisms since the individualised and informal voice mechanisms are more suitable to the flexible structures of the private sector (Gennard & Judge 2005; Kersley et al., 2006). Collectivised structures of employee voice still exist in the public sector despite arguments for the decline of the systems of collective bargaining and reduction in the power of trade unions due to introduction NPM changes which advanced more management authority (Beaumont 1995; Winchester & Bach 1999;22). These collectivised or indirect voice structures such as of trade unions appear to exist in the public sector along with the direct voice mechanisms such as meetings, written mechanisms and downward mechanisms (Kersley et al. 2006; Bennet, 2010). In other words, employee voice opportunities are provided in public sector organizations through both employer-initiated or direct voice mechanisms or employee-initiated or indirect voice mechanisms (Kalleberg et al., 2006; Bennet, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2024). With the strong public ethos, one would anticipate seeing the public sector having a much more coherent system than the private sector which aims to please shareholders, senior managers, customers. However, Wilkinson et al., (2024) argues that voice mechanisms in the public sector do not operate in a coherent system but they

are interrelated and discrete, reflecting the presence of multiple and conflicting agendas and interest groups (Wilkinson et al., 2024). To sum up, literature suggests that multiple and interrelated forms of voice mechanisms exist in the public sector.

The second argument is that though multiple forms of voice mechanisms exist in the public sector, the presence of rigid bureaucratic structures becomes a factor that discourages employees to voice through these mechanisms. Voicing in the public sector means that employees must go through rigid routines and complex problem-solving processes to raise issues and have their issues or views either considered in organisational decisions or resolved (Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010). Considering these features, it becomes time-consuming for employees to voice and have issues addressed which makes it difficult for them to utilise the set voice structures to express the issues they have (Wilkinson et al., 2024). In other words, the rigid structures do not transmit the motivation to employees to engage in the desired employee voice behaviours (Mowbray et al, 2021). The argument, therefore, is that though both direct and indirect voice mechanisms exist in the public sector, the presence of rigid routines and complex problem-solving processes makes it difficult for employees to utilise these mechanisms (also, Wilkinson et al., 2024)

The third argument is that the multiple goals and stakeholders of the public sector creates barriers or restrictions for employees to voice. Unlike the private sector which seeks to achieve profit-making or efficiency, the public sector has, as suggested by Rainey and Bozeman (2000), '*...multiple, conflicting and ambiguous goals and norms*'. These conflicting and multiple goals emanates from multiple stakeholders such as political authority, citizens, trade unions and employees to whom public sector organizations are expected to be accountable (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019; Alang et al., 2020). Scholars (for example, Almeida et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2021) suggest that these stakeholders may have different expectations on the public sector organisations which may not always align with the thriving of employee voice. The political authority, for example, wants to exercise more control on public sector organizations in sectors which offer critical public services such as health, security, water and electricity which does not always support employees' ability to voice (Leat 2007; Gottschall et al. 2015). In Police for example, the UK labour law prohibits workers from joining trade unions to defend pay and working conditions though they can associate while the Germany Labouré law restricts the police forces from exercising the right to strike (Gottschall et al. 2015). Similarly, in the health or utility sectors, research studies (for example, Almeida et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2021) suggest

that there are individual, professional, and organisational barriers to other mechanisms of voice such as union actions like strikes. In such sectors, the state may act or put in place laws that restrict or limit other mechanisms of voice (Dundon et al. 2004: 1150; Kersley et al., 2006:109, Dundon & Gollan 2007; 1182). The political authority may justify such restrictions with an argument that this is in the best interest of the public and that, alternatively, with good employer ethos, good working conditions such as competitive pay would be provided to employees for rendering essential services such that no actions like strikes would be needed (Corby and White 1999; Leat 2007; Christopoulou & Monastiriotis, 2014). The multiple goals and stakeholders in the public sector, in short, create barriers for employees to voice.

The last argument is that public sector features such as paternalistic style of management, heavy regulation as well as a multiplicity of both stakeholders and goals in the public sector shapes the ways employees choose to voice in the public sector. With the aid of the paternalistic style of management discussed in section 3.2, employees prefer engaging in lateral voice in which when they have issues, they speak to peers as well as supporting and validating voice from others (Satterstrom et al.,2021; Jung et al.,2024). Jing et al., (2023) argues that this enables to build a strong and collective vertical voice that can easily be acted upon by those in higher positions. While some employees engage in this lateral voice, risk avoidance and rule-obsession might make other employees not utilise the available voice mechanisms to speak the issues they have for fear of either damaging co-worker relationships (Wilkinson et al., 2024) or other potential consequences (Morrison, 2014). Employees in public sector are also driven by public service motivation which weakens their drive for engaging in promotive voice behaviours (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Liu et al., 2023). All these factors pose a challenge for employees to, crucially, decide what issues they may be allowed to speak and what issues they may not be allowed to speak so that they do not damage relationships with others or their motives for public service (Wilkinson et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). The argument is that employees in the public sector have ideas or suggestions which they become willing to raise but they fail to raise them because of the obstacles and challenges that characterise the public sector context (also, Tsameti et al., 2021). However, other scholars (for example, Cling et al., 2014; Alang et al.,2020) suggest that the presence of heavy policy regulation in the public sector which focus on offering equal opportunities becomes a factor that motivates employees to participate, through voice, in organizational processes through either direct or indirect voice mechanisms. This implies that there is mixed evidence in terms of how the public sector context

shapes how employees utilise employee voice mechanisms to express issues or ideas which they have.

### **3.4. Line managers' role in the public sector**

The centralised, bureaucratic, and rule-based structures of the public sector traditionally have not always allowed the involvement of line managers in HRM implementation (see Section 3.2). It is only with NPM reforms that HRM responsibilities were devolved to line managers. As argued in Chapter 2, there is still evidence of resistance to completely do away with centralised structures; this poses challenges to the acceptability of line managers' involvement in HRM. However, there has been little research on how the role of line managers thrives in such bureaucratic structures. A partnership model is also suggested through New Public Management suggesting that line managers must balance a multiplicity of influences from within and outside the organisation. All this begs the question of how line managers facilitate employee voice within these and other soft HRM features of the public sector context. This section reviews literature on how line managers' roles as discussed in chapter 2 would be undertaken within the public sector context.

The first role discussed related to line managers being conduits in implementing voice mechanisms. These are the official roles in which line managers become robotic conformists and apply no discretion to what HR instruct them to do in implementing voice mechanisms. One would note that these conduit roles appear to be more suitable to the rule-based and bureaucratic structures of the public sector in a traditional sense because line managers do not require autonomy in implementing voice mechanisms (Knies et al. 2018). However, the existence of multiple influences emerging from many actors and constraints as argued in New Public Management raises doubt as to whether the role of robotic conformists would thrive in the public sector (Moore and Fung 2012; Alford et al. 2017). These multiple actors in the public sector may be beyond line managers' formal authority; hence their influence may distort the rules and structures in terms of who should tell line managers what to practice in implementing voice mechanisms (Alford et al. 2017). The tricky part is that sometimes these actors from the wider democratic space may be key and exert an indirect influence for line managers' access to resources to undertake their roles or maintenance of their job as line managers (*Ibid*). Line managers, thus, are left with the challenge of whether they are trespassing on the roles of politicians or other stakeholders' in executing conduit roles or whether they should stick to

formal structures (Alford et al. 2017). As Noordegraaf (2015) puts it, line managers find themselves having two masters namely, the organisation and the profession, the dilemma which make them fail to influence the implementation of HR practices such as those relating to employee voice. In simple terms, while line managers' practice of conduit roles aligns with the bureaucratic structures of the public sector, the presence of multiple stakeholders in the public sector creates the accountability dilemma which makes line managers fail to influence implementation of HR practices.

Chapter 2 also discussed the roles of line managers in engineering adaptability. These roles centred on, among others, relaxing regulations or polices, encouraging informal discussions, and sponsoring experimentation. This leeway is overtime formalised and becomes binding common practice. One would note that there is some level of degree of discretion, though practices are formalised overtime, which means diverting from the roles as robotic conformists. One would expect incompatibility of such roles in highly bureaucratic structures because of the leeway that is involved. Practical experience from the public sector, to the contrary, appear to suggest that line managers capitalise on the loopholes of organisational policies to come up with their own ways (Kersley et al., 2006;109, Dundon & Gollan 2007; 1182). This reflects the flexibility element of the NPM reforms which were applied in the public sector from the private sector as discussed in section 3.1. However, in terms of employee voice, this flexibility has been viewed to have negative implications in terms of managers only implementing those aspects of the policies which please them hence limiting voice options that become available to employees (Corby and White 1999; Forsyth, 2011; Gollan & Patmore 2013). This mixed evidence suggests that it is not clear how line managers would undertake the role of adaptability in the public sector. More research evidence is, thus, required to this effect. Another category of roles discussed in Chapter 2 relates to line managers as translators. In the execution of these roles, it was highlighted that line managers apply agency and discretionary behaviours in coming up with their own ways on how they are going to implement voice mechanisms. These roles require more flexibility, as compared to adaptability roles, for line managers to undertake. It should be anticipated that such roles can hardly suit the highly bureaucratic structures though they may help line managers deal with multiple influences, actors and constraints of the public sector. McGuire et al. (2008) also argue that involvement of line managers with these discretionary behaviours opposes public sector control structures. However, line managers' application of discretionary behaviours in implementing voice mechanisms have been acknowledged as existing in the public sector (also see, Rainey & Bozeman 2000 & Alang et

al. 2020). What is noted, though, is that discretion produces negative outcomes such as causing managers to not show interest in ensuring employees utilise the voice mechanisms (see, Alang et al. 2020) or creating employees' negative perceptions towards using those voice mechanisms (See, Kersley et al., 2006, Dundon & Gollan 2007). In some cases, this discretion also appears to lead to inconsistent interpretation and implementation of the policies or voice mechanisms (Alang et al. 2020). This would mean voice policies or mechanisms not enacted uniformly. Hence, it defeats the anticipated positive outcomes of line managers' involvement in HRM implementation in the public sector through NPM reforms. Given mixed research evidence of whether structures in the public sector are bureaucratic or flexible, more research evidence is required to understand how the translator roles would be applicable in the public sector.

Beyond the roles discussed above, Chapter 2 also highlighted that for line managers to perform these roles, they also need the ability, motivation and opportunity. This has largely been an argument presented by researchers in SHRM. However, other research studies (for example, Kalleberg et al. 2006) appear to suggest that while ability and opportunity-enhancing practices are suitable to the public sector context, motivation-enhancing practices that are output-based do not work in the public sector context. In other words, in the public sector, managers are driven more and motivated by achieving humanistic or public value goals that aim at impacting on the lives of the citizenry while in the private sector line managers are much more driven to achieve profit-oriented goals (Knies et al. 2018). To have the ability in terms of access to resources and training in the public sector can also be a challenge considering the issue of resource constraints highlighted in Chapter 2. As Knies et al., (2024;2432) also adds, '*in many countries, public organizations are experiencing cut-backs in resources*'. Despite these resource constraints, sometimes to access the existing limited resources or opportunities for training, line managers need also to deal with bureaucratic structures and multiple actors and influences since public sector organisations must account for how they spend public resources (Alford et al. 2017;591; Knies et al. 2018;2; Knies et al.,2024). In terms of opportunities, similarly, line managers may lack autonomy and are faced with workload to be able to undertake tasks relating to implementing voice mechanisms considering a multiplicity of actors in the wider public space (Brunetto & Beattie, 2019). All these factors demonstrate how different the public sector context is from the private sector in terms of providing the ability, motivation and opportunities to the line managers in terms of implementing the voice-related HRM practices. However, since more evidence of the AMO influence as well as employee voice facilitation is drawn from the private sector (Bennet, 2010; Brunetto & Beattie, 2019; Kim & Cho, 2024), it calls

for further research on how the public sector context shapes the AMO context for line managers' practice of roles aimed at implementing the voice-related HRM practices.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated how the public sector has unique features for shaping HRM, employee voice and line managers' roles different from the private sector. Despite this, little research has been conducted in the public sector. First, the chapter highlights that HRM in the public sector differs from the private sector based on the human philosophy or paternalistic style of management, multiplicity of actors, resource constraints, collectivist industrial relations and the aspiration to be a 'model employer. The chapter also highlights that NPM reforms which were applied to the public sector and focused on HRM's vertical integration, horizontal integration and line managers' role in implementation did not completely erode the traditional and Weberian-based features of the public sector. The public sector appears to still portray the influence of private sector techniques shaped by the legacy of NPM reforms along with the Weberian-based features of the public sector. A mixture of these features creates a unique public sector context that shapes HRM, employee voice and line managers' implementation role differently from those of the private sector.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE AFRICAN CONTEXT: ADMINISTRATIVE ANTECEDENTS AND RECENT APPROACHES TO VOICE**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed how the public sector context acts as a unique macro-level context shaping HRM, employee voice and line managers' role. This chapter develops further the macro-level context by arguing that the nature of the public sector context depends on the wider national context. To illustrate this, the chapter engages with African management literature to highlight influences that shape the public sector context that has become a naturalised outcome of a mix of forces which include colonialism, neo-liberal ideals and societal values. The idea of engaging with African management literature is to pull out themes that can help to understand the Malawi case context discussed in Chapter 5. The chapter argues that the public sector context in most African countries is characterised by the prebendal system which shapes employee voice and its facilitation by line managers, different from, for example, Anglo-Saxon countries.

### **4.2. Development of the public sector in Africa and HRM**

The discussion of how the public sector in most African countries has developed over the years informs the understanding of the nature, scale and scope of HRM in this context. Analysis of most African public sectors have largely been based on the 'catching up' thesis. This thesis suggests that management practices in Anglo-Saxon countries are universally applicable and important hence should be used as a benchmark or basis for management in Africa (Kuada 2006). In other words, management structures are assessed based on the 'developed world approach' (Jackson 2002:998). This chapter suggests three restructuring phases for the context of Malawi - the colonial phase, the early phase of independence, and the maturing stage which is characterised by the adoption of new public management. Engaging with these restructuring phases provides a good background for understanding how the western-based administrative structure shapes the context for employee voice, implementation of relevant HRM practice and the role of line managers.

During the colonial period, the literature suggests, broadly speaking, that 'everything 'African' was represented as negative while everything positive was European' (Mkomo 2011:368). The argument is that while economically, the colonisation of African countries was about the scramble for natural resources and human labour, the colonising countries legitimised their

administrative systems as superior (Ibid). The precolonial African value system, based on social relationships of trust and reciprocity, were dismissed. Instead, these features were characterised as ‘authentic’ African traits, seen as attempts for mainly personal aggrandizement or, as corruption (Pitcher et al. 2009;130) and used within a racialised framework as legitimisation for the superiority of white colonisers in ruling the country (Ranger, 2010). The idea of superiority lead to African public sector administrative systems that until today approximated the western ones, since these were deemed effective and efficient (Kuada 2006; Mathur & Mulwafu., 2018). During the colonial phase, therefore, most Africa public sector systems inherited the western Weberian-based highly centralized agencies with service-wide consistency of (racialised) rules and implemented based on structural violence and exploitation (Beattie and Waterhouse 2007).

Though most African public sectors inherited these western-based administrative structures, the African traditions, beliefs and values also were actively used and co-opted under said structures (Cooke 2001) to support the colonial administrative systems. The concepts of patrimonialism and neo-patrimonialism illustrate this. Patrimonialism concept suggests that ‘the organisation, staffing and remuneration of public bureaucracies was based on kinship or political clientelism, which transformed public office into a privilege or entitlement (Yanguas & Bukenya 2015; 138). This can be traced back to the colonial period where colonial masters created a system called, ‘patron-clientelism’, ‘an exclusive relation of mutual benefit which holds between two persons defined as socially and politically unequal, and which stresses their solidarity’ (Newbury 2003; Pitcher et al. 2009). In this patron-clientelism model, there was interaction of two hierarchies with European officials (representing the colonial masters) constituting one central hierarchy which was key in the making of crucial decisions and the ‘indigenous’ hierarchies chosen by the colonisers reinstated as the local and regional government (Newbury 2003; Hyden 2006). This system served beyond the redistribution of resources and mutual exchange of benefits between colonial masters and the chosen indigenous since it aimed at ‘obviating kin rivalries by creating loyal followers’ (Newbury 2003;8). During colonial administration, bureaucracies existed based on— often artificially created - kinship or political clientelism, which transformed public offices into a privilege or entitlement, often the only way for usually a limited and specific part of the oppressed black population ripped of any citizenship rights to participate in decision making. (Ibid).

The patron-clientelism ethos continued to have an influence in the post-colonial administrative systems, usually allowing the group privileged by the colonisers to continue their dominance

through continuing the concept of neo-patrimonialism and patron-clientelism in the postcolonial period. New democracies were formed on the established bureaucratic system that allowed for 'personal dimensions of power, governance and compliance' (Pitcher et al. 2009; Yanguas & Bukenya 2015). The key features for this neo-patrimonialism, included clientelism, patronage and prebendalism. These features are more summarised into what Richard Joseph (1987:8) calls the 'prebendal system'. This is the idea borrowed from Max Weber to refer to the 'patterns of political behavior which rest on the justifying principle that [state] offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as of their reference or support group' (Joseph 1987). Diamond (1989:284) argues that in the postcolonial African public sector administrative systems, this prebendal system still operated behind the 'camouflaging facade of legal-rational, constitutional, and bureaucratic rules'. In the post-colonial phase of public sector reform, one finds that there was an,

*'entrenched resistance from bureaucrats rooted in a moral and political economy of personalist or kinship-based administration, in which state offices are created and sustained as specific privileges, benefits or rewards, and not as generic, technocratic functions to be reformed or dismantled when they cease to be efficient'* (Yanguas & Bukenya 2015:138)

The continuity that is observed in these writings is often used to explain corruption in post-colonial setting. It is argued that the prebendal system of patronage, clientelism and would form part of African 'traditions' that contrasted with the western-based administrative structures (Otenyo 2006; Conroy 2006; Kuada 2006; O'Flynn 2007). In other words, the failure of western administrative structures during to support democratic structures in the newly independent states during the then post-colonial period is blamed on the African values of trust and social relations that had been co-opted by the colonising regimes by a 'divide and conquer' approach towards the black population (Ibid). In these assessments, the western systems are characterised as ideal types, and erase the colonial past (Ranger, 2010). The argument neglects that these western systems had not been 'western' but shaped by colonisers, including 'invention' of African authenticity, selling 'to the colonised its own notion of what was authentic about them, what was trans-historical about them, and what cannot be changed without being violated' (Naqvi & Mathur, 2001:25). In this perspective, the emergence of repressive regimes, authoritarianism and economic failure in most African countries such as Malawi, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Libya, Ethiopia and Uganda (Larbi 1999; Conroy 2006; Otenyo 2006), can be seen in a different perspective. Most African countries were experiencing political instability around 1980s (Larbi 1999; Conroy 2006; Otenyo 2006). The Washington

consensus targeted these countries specifically with the promise to build more stable political economies in the ‘developing world’. (McCourt, 2002; Otenyo 2006; Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011).

The Washington consensus was mainly based on the catching up thesis. It represented public sector reforms (in the name of structural adjustment programmes) that were sanctioned by the Bretton Woods institutions such as World Bank and IMF as a condition for their loans (McCourt 2002; ECA 2004). Among other things, the Washington consensus impacted heavily on the public sector in an ideal type version (McCourt, 2002; ECA 2004). African countries found themselves under pressure to implement, democratise and improve administrative systems while equally having to reduce staff levels, salary decompression and ensuring fair and just staffing practices (Ibid).

These reforms were setting the framework for HRM approaches. The major idea in all these preliminary reform initiatives was to ensure that there should be ‘infusion of new values of professionalism, accountability, responsiveness, and a focused sense of mission for maximum efficiency in the [public sector]’ (Omoyefa 2008). Again, these professional values that were advocated were not only based on the private sector such as, ‘sense of mission for maximum efficiency’ but were also derived from the western context. Interestingly though, the success of these reforms impacted most in the political rather than administrative structures (McCourt 2002). It has been argued that most African countries had to focus on reforms that would help them obtain loans from the Bretton Woods institutions to turn around the economic crisis that came after the debt crisis of 1982 (Rodrick, 1990; McCourt, 2002). Instead of enhancing democratic decision-making processes, many African countries found themselves yet again pressured towards economic aims and objectives, while reforms to establish a truly democratic decision-making process including the population in the crisis hit countries was neglected.

The Washington consensus created the foundations for the roll out of neo-liberal NPM-based reforms. These reforms aimed at ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services with also using new and private sector-based management techniques that largely developed in the Anglo-Saxon world (Johnston 1998). Vyas-Doorgapersad (2011) argues that the model of NPM reforms in most African countries constituted features namely decentralisation, contracting out, Corporatisation and performance contracting. Decentralisation involved three key processes namely *deconcentration* (the passing down of administrative functions to lower levels within government agencies), *delegation* (transfer of

central government administration of public functions to semi-autonomous organizations) and *Devolution* (transfer of governance responsibility for specified functions to the publicly or privately-owned sub-national levels) (Hope 2001:124). Contracting out related to outsourcing non-core public sector functions or services to bring out efficiency in the usage of financial (such as cash), human (personnel) and other resources (such as time) (Hope 2001: 124). In other words, this was a way of emphasising ‘greater discipline and parsimony in resource use’ (Hughes, 1998; 61-65). Corporatisation involved converting public sector departments into independent agencies within or outside the public sector (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011). This was aimed at ensuring that there is greater competition in the delivery of public services (Hughes, 1998). In performance contracting, public sectors had to initiate agreements between government or its representative agency and either management of public enterprises or private managers through which performance was measured against targets within a specified period (Larbi 1999;23). This motivated the popularisation of performance management systems which clearly defined the standards and measures of performance in many African countries such as Botswana and South Africa (Hughes, 1998; Dzimbiri 2008). Lastly, NPM reforms also involved fusing the information and communication technologies within the public sector departments to aid the delivery of public services (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011;240). Beyond transforming the administrative structures of the public sector, the reforms, importantly, positioned HRM at the centre of ensuring the effective and efficient delivery of public services (Hughes, 1998; 59).

Shim (2001: 323) summarises that with the application of NPM techniques, four key aspects of HRM were introduced in the African public sector. Firstly, the nature of HRM in the public sector took the form of HRM that was synonymous to the private sector where emphasis was on the efficient use of human resources (Ibid). Secondly, through the process of decentralisation, lower-level departments and line managers were accorded flexibility and freedom in HR management. Thirdly, through the process of performance contracting, in exchange for offering flexibility and freedom to the lower departments and line managers, governments aimed to achieve accountability of those departments and the line managers on HR management (Ibid). Lastly, through putting in place different NPM reforms for the good management of the public sector and human resources, government undertook an important role as the model to other organisations within and outside the civil service on HRM practice (Ibid). In the case of Malawi, adopting the ‘model employer’ approach follows from its historical coloniser (UK) which also falls under the same public service approach as noted in

chapter 3. Apart from these four aspects which illustrate the application of strategic HRM ethos in the African public sector organisations, through NPM reforms, there was also greater emphasis on ensuring that communication and information technologies form part of the implementation of the reforms and delivery of services (Ibid) as new best practice for good governance (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011).

However, despite that the implementation of NPM reforms was deemed a success for some African countries, many countries continued to face economic and administrative challenges (Larbi 1999: 9; Omoyefa 2008: 28). Research also suggests that there was limited success in the implementation of performance contracting and pay and grading reforms in countries such as Uganda, South Africa, Ghana, Senegal and Botswana (Hope, 2002). It has been speculated that failure of NPM reforms to register successes regardless of what was viewed as a conducive environment for reforms in most African countries could be attributed to lack of cultural foundation of those NPM reforms (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011). NPM reforms were designed and influenced heavily by the western governments and bodies like the IMF and World Bank (Kamoche et al. 2012). In exchange of foreign aid, African countries were pressured to implement these reforms in their public sectors which did not consider the socio-cultural context of those countries (Ibid). The reforms could not improve the African public sectors because the western-based administrative structures that were targeted for reforms still operated alongside an informal, yet more influential, prebendal system of clientelism and patronage. While these values are, in fact, rooted in many African traditions and reflect trust, reciprocity, and material exchanges (Pitcher et al. 2009; Yanguas & Bukenya 2015), the crucial co-option of these values during the colonial phase should not be forgotten in assessing failures, and to understand the potential limitations to public service motivation in the post-colonial context. The making and shaping of the societies during colonial times, with the divide and conquer approach specifically with regards to including some parts from the artificially designed countries, creating ‘tribes’ and ‘chief’ systems without including the black population, leaves the question of how ‘authentic’ these values can be today more complicated than some literature suggests.

#### **4.2.The role of ‘African culture’**

Cultural dimensions have been discussed already, mainly in the perspective of their coercive co-option. In the following, the ‘Cultural uniqueness’ thesis will be presented and discussed. The concept of cultural uniqueness argues that the African context contains unique and distinctive values and norms which should be utilised to understand management practices (Kuada 2006). In this context, in particular the resource-based view theory (Kuada 2006; Rasheed et al. 2017), cultural values are often regarded as a source for competitive advantage, and they are framed as rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. African management research has tried to understand what values and beliefs would signify an indigenous African philosophy of management. However, as might become evident given the size and complexity of the African context, the diversity and disintegration of Africa along the lines of ethnicity (relating to the existence of about 2,000 different ethno-cultural communities), history (relating to who colonised those countries), politics (relating to the processes of either dictatorship or democratisation after colonial independence) (Kamoche et al. 2004) makes it as convincing to speak of ‘African’ cultures as it would be to address ‘Asian’ cultures as a unifying set of values.. That said, some academics have used the notion of ‘African Thought system’ which brings together common African values and beliefs, deemed useful for understanding the ‘African Management context’ (Blyden 1908; Nzelibe 1986; Kamoche 1997).

These literatures assume that an African thought system is a philosophy which informs what would be regarded as the ways of life or work behaviours for an African context (Blyden 1908;29; Kamoche 1997;545), largely summarised as traditionalism and communalism. Traditionalism relates to the ‘adherence to accepted customs, beliefs, and practices that determine acceptable behavior, morality, and the desired characteristics of the individual in African society’ (Nzelibe 1986;11). They may include beliefs relating to unity around the leader as well as solidarity\_(Pitcher et al. 2009). For example, the former President of Democratic Republic of Congo, Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko argued that;’...*In the United States and Europe, it is commonly accepted that enlightenment emanates from the clash of ideas. In Africa, we follow an ancestral policy in which, when a problem arises, we rally around the leader and work out a solution*’ (Elliot et al. 1990:21). In other words, emphasis is on the respect for the wisdom of seniors or leaders (Kamoche 1997). Traditional values have also implied a preclusion of competition in the African society apart from an enforcement of solidarity (Pitcher et al. 2009). Aspects such as precluding competition, avoiding clash of ideas

and glorifying wisdom of seniors are said to shape the prebendal system where managers reward loyalty to these values through patronage (Newbury 2003:8).

The second element of the said African thought system is communalism. This emanates from the belief that an individual does not exist alone but belongs to the community (Nzelibe, 1986). This is best captured in the concept of Ubuntu philosophy which define Africans as being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, and socially mature, among others (Otite 1978; Ahiauzu, 1986; Roux & Coetzee, 1994; Battle 1996). Being an African in this case implies being cooperative such that 'We', rather than 'I', becomes the law of African life (Blyden 1908:29). Thus, African contexts place more value on group interactions (Kamoche 1997). Unlike most western societies which observe individualism, the African thought system comprises a belief in the communalistic traditions which are based on the kinship-oriented socio-cultural values and a system of mutually benefitting reciprocities (Nzelibe 1986; Mabovula, 2011). Also related to communalism is the belief in family as a basic unit of socialisation where an individual is shaped into an effective participant in human interactions (Nzelibe 1986). With this belief, there is more adherence to the extended family concept (Kamoche 1997). These communalistic values are regarded as shaping the creation of kinship-based administration where there is utilisation of rewards, benefits, or privileges for personal benefit or through orientation to group or family (Yanguas & Bukenya, 2015). It must, however, be emphasised that other scholars suggest that these communalist principles such as Ubunthu only apply to certain regions in Africa such as the southern part where there is emphasis on communal harmony and interconnectedness (Mhlongo et al 2024). In other regions of Africa, such as in the west, it is suggested that there is co-existence of diverse groups which influences negotiation styles and decision-making processes different from the south (Ibid). This corresponds to the earlier argument of the disintegration of African societies in terms of shared values (Kamoche et al. 2004) which poses difficulties in using culture as an explanatory variable influencing HRM or employee voice.

Another drawback of the cultural uniqueness thesis in explaining the African context is that it does not demonstrate how African culture can be a critical source of competitive advantage or influence the nature of either HRM or employee voice in the African public sector organisations (Kuada, 2006). This is largely due to limited research not only on HRM in developing countries (Rees, 2013) but also on the influence of so called African culture on HRM, employee voice or the role of line managers (William & Yecalo-Tecle, 2020)., Understanding the norms of behaviour and expectations as a heuristic device, and add

traditionalism and communalism not as cultural features but as part of analysing the prebendal system could avoid reproducing neo-colonial tropes. The next sections provide a discussion on potential the implications of these communalist and traditionalist norms of behaviours and expectations on employee voice and the role of line managers.

#### **4.3.The emergence of employee voice in African public sector**

Just like HRM, employee voice is also under-researched in the developing countries such as those in an African context (Ajibade Adisa, 2023). Despite this limited research, public sectors in most African countries presents a unique context, different from those of the Anglo-Saxon countries, which impacts on employee voice. As discussed in section 4.1 and 4.2, public sectors in the African context are shaped by the post-colonial legacy, operation of the prebendal system which contrasts the western bureaucratic system as well as the role of African cultural values. Engaging with employee voice in a post-colonial context must acknowledge the complication that come with ‘voice’ in the first place. As discussed in section 4.1, the antecedents of public service systems in most African countries co-opted indigenous ‘voice’ based on a racial system; the shift towards the Washington consensus saw ‘voice’ coerced by economic pressures; NPM further made voice a transactional tool to deliver savings and efficiency. All these factors have played a role towards the emergence of employee voice in the public sectors of most African countries.

In the immediate post-colonial period, employee voice in most of the independent African countries existed on a collective level though with heavy restrictions. Learning from the experience of the intense liberation struggle against colonial authoritarianism in which collective voice through unions was key, most independent African states placed restrictions on the collective voice through one party and authoritarian systems to prevent revolts and to consolidate power within what were now young democracies (Budeli, 2012; Ajibade Adisa, 2023). This involved, as suggested by Budeli (2012;463), ‘...recruiting among members of trade unions or subjecting trade unions to the writ of government’. Union leaders were also turned into ‘stooges’, victimised with some fleeing into exile for voicing against the authoritarian independent regimes in countries like Ghana and Malawi (Dzimbiri, 2006; Ayentimi & Burgess, 2023). It also involved severely restricting the rights and freedom of association in the workplace (Budeli, 2012; Klerck 2016). In Malawi, for example, labour freedoms and rights were restricted through the Trade Union Act of 1958 and the Trade Dispute Act of 1952 (Chazan et al. 1994; Conroy 2006; Dzimbiri- 2008). In Kenya, similarly, after independence, the state fettered the influence of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions

which had been in front fighting for labour rights (Muasya & Walumbwa, 2023). Also, in Ghana, the dissolving of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in 1966 by the second independent government led by the progress party (PP) and the authoritarian gesture by the government led by the National Redemption Council (NRC) of reviving the TUC and demanding full support of the regime further illustrate restrictions on the collective voice structures by the independent regimes (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2023).

The idea in placing these legal restrictions on collective voice structures was that those in higher positions had to be held in high esteem such that voicing against them was regarded as improper (Ajibade Adisa, 2023). In other words, speaking against them acted like questioning their prerogative or social legitimacy (Marchington, 2007). In Malawi, speaking up with ideas aimed at changing work conditions (even if promotive) at the time was deemed as an act of insurgency towards Kamuzu (the president) who had ears and eyes everywhere to detect any dissenting murmurings (Mwanjawala 2020). The spies or administrators themselves were responsible for reporting any conflicting or contrary views and authoritarian actions were taken (Dzimbiri 2006; Dzimbiri- 2008). The legitimatised option in this context becomes the ‘reciprocity’ principle suggested Kuada (2006) where employees in organisations who faced problems or challenges needed to just reach out to their managers as leaders who were expected to provide guidance, direction or the solution to their problems or challenges. In such a threatening postcolonial context, workers in public workplaces could largely speak their issues through what Kuada (2006;100) calls, ‘closed networks’ which involved peers or close friends who were trustworthy. This represents an act of engaging in lateral voice as is the case in the public sector as discussed in section 3.2. In short, the post-colonial legacy shaped restrictions on collective voice structures in most independent African countries. As such, employees voicing through closed networks would be expected today in African countries like Malawi due to their postcolonial legacy.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in most African countries, there were calls for the establishment of the democratic and constitutional order (Budeli, 2012). These calls were necessitated by the economic challenges which the Washington phase, discussed in section 4.1, could not address as well as political problems created by the authoritarian leadership. The pressures also came from international financial institutions such as world Bank, IMF and other donors for African countries to undertake both political and economic liberalisation (Kraus, 2007). Within this context of pressures, trade unions re-emerged strongly and led these calls for democratisation and constitutional order just like with the last years of colonialism (Ibid).

In Zambia, for example, the Zambia Congress of Trade Union led the movement which led into the introduction of a new liberal democratic constitution in 1991 (Ibid). In Malawi, the legal and political structures improved with the creation of legal instruments, supporting collective mechanisms of employee voice such as the 1994 Constitution of Malawi, the Labour relations Act of 1996 and the industrial Relations Court (Tordoff 1997; McCracken 1998; Dzimbiri 2005; Dzimbiri 2008). Among other changes, there was creation of legal instruments which supported collective mechanisms of employee voice such as the 1994 Constitution of Malawi, the Labour relations Act of 1996 and the industrial Relations Court (Dzimbiri 2008;56-60). In Ghana, this phase was marked by the return of the constitutional order in 1991 which enabled unions to be able to represent and mobilise workers in safeguarding their rights and achieving their interests (Kraus, 2007). The argument is that in most African countries, the democratisation phase has led to the statutory protection of employee voice in collective terms in which trade unions have become powerful collective forces through which employees speak about their workplace issues (Klerck 2016).

In the democratisation phase, employee voice was also placed at the centre of NPM reforms in public sector organisations for the effective delivery of public services (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2011). In these reforms, as discussed in section 4.1, emphasis was on efficient utilisation of human resources which involved measures aimed at ensuring good communication between employers and employees (Ibid). In the efficient utilisation of human resources, line managers were also accorded greater flexibility, authority and freedom in human resource management which brought more usage of individualised forms of employee voice (Shim, 2001). Despite all these changes promising a thriving environment for employee voice, employees in the public sector in most African countries appear to still fear to voice their issues as illustrated below.

In a study by William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020;790) it was found that most employees in Ghana's public sector are reluctant to voice out new ideas which can make improvements in work practices. The few employees who speak up choose to speak on issues that are either narrow in scope or already exist on paper but not in practice (Ibid). Similarly, a study by Machokoto & Dzvimbo (2020;125) which was done in Zimbabwe also illustrates that most workers show willingness to offer constructive unlike destructive ideas. This is the same case one finds in the post-democratic era in Malawi. Public sector organisations in Malawi demonstrate prohibition of promotive voices through strategies such 'hide and seek' and 'divide and rule' (Dzimbiri 2005; 72-78). The 'hide and seek' strategies are 'strategies that

public organisations use to acknowledge the presence of union rights at one time and withdraw them at another' (Ibid). Examples of these include strategies such as 'recognition, labelling unionists as opposition agents, delaying tactics, use of state apparatus to suppress labour rights and unilateral decision making' (Dzimbiri 2005;74). Divide-and-rule strategies relate to 'alleged state sponsorship of splinter unions to create chaos in the labour movement' (Ibid). The idea is still to prohibit critical voices even if they may be promotive of improvements in organisational work practices. These examples appear to disprove the catching up thesis discussed in section 4.1 that employees in African contexts are passive and do not show interest to contribute towards improvements in the organisation. In other words, employees do have promotive ideas (narrow though they may be) and are willing to present them supportively and constructively but they are reluctant to do so because of line managers' hostility towards the voicers which still appears to exist in the African public sectors (William & Yecalo-Tecle, 2020). While Kuada (2006) relates this to the idea of reciprocity-values, where if employees face problems or challenges, they should just reach out to their managers as leaders who have the means to provide solutions, the systemic and repressive nature of the employment relation explains very material and legal concerns for employees for speaking up. The fear to speak to supervisors which William & Yecalo-Tecle (2020;790) demonstrates as existing in the public sector, can be explained in the same realm. The fear for punitive sanctions would lead employees to resort to speaking through closed networks as suggested by Kuada (2006).

This section argues that employee voice has been largely oppressed in most African public sectors as influenced by the legal, administrative and political institutions that are shaped by the co-opted African culture and postcolonial legacy. As line managers' involvement, which was expected to improve the efficient management of human resources, appears to do less in creating the conducive climate for employee voice, the next section elaborates on why this is the case.

#### **4.4. Line managers – complicated framing for a managerial role in African public sector.**

Discussions on public sector management in the African context are often tainted by a combination of the Cultural uniqueness and the catching up thesis: Managers are portrayed as holding cultural values that make them fail to adopt the good western management styles, or, as Kuada (2006; 98) puts it, African managers are viewed as, 'defying the cannons of good Western style management'. They, among others, preoccupy themselves with achieving personal gain or dealing with their personal problems at the neglect of organisational goals

(Montgomery 1987). In other words, they like to divert from rules or bureaucratic demands of the administrative structures in preference for their personal benefits or privileges or handling their personalistic issues. Their clinging to cultural norms would mean an exercise of more discretion not applicable to the exercise of conduit roles discussed in chapter 2. The assumptions brought forward are that managers hence would implement voice mechanisms in a way that suits their greater orientation to patronage which further takes away their commitment from the organisational objectives (Kuada, 2006).

In addition, the public sector is seen as less innovative as the private. Montgomery (1987) argues that the behaviours of managers in African public sector organisations cannot match up with those of managers in private sector. In other words, they are not risk-takers, experimenters, outward-looking, and client-oriented which would help them operate structures based on the private sector (Ibid). Their leadership behaviours are also characterised as being authoritarian, repressive and involving close supervision (Abudu 1986; Kuada 2006; O'Flynn 2007). This would mean little room for accommodating and utilising employee ideas that may be promotive but viewed by managers as being critical. In the catching up thesis, it is argued that managers demonstrate these managerial behaviours because their thinking taps from the African values embedded into the prebendal system which does not help them achieve practices like voice mechanisms (Boojihawon 2021). It is also given as the reason why multinational companies operating in African countries would import expatriates since local managers are unable to execute the vision resulting from their cultural bedrock of knowledge (Boojihawon 2021).

These literatures show that if one would not pay attention to any post-colonial continuity, African managers are 'in need' to unlearn negative culturally based managerial behaviours and be given training to learn western or private sector-based approaches for them to operate the administrative structures (Montgomery 1987; Richards 1991; Kuada 2006). However, it is argued that these and many other donor-funded western-based trainings still appear to revert to the usage of what is framed as traditions and values (Kuada 2006).

In this context it does not come as a surprise that line managers' role has been largely viewed negatively. The African values are viewed as shaping managerial behaviours which are authoritarian and only seeking to implement patronage as discussed in the catching up thesis (Kuada 2006). The manager becomes the most feared and employees try to do whatever they can not to attract his anger (Kuada 2006). Managers are seen to try to reward loyal employees who are ready to even shoulder the blame to buffer their superiors (Ibid). In this reciprocal

exchange of power and privileges, managers are found to lack responsibility, commitment to goals and showing negative attitude to work (Ibid). In this perspective, line managers are only driven by the search for power and privileges for them to implement voice mechanisms otherwise they lack responsibility and commitment. One would note that this is the view coming from the catching up thesis which suggests that management approaches in Africa have negative implications and need to be unlearnt to develop managerial approaches that resonate with those of the developed world (Jackson 2002).

By adopting this negative view of African culture, the challenge is that it neglects the positive notions of communalism and tradition, and hence unsees options for managers and their attitude to voice. Similarly, the traditionalist values such as unity around the leader have also been discussed in terms of how they shape repressive or authoritarian managerial behaviours without consideration of any positive behaviours that would emerge from such values. In one of the rare studies of line managers in an African context, a study by William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020) engages with line managers in the Ghana public sector. They assume that the hostility which line managers show towards promotive voice does not emerge from the organisational shared norms that are shaped by the societal structural, material, or cultural factors. Instead, they argue that the hostility is shaped by the line managers' psychological settings, and how they engage with the structural, material and cultural environment (Ibid). This is further elaborated in the sections below.

The first argument relates to how the structural aspects shape line managers' role. The argument is that sometimes line managers may be unreceptive to employee voice because they see it as contravening the rules embedded in the bureaucratic structure of the public sector (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). Public managers are viewed as being risk averse which make them not to implement employees' new ideas for fear of outcomes that would come after that implementation (Ibid). This idea was also found in the Catching up thesis advancing that line managers in the African public organisations are not risk-takers, experimenters, outward-looking, and client-oriented which make them fail to carry out their roles in the bureaucracy such as implementing voice mechanisms (Montgomery 1987). Structure, in this case, is discussed in terms of the rigidity and adherence to rules by managers which make them to become hostile to promotive voice (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). In other words, the structure offers a challenging opportunity in the AMO model for line managers to implement voice mechanisms. However, the findings of this study by William & Yecalo-Tecle (2020) revealed that structural rigidity and adherence to rules by line managers does not make them

look at promotive voice as being risky requiring prohibition. This, therefore, contradicts the catching up thesis.

The second argument relates to how the materialistic orientation of line managers make them become hostile to employee voice. In this argument, William & Yecalo-Tecle (2020) argue that line managers may prohibit employee voice because of fear that they may lose the material benefits which they gain from their position. This is viewed as a possibility in two ways. Firstly, implementing the ideas raised may turn the employee voicing as being more competent than the manager hence being promoted even above the manager in question (Ibid). Secondly, the voice could harm them materially as they may reduce opportunities such as rents if voices relate to reducing expenditure or preventing corruption (Ibid). Such arguments demonstrate that line managers may prohibit voice because of adherence to the informal prebendal system that was discussed in section 4.1. of this chapter. In other words, because of the need to maximise personal benefits which they gain from their position, line managers may be motivated, through the AMO model, to become hostile to ideas whose implementation would result in loss of personal benefits. The catching up thesis strongly advances this idea. In their findings, however, William & Yecalo-Tecle (2020) found that line managers would not oppose voice because they want to preserve material interests such as rents. Again, this contradicts the argument advanced by the catching up thesis about the negative influence of the prebendal system on the Weberian structure discussed in section 2.0. of this chapter.

The third argument relates to the generalised cultural aversion to voice where managers and employees would just share a norm that voice is not the way to go (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). With such shared expectations and norms, which would become demotivators to line managers through the AMO model, employee voice would just be discouraged in the organisation even if it does not contravene the rules or threaten the loss of material benefits (Ibid). It was also explained in section 4.0. of this chapter that line managers' hostility to voice in African public sector was shaped by cultural values such as traditionalism. This would also correspond with the catching up thesis that line managers in the African public sector lack responsibility and commitment to goals (Kuada 2006;101). Inherent in this philosophy is the assumption that public employees in developing countries are passive and indifferent to organisational performance such that they are always in constant need of supervision (Abudu 1986;18; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020;790). This is also regarded as a factor that separates public employees from those in private as the former are not motivated to express innovative

ideas, regarding that as an extra role requiring special compensation while the latter considering it as part of career advancement (Bysted & Hansen 2015). The key argument is that both employees and line managers agree that promotive voice is undesirable hence they are both not committed to it (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020;793). However, William & Yecalo-Tecle (2020) found no evidence of cultural opposition to employee voice in the Ghana Civil service which also contradicts the catching up thesis.

It needs to be noted though that William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020;791) approached the question from a work-psychology perspective and were interested in how managers create their self-image as leaders in higher positions in the hierarchy. They conclude that the ‘psychological aversion to promotive voice...derives specifically from the supervisor's position in the organizational hierarchy’ (William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020;791). This psychological self-image would, for example, be created from the traditional views that characterise the African context such as those that emphasise on them being the seniors whose wisdom should be respected by their subordinates (Kamoche 1997;538). Consequently, line managers would not be motivated to implement voice mechanisms to allow that employees have an input into the decision-making processes (Fast et al. 2014). Psychological reasons are not among the reasons which make line managers become hostile to voice according to the catching up thesis. However, the findings of William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020;804) made the point that line managers would be hostile to voice because of ‘a psychological threat to their hierarchical positions’. This offers a critique to the catching up thesis that reduces line managerial hostility to voice to the structural, material, and cultural characteristics of the African public sector context. Beyond that, these findings also provide evidence that further validation is needed to find out how these structural, material, and cultural characteristics of the African public sector context influence line managers’ AMO to implement voice mechanisms. This approach emphasises the effect of the cross-national interaction of African cultural values and beliefs with those of other continents like Europe and Asia in shaping managerial approaches (Kuada 2006; 106). It acknowledges that managers in African countries – as in other contexts - utilise specific values and beliefs in the way they develop their managerial approaches (Ibid). These values are rooted in societal norms and values as well as the post-colonial context.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the complexities of the political-economy and the macro-level context for analysing employee voice in the context of the post-colonial public sector. In the development of African public sector, the chapter highlights that the operation of the western-based administrative structure alongside the prebendal system offers a difficult context for the thriving of employee voice, implementation of relevant HRM practice and the role of line managers. Though the cultural values and norms (along with the postcolonial legacy) in most African countries appears to have strong influence on the creation of the prebendal system, these have been largely ignored in research in terms of how they create a context for employee voice and how it is facilitated by line managers. This is what the thesis attempts to achieve in using the structural, materialistic and cultural values and norms to explain how they create a context for employee voice and how it is implemented by line managers in public sector organisations. If voice concepts rely on ideas around values, however, the African context reflects a hybrid system that must be carefully framed within a postcolonial, neoliberal and cultural context. Hence, referring to ‘African culture and values’ are both necessary and not without danger of reproducing neo-colonial perspectives. Nevertheless, there is a need to consider that cultural norms of behaviours in most African countries have been shaped by a mix of forces which include postcolonial, neoliberal policies as well as the societal values.

## CHAPTER 5: THE MALAWI CASE

### 5.1. Introduction

Chapter 4 discussed the complexities of the political-economy and the macro-level context for analysing employee voice in the context of the post-colonial public sector. The current chapter narrows down the discussion to the consideration of the role of the Malawi national context in shaping line managers' facilitation of employee voice. Just like the broader African context, the chapter argues that the public sector in Malawi also appears to be shaped by the postcolonial legacy and the societal values such that there is an interplay of the patrimonial and cultural ideals. These are discussed as creating the individual, professional, and organisational barriers towards the thriving of collective voice structures as well as line managers' operationalisation of the individual voice structures.

### 5.2. The development of the Malawi public sector

The development of the public sector in Malawi, just like in most other African countries as discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.1), can also be understood through three restructuring phases - the colonial phase, the early phase of independence, and the maturing stage. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Malawi was a slave trade's major trading route until the British government colonised it from 1891 to 1963 (Conroy, 2006). The aim was to, as Conroy (2006:15) puts it, '...protect people from slavery...and...support Britain's strategic interests in southern Africa'. Without minerals, as was the case in the neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia, the British were attracted to Malawi for cheap labour and abundant cheap land (Dzimbiri, 2008). Wage employment was largely in the rail sector, farms or domestic places where workers were experiencing poor wages and working conditions (Dzimbiri, 2008). As a British colony, the Malawi public sector administrative systems approximated the British public service in terms of the governing principles and regulations (Dzimbiri, 2016; Mathur & Mulwafu., 2018). As Mtuwa and Chiweza (2023) argue, most of the governing principles and regulations were those based on the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1854) which advocated for, *inter alia*: merit-based recruitment; unified civil service in which clerks could be transferred between departments in preparation for senior roles; the hierarchical structure; regulation of promotions to only apply to qualified persons; and a system of probation before appointment. The idea was to establish administrative structures which were based on political impartiality and meritocracy as compared to political patronage in HRM practices such as hiring (Dzimbiri, 2016). However, these structures have been historically influenced by the patrimonial ethos through the chieftainship institution as well as the national cultural values as discussed below.

The influence of the patrimonial ethos in Malawi can be illustrated through the integration of the chieftainship institution into the British based administrative structures. In the wake of native unrests in some African countries and in response to Frederick Lugard's (the then Governor of British-ruled Nigeria) criticism of the direct rule which was created with these British based colonial administrative structures, a system of indirect rule was established in Malawi after the passing of the Native Authority and Native Courts Ordinances of 1933 (Baker, 1975). In this indirect rule, the chiefly authority was empowered and integrated into the British based administrative structures with the aim of: aiding the colonial government in executing other tasks such as collecting taxes and presiding over civil cases in the traditional courts; promoting inclusive institutions that would represent different interest groups; and instilling the colonial governance values in the people through trainings which were offered to chiefs (Kayira & Banda., 2018). Besides these aims, however, the major reason for integrating the chiefly authority was, as argued by Chiweza (2007), to control the rural masses, consolidate colonial authority and prevent potential native unrests. This reflects a regime that was seeking to consolidate as an autocracy according to a model of regime consolidation by Bratton and Mattes (2009) in which the demand for democracy by masses and the perceived supply by the colonial government exists at lower levels in equilibrium. The chiefs, in this set up, were torn between supporting the colonial masters who wanted to consolidate power through political patronage, on the one hand, and the dissidents in exile or nationalist politicians who started fighting for democracy and independence in the 1950s, on the other hand (Dzimbiri, 2008; Kayira & Banda., 2018). One would note that, in the colonial period, the quest for power consolidation by the colonial regime in Malawi led into the infiltration of the political patronage or patrimonialism ethos into the administrative structures through the indirect rule. This contrasts the political impartiality values contained in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report which formed the basis for the British based administrative structures.

The British based administrative structures, infiltrated by the patrimonial ethos, continued to be adopted by the post-colonial regimes in Malawi. In the immediate post-colonial regime of President Hastings Banda, the administrative structures continued to be highly centralised and hierarchical as influenced by the British structures (Kachimera, 2014). This regime also restructured the chieftainship institution in ways that aimed at consolidating the regime's political power just as was the case with the colonial regime (Kayira & Banda., 2018). Among other changes, the Chiefs Act was passed in 1967 with the aim of exploiting the chieftaincy institution, which was now hierarchically arranged, through subjecting it to the strict control of

the Malawi Congress party (MCP) government through the District commissioners (DCs) (Baker, 1975: Kayira & Banda., 2018). Through the chiefs Act of 1967, the chiefs became the auxiliary of the DCs in enforcing the MCP policies which were unpopular to most people such as tax collection and use of force on dissidents (Chiweza, 2007). The MCP government's 1969 reforms in the traditional court system also saw some senior chiefs accorded powers to preside over high-profile treason cases such as the one involving Orton Chirwa who had a fall out with President Banda (Chimango, 1997). Even after abolishing the traditional courts system and informalising the roles of chiefs through the 1994, the chiefly patrimonial authority still plays a significant role in the public sector (Kayira & Banda., 2018). Party politicians heading the top public sector offices still rely on the capacity of the chieftainship to gain hegemony over rural masses (Chinsinga, 2009; Kanyongolo, 2016). The idea has been to use chiefs to the regime's advantage through ensuring that '...the [chiefly] patrimonial authority [is] incorporated within the...hegemonic form of party power' (Chiweza 2007;61).

The formal and informal reliance on the chieftainship in the Malawi public sector structures is also a recognition of the role of national values, traditions and beliefs in the public sector. Chiefs have been regarded as custodians of these national values and beliefs as manifested through mobilisation of masses during annual festivals such as 'Chewa Heritage Foundation,' 'Mulhako wa Alhomwe' and 'Mzimba Heritage Foundation' (Kayira & Banda., 2018). The chiefs' mobilisation of rural masses during the colonial and postcolonial periods through roles such as maintaining law and order and collecting taxes also adds on the value which people give to the national traditions and values (Fukuyama, 2008). In Malawi, it is suggested that the social structure is based on ethnicity as well as communal and traditional values discussed in section 4.2 (See also, Hussein, 2005). However, it is suggested that in the public sector, the traditional values such as giving as an act of goodwill or respect for leaders are mostly abused such that they influence indulgence in nepotism and corruption, flouting of public sector regulations and subversion of public sector principles of meritocracy and impartiality (Hussein, 2005; Dzimbiri, 2009; Mtuwa & Chiweza, 2023). The national traditional and communal values are, therefore, regarded as playing an important role, in a negative sense, to the functioning of the public sector governance structures in Malawi (Also see, Fukuyama, 2008). As discussed in section 4.1, these national cultural values are also attributed as the cause for the failure of efforts such as structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and new public management reforms in the early 1990s, aimed at reforming the public sectors in most African countries including Malawi (Dzimbiri, 2009; Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2016). As Dzimbiri

(2009; 49) argue, ‘while [Malawi has] been successful in importing management structures, rules and procedures through reforms, [it is] yet to succeed in transforming the cultural aspects which make these reforms work’. The interplay of the western based administrative structures shaped by and going through a coercive colonial system and the influence of the national cultural values make the Malawi public sector as a unique context for understanding employee voice and, as this thesis argues, how it is facilitated by line managers.

### **5.3.Employee voice in the Malawi public sector**

Shaped by the colonial and post-colonial legacy as well as national cultural values, employee voice has historically operated in a restrictive and hostile environment. In the colonial period, when local labourers who took up wage employment in rail sector, farms or domestic places were experiencing poor wages and working conditions, their collective force could do little to improve those conditions (Dzimbiri, 2008). Freedoms to bargain for fair wages or association were heavily restricted by the Trade Union Act 1958 and the strikes were restricted by the Trade Dispute Act 1952 (Ibid). This restrictive legal framework also caused a few trade unions which were created such as The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and African Trade Union (CATU) to fail to represent workers’ interests until in the late 1950s when there was emergence of nationalist politicians who started fighting for independence (Ibid)

Expectations were high when the independence government was being formed in 1964 that labour freedoms and rights were going to be promoted (Conroy 2006). These expectations were frustrated by the immediate transition into an authoritarian one-party regime which continued to limit the labour freedoms and rights within the same colonial legal context of the Trade Union Act of 1958 and the Trade Dispute Act of 1952 (Dzimbiri- 2008; Chazan et al 1994). Among other worst examples, trade unions were streamlined from 19 to 5, union leaders either became ‘stooges’ and had to dance the song of the state or fled into exile for speaking out on behalf of employees, and spies were planted at different public workplaces—causing fear among workers to articulate grievances (Dzimbiri 2006; Dzimbiri- 2008). Furthermore, the one-party regime severely restricted strikes and other voice mechanisms in the public service sectors which were delivering essential services such as Health, Security and utilities (Dzimbiri- 2008).

In a period prior to or early 1990s, pressure started mounting for the second wave of the multiparty democracy in African countries with repressive regimes such as Malawi (Dzimbiri 2005; Dzimbiri 2008). These pressures were being exerted from both external forces such as

western governments, World Bank and IMF through making democratisation as a precondition for financial assistance as well as from internal forces which included the influence of the pastoral letter from the catholic bishops, the pressure groups and the widespread strikes from 1992 to 1993 (Dzimbiri 2005; Tordoff 1997). The result was the second wave of multiparty dispensation from 1993 which greatly improved the industrial relations policy framework in Malawi (McCracken 1998; Dzimbiri 2008). In terms of employee voice, there was a creation of the legal instruments which supported voice opportunities such as the 1994 Constitution of Malawi, the Labour relations Act of 1996 and the industrial Relations Court (Dzimbiri 2008;56-60). For example, section 31 of the Malawi Constitution provides the rights to fair and safe labour practices and to form and join trade unions. Similarly, the Labour Relations Act of 1996 (last amended in 2021), in its part IV, sets the framework for collective bargaining and organisational rights of employees. The Malawi public service management policy (See Malawi Government, 2018) also provides for the institutionalisation of the grievance management system in which public sector employees are equipped with knowledge on what constitutes grievances and how they can be managed. The same policy also provides for the need to capacitate the supervisors and leaders who are regarded as important in grievance management.

The industrial relations framework that has been created in the Malawi public sector implies that there is dominance of the collective structures of employee voice such as unionisation, and collective bargaining as suggested by George Dzimbiri (2016). These structures are supported by the Malawi Constitution, Labour Relations Act as well as other labour institutions such as Industrial Relations Court and labour office (Ibid). In the case of unionisation, the post democratic dispensation has seen growth of trade unions in many sectors such as teaching (Teachers Union of Malawi), Agriculture (Agriculture and Plantation workers) and for all civil servants (Civil Servants Trade Union) (Ibid). These unions have also been created in the public service sectors which deliver essential services such as health (Medical Doctors Union of Malawi) and utility (Water Employees Trade union of Malawi) where in the immediate post-colonial period, voicing was heavily restricted to avoid disruption of service delivery (Dzimbiri 2008; Pensulo 2020; PSI 2020).

Despite the growth of these unions, their relevance in representing employees' interests has been questioned in the Malawi public sector. Chapter 4 highlighted that, in the Malawi public sector, organisations employ the 'divide and rule' and 'hide and seek' tactics which hinder the role of unions (Dzimbiri 2005; 72-78). The 'divide and rule' tactics have involved the creation

of sprinter unions, buying off union leadership, and intimidating employees to fire them if they utilise other voice mechanisms while the ‘hide and seek’ tactics have included labelling trade unionists as opposition agents, delays in implementing agreements and unilateral decision making (*Ibid*). In some cases, the political actors have taken deliberate policy actions aimed at denying employees access to voice. For example, the International Trade Union confederation faulted the Malawi Government for the action in amending the Labour Relations Act, in 2021, which appeared to limit the right to strike and punishing workers who exercise this right (Mzungu 2021; np). The said bill, which has now turned into law, relates to the amendment of section 46 (4) of the Malawi Labour relations Act which now states that, ‘An employee shall receive wages for a maximum of three days in a year where he or she is absent from work due to participation in a strike, whether such absence is consecutive or not or related to the same subject of the strike or not. One would note that such laws have the potential to discourage participation in union activities.

In the case of grievance handling procedures, George Dzimbiri (2016) argues that these are not effective as avenues for addressing employee voice issues. It is suggested that trust lacks between management and employees in terms of addressing the issues which employees have (*Ibid*). Since these voice structures are usually management-initiated, this boils down to employees’ perceptions discussed in section 2.1 that these structures mainly serve interests of management and not employees and under management’s control (Avgar et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2023). It was also discussed that largely they limit employees to the expression of job-related issues rather than wider employment issues (Guest & Pecce. 2001). Another issue with grievance handling procedures is, according to the Malawi public service management policy (2018), that they are not effectively operated by supervisors or line managers. This is because these actors lack the capacity which demands that they should be adequately trained for this role (*Ibid*). This discussion suggests that while the collective voice structures such as unionisation, collective bargaining and grievance procedures appear to exist in the Malawi public sector organisations, it is not clear whether they are relevant towards the provision of voice opportunities to employees.

#### **5.4.Voice facilitation in the Malawi public utilities sector**

One issue discussed in Section 5.2 is that the public utilities sector in Malawi demonstrates to have structural barriers to employee voice hence this section delves deep into it. In the sectors which Government regard as essential or sensitive to the delivery of public services, studies appear to agree that there are strong barriers for employees to voice (Leat 2007). In such sectors

such as Security, Health and utilities, the state exerts strong influence in terms of laws and other direct interventions to avoid the critical services' delivery from being disrupted (Leat 2007; Gottschall et al. 2015). In the health sector, for example, studies (Almeida et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2021) suggest that there are individual, professional, and organisational barriers which make it difficult for line managers to contribute towards ensuring that employees have voice. In some cases, in these essential or sensitive sectors, employees are even excluded from enjoying some legal rights such as using certain forms of voice (Leat 2007). In the security sector, Brooks (2017) also found that employee voice can be a risky undertaking negatively affecting career progression for an employee. In such essential industries, thus, Government justifies institutionalization of these barriers to voice with an argument that this is being done in the best interest of the public and that the state would try to provide good working conditions such as competitive pay considering that these employees render essential services (Leat, 2007; Christopoulou et al., 2014). With these barriers, one would anticipate seeing wider gaps in the way voice practices are facilitated by line managers.

The Malawi public utilities sector offers another evidence of the context with barriers to voice facilitation. It was, firstly, discussed in Chapter 4 that historically, from independent one-party regime, the public utility organizations have been restrictive of employee voice with organizations employing approaches such as 'hide and seek' and 'divide and rule' (Dzimbiri 2005; Dzimbiri- 2008). State, through board of directors, develops strong interest as shareholder in the Malawi utility organisations because of the criticality of the utility services being rendered to the public. The board of directors have become a tool which state actors use to transmit their interests into the public utility organizations which appear to restrict voice (Gwede 2020; NPC 2021). Just like other sub-Saharan public utility service providers, Malawi public utility organisations have continuously also been 'under financial duress' (World Bank, 2021). As most of these utility organisations are parastatal organisations which must generate their own revenues through selling utility services to the public, they are continuously faced with non-payment of utility bills because of economic struggles of customers (Magalasi 2021; Nyasatimes 2020). As a result, most of the utility organisations face financial related challenges (Nyasatimes 2020; Malawi Government 2020; Khamula 2021). With such financial difficulties, one would anticipate that line managers would have lack of access to resources for them to be able to undertake activities aimed at implementing voice practices (Shand et al. 2023). The resulting poor working conditions and general economic challenges would not only make employees express prohibitive voice but also make them fear to speak up even if the

means are provided since voice is viewed as a risky undertaking (Janardhanan et al. 2022; Rafique et al. 2023).

While the public utilities sector, in general, and the Malawi public utilities sector, in particular, demonstrates to a context with barriers to voice facilitation, research studies have mostly ignored it as a context for understanding employee voice. Most employee voice studies (For example, Tsameti et al., 2021; William & Yecalo-Tecle, 2020) have been undertaken in the wider central government institutions. A few studies that have aimed at understanding employee voice in the essential services have focused largely on the health sector (For example, Almeida et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2021) with a few studies done in the public security sector (for example, Brooks 2017) or the utilities sector (for example, WERS study in Kersley et al. 2006:108-143). The public utilities sector in developing countries like Malawi appears to have received little or no attention in terms of understanding line managers' voice facilitation. This necessitates the use of the Malawi public utilities sector as the context for understanding the nature of voice-related HR practices and how they are implemented by line managers.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

The chapter demonstrates how the Malawi public sector, shaped by the colonial and postcolonial legacy as well as cultural values, acts as a unique context for understanding employee voice. It has been argued that though the Malawi public sector was initially structured around the British based principles of meritocracy, political impartiality and bureaucracy, the colonial regime's quest for authority consolidation and control of rural masses replaced political impartiality with patrimonialism through the chiefly patrimonial authority. The chapter, in this case, argues that the patrimonial tendencies and the cultural values creates a unique context of the Malawi public sector for understanding employee voice and how it is facilitated by line managers. In this context, barriers exist which work against the effectiveness of voice structures. In terms of collective voice structures such as unionisation, it has been discussed that organisational tactics such as 'divide and rule' and 'hide and seek' tactics as well as national HRM policies act as barriers. For individual voice structures such as grievance procedure systems, it has been discussed that employees avoid voicing through them and line managers lack skills to drive employees towards utilising these systems when voicing. These barriers to employee voice appear to be especially pronounced in the Malawi public utilities sector where only a few studies have been conducted to explore the nature of employee voice and how it can be facilitated by line managers.

## **CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter summarises theoretical concepts discussed in earlier chapters and uses these to develop the conceptual framework and research questions for the thesis. The key argument developed in the earlier chapters is that to understand how voice is practiced in organisations, there is a need to consider the individual line manager, as well as the organisational, public sector and wider national layers of context. Adopting voice-related HR practices in organisations to achieve voice quality is complex. This thesis suggests considering the well-established idea of the facilitative role of line managers but argues that context matters, including the influence of multiple layers of organisational, public sector and the role of the state. The thesis, therefore, aims to explore factors influencing line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within an organisational and national context – the African public sector. To realise this aim, the thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature and quality of voice-related HR practices that are adopted in the public sector organisations?
2. In what ways (or through performance of what roles) do line managers contribute to the implementation process of these voice-related HR practices?
3. What (and in what ways do) factors within the multiple layers of organisational, public sector and national African context influence line managers' implementation of the voice-related HR practices in organisations.

These three research questions and their sub-questions are elaborated in the sections below.

### **6.2. Conceptualising the adoption of voice-related HR practices and their intended implementation in public sector organisations**

Chapter 2 introduced multiple perspectives in conceptualising employee voice but argued that it is appropriate to frame the current thesis using a unitary approach while acknowledging more critical pluralist and radical perspectives. Based on a unitary perspective, HRM and OB scholars agree that the adoption of voice-related HR practices is motivated by strategic outcomes aligned to positive employee voice promises. Organisations are expected to make decisions relating to the adoption of HR practices (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). The outcomes of these decisions reflect 'intended' voice-related HRM practices. 'Intended' HRM practices

are defined by Fu et al. (2020;204) as, 'HR practices that the firm's executives seek to establish to increase firm performance'. These practices represent the outcome of the process of developing organisational HR strategy which senior managers and HR personnel regard as the best at eliciting employees' affective and cognitive behavioural responses essential for organizational success (Wright & Nishii 2013;9-10). Under the unitary perspective, HRM literature (see, Rees et al. 2013, Fu et al. 2017 & Nechanska et al. 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020) emphasise the managerial perspective to employee voice in which management-sponsored and direct types of voice channels are regarded as key to according employees with voice opportunities and supporting organisational goals. These management-sponsored voice practices involve employees voicing through channels such as meetings, written mechanisms (such as surveys, emails, grievance processes and suggestion schemes) and downward mechanisms (such as noticeboards) (Harlos 2001; Kersley et al. 2006; Marchington & Suter 2013).

To enact management-initiated voice practices, the HRM implementation literature (see Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Jiang & Messersmith 2018, Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Harley 2020 & Mowbray et al., 2021) emphasises that organisations can rely on the role of line managers. These line managers are expected to consistently, with reduced discretionary behaviours, implement these management-led voice mechanisms for employees to utilise them and have voice opportunities to contribute towards achieving organisational objectives (Harlos, 2001; Marchington and Suter, 2013). Researchers in HRM emphasise how management-led or direct voice practices, which are regarded as 'intended' practices, and the role of line managers, can help in facilitating employee voice in organisations. OB research also emphasises that voice opportunities in organisations are provided through management-sponsored voice practices but gives more weight to the organisational actors' behaviours and the psychological safety climate as a context for the thriving of employee voice in organisations (Leat 2007; Ashford & Barton, 2007; Morrison 2011; Nechanska et al. 2020). Focus is, therefore, on the 'group (e.g., managers' openness) and individual (e.g., prosocial motives) as the antecedents of workers' decision to voice' (Huang et al., 2023;2). The focus is on understanding how organisational actors' behaviours and the psychological safety climate create a conducive context in which employee voice contributes to organisational improvement (Leat 2007; Morrison 2011; Nechanska et al. 2020). Employee voice is reduced to prosocial behaviour involving three flows, to (1) peers, (2) immediate supervisors and (3) other managers (Detert et al., 2013). However, as Detert et al., (2013) admit and as also argued by Morrison (2014), voicing to peers or outside the formally established voice structures is defined as a

disruption to the organisation's harmony. Through the unitary perspective, both OB and HRM literature advance the idea of intended voice related HR practices. These practices are supported by management and are based on the assumption of functioning, that is, pro-social behaviour amplifying role for organisational actors such as line managers in implementing these practices.

This perspective often fuels the 'unsubstantiated myths' that voice practices can only drive business success if they are introduced on management terms (Gennard & Judge 2005; Kaufman 2020). It neglects diverse interests that exist in organisations between management and employees as well as other factors in the institutional and wider national context which shape the intended voice-related HRM practices historically shaping the organisation (also, Freeman & Medoff, 1985; Batt et al. 2002; Wilkinson et al. 2020; Syed, 2020).

The pluralist view of voice (see chapter 2) acknowledges the promotive voice dimension that is emphasised in the unitarist perspective but gives more weight to what is understood as remedial voice dimension. Here, the assumption is that organisations are comprised of sectional groups with conflicting interests (Guest & Peccei 2001; Lewis et al. 2003; Heery 2016). Since the employer holds the advantaged position in power and authority which needs to be checked and balanced (*Ibid*), employee voice is regarded as a tool for asserting workers' interests and checking managerial unilateral actions (Harley 2020; Avgar et al. 2020). This conflictual setting necessitates remedial voice behaviours, in both defensive and destructive sense, which may mostly be expressed through the employee-initiated or indirect voice forms as they may not always be comfortable to management to be expressed through management-sponsored platforms (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Johnstone, 2024). A pluralist perspective would suggest that intended voice related HR practices in organisations should be employee-initiated. However, given the power imbalance, it is assumed management tends to make attempts to either preoccupy the employee-initiated voice forms with management-initiated activities or to change them from serving employees' remedial interests into serving management's promotive interests to reinforce power and authority (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013; Alang et al., 2020; Avgar et al., 2020).

In the radical view of voice, a structured antagonism is acknowledged. The tensions between the conflicting interests and the power assigned to employees sees management occupying employee-driven voice forms. Employee initiated voice is regarded as an obstruction to the

attainment of positive organisational outcomes or preservation of power and authority (Kaufman, 2014).

Conflicting evidence exists on the efficacy of the employee-driven voice forms in organisations especially those of the public sector. On the one hand, some studies (Beaumont 1995; Winchester & Bach, 1999, Farnham 2002; Kersley et al., 2006; Dundon & Gollan 2007; Kochan et al. 2019; Avgar et al. 2020) suggest that these employee-led or indirect voice forms are in decline in most public sector organisations, with a shift towards management-led voice forms. Chapter 3 supported this by arguing that the emergence of NPM reforms implied the decline of collective voice practices. Other scholars (Brown 2010; Barnes & Macmillan 2015; Kochan et al. 2019; Alang et al. 2020) suggest though that in public sector organisations, employee-led voice forms are adapted to management-led forms and assume the emergence of hybrid forms of voice practices. In other words, voice practices in the public sector are largely still adopted on management terms and not independent from management control (Gollan 2007). The indirect mechanisms, thus, are changed from being employee-initiated and serving employee interests to being management-initiated and serving interests of the organisation (Marsden 2007;1275-1276, Van Wanrooy et al. 2013;57 & Avgar et al. 2020;365).

The public sector has also other unique features that shape the nature of the adopted voice mechanisms. These unique features (see Chapter 3) which include rule-based structures, multiplicity of actors, paternalistic style of management, standardised employment practices and the aspiration to be a ‘model employer’. The last point importantly impacts on the employment relation. The assumption is made that public sector values translate into higher standards in job quality and orientation on democratic rights (Gottschall et al. 2014). In the context of this thesis, the specifics lead to the assumption that the public sector is receptive to specific voice practices. This may mean to observe more of the intended voice practices formalised through management-sponsored voice mechanisms, and less individualised or informal voice mechanisms which are more suitable to the flexible structures of the private sector (Gennard & Judge 2005; Kersley et al., 2006). The rigid structures of the public sector were also, as discussed in chapter 3, as not transmitting the motivation to employees for voicing through the management-led voice mechanisms. Instead, it was suggested that employees prefer voicing through lateral means. The multiple goals and stakeholders in the public sector as well were discussed in chapters 3 as creating barriers for the intended voice practices (whether management sponsored, or employee initiated) to achieve the voice quality. In fact, voice literature (see, Wright & Nishii 2013;10; Nishii & Paluch 2018; Kochan et al. 2019;

O’Shea & Murphy 2020) suggests that most of the intended voice-related HR practices in public sector organisations are not actualised or do not transmit voice opportunities to employees such that there are wider gaps between intended and actual practices. This raises, first, questions of the nature of the intended voice related HR practices that are adopted in public sector organisations and the interests which they serve, whether management or employees. Second, since line managers are expected to play a role in translating the intended into actual voice practices, the voice gaps in public sector organisational context raises the issue of the nature of the formal role allocated to line managers in implementing the intended voice related HR practices. RQ 1 thus can be refined in three respects:

RQ1 Given the unique employment relations of the public sector, what is the nature and quality of the intended voice-related mechanisms that are adopted in public sector organisations? i.e. (a) To what degree are the intended voice related HR practices, management-led or individualised versus employee-led or collectivist? (b) What is the formal role allocated to line managers as conduits of intended practice?

### **6.3. Line managers’ actual implementation and quality of voice-related HR practices**

The HRM implementation literature (for example, Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Nishii & Paluch 2018; Fu et al. 2020) suggests that failure of voice practices to satisfy the voice quality criteria has to do with gaps in their implementation by line managers. These line managers are placed at the centre of implementing the intended HR practices such as those relating to employee voice and ensuring that these are actualised in terms of attaining quality outcomes (Guest and Bos-Nehles., 2013; Fu et al. 2020). Yet their roles in translating the intended voice-related HR practices into actual practices can differ (Nishii & Paluch 2018, Fu et al. 2020).

Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) argue that line managers are either led by the values or priorities set by HR and the organisation or they may follow their own ways based on due to many factors such as time pressures, competing priorities or lack of commitment towards implementing the practices. Chapter 2 discussed three roles line managers might play during the implementation of intended voice practices, namely line managers as ‘conduits’, ‘engineers of adaptability’ and ‘translators’. Roles as conduits are based on the optimistic thesis of HR devolution (Hutchinson, 1995; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999) with emphasis on compliance and consistency as well as demanding that line managers should be ‘robotic conformists’ to what has been written down by HR or senior managers (Floyd & Wooldrid 1992; Harney & Yi Lee 2022). This understanding reduces proactive behaviours of line managers while making them

‘work to rule’ without discretion (Legge 2005: 209). The assumption is that line managers will be provided all the necessary HR support in executing the roles with senior managers expected to create a conducive culture for implementation (Guest & Bos-Nehles., 2013). In understanding their roles as ‘engineers of adaptability’, line managers have agency and they may introduce their own interventions in implementing voice practices which can, over time, become a binding common practice (Brown, 1972; Floyd & Wooldrid., 1992; Harney & Yi Lee, 2022). Here, line managers are engaging based on formalised discretion (Harney & Yi Lee 2022). The roles of line managers as ‘translators; represent a shift towards the exercise of discretion or proactive behaviours by line managers in implementing voice mechanisms (Giddens, 1984; Van Mierlo et al., 2018; Harney & Yi Lee 2022; Mowbray et al., 2022). Line managers utilise their interpretive schemes to translate, or, to make sense of what they understand of HR policies and devise their own approaches in implementing voice-related HRM practices.

As evident from the discussion of line manager roles in implementing voice practices, it is not clear what line managers do in this process. Therefore, many studies (Wright & Nishii 2013; Mierlo et al. 2018; Alang et al. 2020) have called for further enquiry into the typology of roles which line managers undertake in the HRM implementation process. What is known, however, is that there is mostly a gap, wider in the public sector, between the intended voice-related HR practices and what is implemented in practice (Wright & Nishii 2013;10: Kochan et al. 2019;28-31& O’Shea & Murphy 2020). This reflects that line managers, as key actors in HRM implementation, do not always implement in ways that would achieve the quality of those voice-related HRM practices

In terms of the perceived quality of voice-related HR practices, literature suggests a range of dimensions by different scholars (Dachler & Wilpert 1978; Gollan & Patmore 2013; Huang et al. 2023). First, the degree of accessibility of voice practices to the decision-making process means that voice practices should create a structure in which employees’ suggestions are taken up and form part of the decision that are made. Second, the range and importance of issues covered are crucial for voice quality. Management and employees may attach different importance to voice practices with management prioritising promotive voice practices while employees attach more importance to remedial practices. Last not least, the rules and range of people involved, their base of legitimacy and the extent of usage of voice exchange give insights into quality (Ibid). Quality in this case is understood in terms of the ability of the voice-related HRM practices in according the voice opportunities to employees in terms of

accessibility, importance of issues exchanged, and the rules and range of people involved (Ibid).

Line managers play a role to ensure that voice mechanisms adopted in organisations meet the above litmus test in achieving voice quality. Chapter 3 discussed many reasons related to the public sector context that make line managers fail or struggle to implement the intended voice-related HR practices in ways that would achieve voice quality. First, while the conduit role of line managers appears to augur well with the rule-based structures of the public sector, the existence of multiple influences in the public sector poses a big challenge. The presence of multiple influences and stakeholders were found as distorting the rules and structures in terms of who can tell line managers what to practice in implementing voice mechanisms (Noordegraaf, 2015; Alford et al. 2017). The multiplicity of actors in the public sector also means that line managers' access to resources for undertaking their implementation roles as well as autonomy in the implementation process are challenging (Alford et al. 2017; Brunetto & Beattie, 2019), making it difficult for line managers to influence the process of implementing voice related HR practices as expected by the HRM implementation literature (see, Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Fu et al. 2020).

While the adaptability and translator roles of line managers, involving application of different degrees of flexibility and discretion, appear to contrast with the rule-based structures of the public sector, practical evidence in the public sector suggests that these roles are practiced in the implementation of voice related HR practices (Rainey & Bozeman., 2000; Alang et al., 2020). It has been suggested that line managers capitalise on the loopholes of organisational policies to come up with their own ways of implementing HR practices (Kersley et al., 2006; Dundon & Gollan 2007). This reflects the flexibility element of the NPM reforms which were applied in the public sector from the private sector as well as the paternalistic or humanistic values of the public sector (Chapter 3, also see Farnham & Horton, 1996; Knies et al. 2018; Knies et al., 2022). However, in terms of employee voice, these discretionary behaviours were discussed in Chapter 3 as having negative implications in terms of managers using the paternalistic values to only implement those aspects of the practices or policies which please them hence; limiting voice options to employees (Corby and White 1999; Forsyth, 2011; Gollan & Patmore 2013; Alang et al. 2020); creating employees' negative perceptions towards using certain voice forms (See, Kersley et al., 2006, Dundon & Gollan 2007); and leading to inconsistent interpretation and implementation of the intended voice practices (Alang et al. 2020). In short, while the adaptability and translator roles would be regarded as not suiting the

rule-based structures of the public sector, evidence suggests that they are still practiced by line managers in the implementation of voice practices because of the presence, in the public sector, of other characteristics such as paternalistic or humanistic values. However, the practice of these roles does not suggest contribution towards achieving high quality voice-related HR practices. This mixed evidence leads to the further refining of Research Question 2 as below.

RQ2 (a) What roles do line managers play (beyond their formal roles) in the implementation of voice-related HR practices in public sector organisations?

RQ2 (b) To what extent do the implemented voice-related HR practices allow employees voice opportunities?

RQ2 (c) To what extent do these roles contribute towards the implementation of high-quality voice-related HR practices; i.e., do line managers play a role in defining what issues are important, legitimacy attached to voices and issues, which rules and people are involved and the extent of usage of voice exchange?

#### **6.4. Contextual influences shaping line managers' implementation of voice-related HRM practices**

##### **6.4.1. Organisational support and Line managers' ability, motivation and opportunity**

For line managers to practice roles aimed at implementing voice related HR practices, they require organisational support. As discussed in chapter 2, the conduit roles assume that there would be adequate support or 'allocative facilities' from the organisation in terms of money and other resources for line managers to use in the practice of those roles (Van Mierlo et al., 2018). This is supported by the resource-based view which advocates for the creation of unique strengths and capabilities of employees as a critical internal resource based on their value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability (Rasheed et al., 2017). For line managers to have the strength and capabilities for implementing the voice related HR practices, therefore, it is suggested that they need to be provided with good organisational support in terms of clear policies, good HR support, adequate capacity in terms of time and other resources such as training and rewards (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Harley, 2020). This represents what Kehoe and Han (2020) regards as the immediate organisational context in which HR and management are expected to equip line managers with skills or provide them with all the necessary resources for implementing voice related HR practices.

The horizontal integration dimension of HRM, discussed in chapter 2, adds further that to develop line managers' unique strengths and capabilities for implementing voice related HR practices, there is need to consider organisational support in terms of the cumulative effect of the skills-enhancing, motivating enhancing and opportunity enhancing practices (Knies & Leisink, 2018; Harley, 2020). In other words, the cumulative effect of the integrated *ability-enhancing practices*, *motivating-enhancing practices* and *opportunities-enhancing practices* (AMO) is regarded as important towards the implementation of voice related HR practices (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Fu et al. 2017; Malik 2018; Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Siddique et al. 2019; Mowbray et al, 2021). This is because they are regarded as transmitting the ability, motivation and opportunity which have been discussed in chapter 2 as important for line managers to demonstrate good behaviours for implementing voice related HR practices (Ibid). The argument is based on what Kehoe and Han (2020) regards as the individual line manager factors which act as a context that shape the implementation of voice-related HR practices. At this individual level, as also supported by the HRM implementation models, line managers require *ability* in terms of skills, HR knowledge and resources (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018), *motivation* in terms of personal and organisational incentives, shared norms and self-image (Van Mierlo et al. 2018; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020), and *opportunity* in terms of HR (and policy) support, capacity and time to implement voice mechanisms (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Fu et al. 2017). This has been termed the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) context.

Other scholars (Op de Beeck et al. 2016; Townsend & Mowbray 2020) have used role theory to suggest that for line managers to act with their full capacities towards implementing voice related HR practices, perceptions of HR and senior managers, on the one hand, and line managers, on the other hand, also play a role. These perceptions of the organisational support and individual capacity were discussed in Chapter 2 as affecting the degree of devolution and line managers' implementation of voice-related HR practices (Op de Beeck et al., 2016). If line managers perceive that as part of organisational support, voice practices need to be designed well, they may show some level of resistance to implement if they realise that, in practice, the voice mechanisms are hard to implement (Townsend & Mowbray., 2020). Similarly, if HR and senior managers underestimate the individual capacity of line managers to implement voice practices, they may give them less or no implementation responsibilities but aim at equipping those line managers with necessary skills (Op de Beeck et al., 2016). The converse would also be true, that if HR and senior managers overestimate the individual capacity of line managers,

they may do less in providing line managers with other types of ‘allocative facilities’ (Van Mierlo et al., 2018) such as content-related advice and coaching on tasks for implementing voice-related HR practices (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013).

Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the issue of resource constraints in the public sector where there are many workforce-related and operational challenges, such as austerity, pay freezes and shrinking budgets (Turkyilmaz 2011 & Ibrahim & Al Falasi 2014; Jin & McDonald 2017; Pepra-Mensah & Kyeremeh 2018). Moreover, as argued in Chapter 4, public sector organisations operating in developing country settings like Africa, as compared to those operating in developed settings, face additional resource constraints which make it difficult to support line managers in voice facilitation (Prouska & Psychogios 2018). In such developing country contexts line managers’ facilitation of voice may be too demanding. For example, existing economic contexts are characterised by factors like high unemployment rates which make employees shun utilising formal voice practices for fear of consequences of engaging in voice as a risky undertaking which could make them become unemployed (Prouska & Psychogios 2018; Kougiannou 2023). Similarly, Chapter 4 highlighted that employees in the African context are often seen as passive and indifferent to organisational performance and, materialistically, only interested in achieving personal gain which make them fail to express ideas for organisational improvement through the formal voice avenues. The same chapter also highlighted that with postcolonial tensions that have redefined traditional and communalist cultural values, fear often seems to drive employees more towards voicing through ‘closed networks’ (Kuada 2006;100). This undermines, in part, line managers’ role to lead employees towards voicing through the organisations’ formal voice-related HR practices.

Thus, line managers’ voice facilitation in the African context promises to be a challenging task, necessitating adequate organisational support which, ironically, cannot be provided to line managers because of resource constraints. This raises the question of what kind of HR or management support is given to line managers in public sector organisations in developing countries and how this support contributes to line managers’ ability to ensure that subordinates have voice opportunities. This is explored in this thesis through the following research questions.

RQ3 (a) What is the nature of organisational support given to line managers in public sector organisations in the African Context?

RQ3 (b) In what ways does this support contribute towards:

- i. Line managers' ability to ensure that employees have voice opportunities?
- ii. Line managers' motivation to ensure that employees have voice opportunities?

#### **6.4.2. Public sector influence on line managers' implementation of voice-related HR practices**

In discussing the external context of the HRM implementation process, the thesis considered how the public sector, with government as an external stakeholder, may be more receptive to certain HRM practices than the private sector. This argument was considered in Chapter 3 and developed further in Chapter 4 to highlight the unique structural features of the public sector which shape how voice-related HRM practices are adopted and implemented in the public sector. In the present chapter (see section 6.4.1), the public sector is shown to act as a resource constrained context where it is difficult to find resources in supporting line managers in their voice facilitation responsibilities. Chapters 2-4 also discussed how the bureaucratic structural features of the public sector would negatively shape line managers' AMO and act as obstacles for line managers to ensure that their subordinates have voice opportunities. To this effect, it was argued in Chapter 3 that even with the introduction of NPM reforms, the public sector is still characterised by the routine bureaucracy and red tape of the traditional phase of public sector transformation, with many layers of authority required for employee issues to be addressed (Gennard & Judge 2005;62 & Kersley et al., 2006). In New Public Management, line managers have a much more complex task than in the private sector as they must balance influences of multiple actors from a wider democratic space (Moore and Fung 2012; Alford et al., 2017). Thus, the autonomy of line managers is reduced in terms of ensuring that voice issues are addressed (Knies et al., 2018).

The extent to which structural issues inhibit effective implementation of voice-related practices is explored in the present thesis through the following research question.

RQ3 (c) In what ways and to what extent do structural issues contribute to the quality implementation of voice-related practices in the public sector?

#### **6.4.3. African cultural context and voice-related HRM practice**

Chapter 4 emphasised the socio-cultural dimensions of the external context which has been widely ignored in explaining the implementation of voice practices. This dimension is defined in terms of the cultural and material factors of the African context which shape how line managers facilitate employee voice. Traditional values such as adherence to accepted beliefs, avoidance of clash of ideas and respecting elders mean that line managers may favour

authoritarian managerial behaviours (Nzelibe 1986; Pitcher et al. 2009). With these behaviours, subordinates fear line managers and expressing their ideas. The ‘reciprocity’ principle (Kuada 2006:102) argues that subordinates must follow what line managers or other senior executives say as employees believe them to be a solution to all organisational problems and challenges.

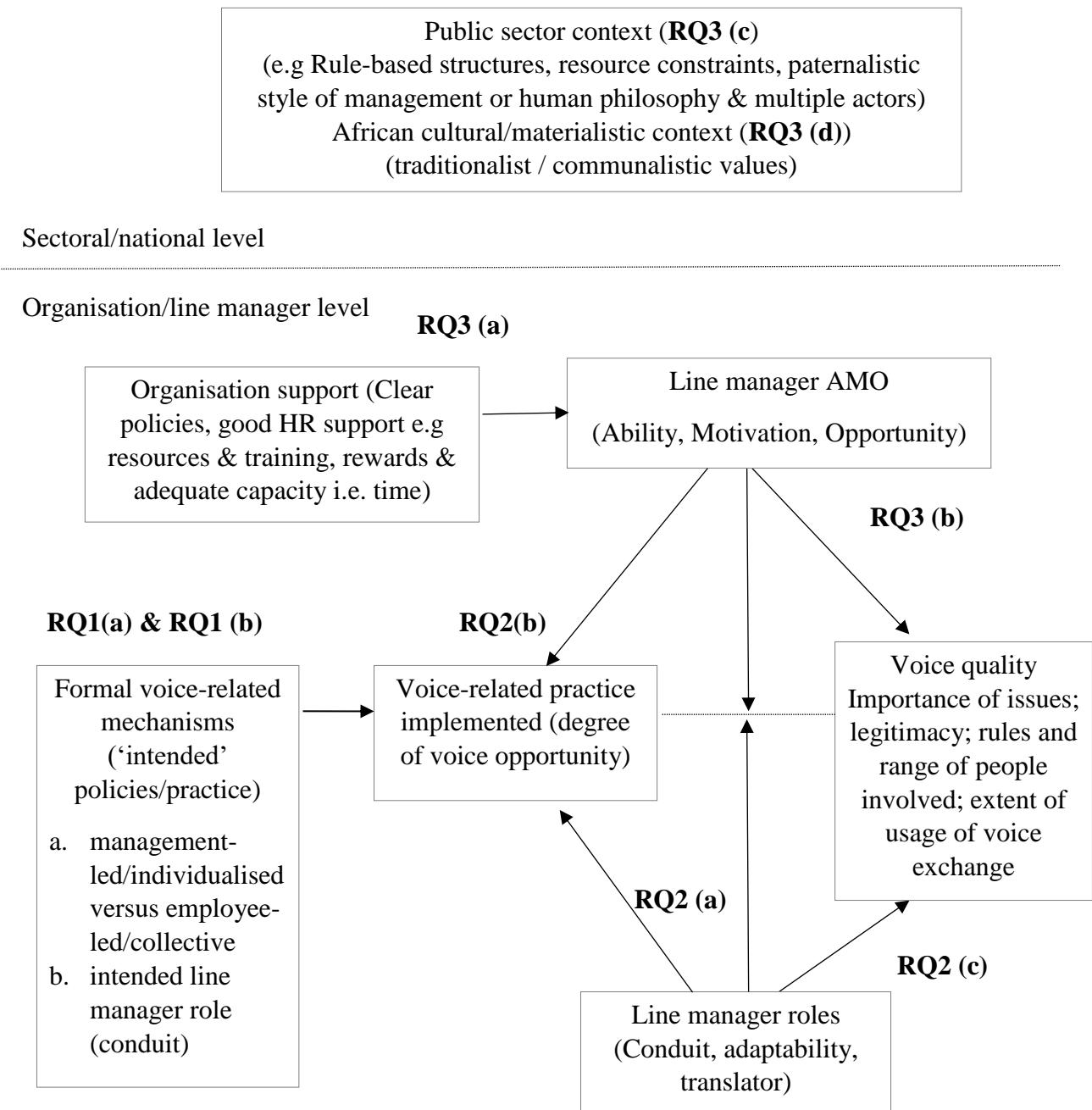
Apart from traditional values, the African thought system is defined in terms of communalist values based on the belief that an individual does not exist alone but belongs to a community (Nzelibe 1986). Emphasis is on placing value on group interactions. The Ubuntu philosophy is founded on such values in which Africans are regarded as caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, and hospitable (Otite 1978; Roux; Ahiauzu 1986; Coetzee 1994; Battle 1996). However, as discussed in Chapter 4 these communalist values, just like traditional cultural values, are portrayed in a much more negative way by scholars within the ‘cultural uniqueness’ and ‘catching up’ theses. Communalist values are regarded as the foundation of a system of mutually benefitting reciprocities, the prebendal system, which is sustained by the utilisation of rewards and privileges for personal benefit through orientation to group or family (Nzelibe 1986; Kuada 2006; O’Flynn 2007; Mabovula 2011). In this system, employees’ decision to voice and line managers’ decision to facilitate voice are all shaped by the desire to elicit personal rewards or to achieve materialistic interests. This search for power and privileges creates line managers, for example, who lack responsibility, show less commitment and demonstrate aversion to voice facilitation goals. In contrast, others (Ashford et al. 2009; Fast et al. 2014; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020) dispute that cultural and materialistic values lead to line managers’ aversion to employee voice, suggesting that this is psychologically motivated. Amid these tensions and disagreements, a gap is still left in understanding how African cultural values shape managerial approaches or behaviours of line managers in implementing voice-related HR practices. With this gap, it is even difficult to know what African managerial approaches are relevant with respect to the recently emerged ‘hybrid African management’ (Kuada 2006:106) to interact with approaches from countries outside Africa. This discussion motivates the final research question of the thesis.

RQ3 (d) How do African political (democratic) and cultural values contribute towards the quality implementation of voice-related HR practices?

## **6.5. Conclusion**

This thesis aims to explore the factors which influence line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within a specific organisational and African national context – the Malawi public sector. Drawing from HRM implementation theory, it has been argued so far that any exploration of how voice practices are practiced should consider the individual line manager, as well as the organisational, public sector and wider national layers of context. Through these levels of analysis, the present chapter proposed three research questions relating to the nature and quality of voice-related HR practices that are adopted in public sector organisations and the ways in which line managers contribute to the implementation process. These research questions are represented in Figure 1 and explored further through an empirical study whose rationale and design are presented in Chapter 6. In Figure 1, it must be pointed out that the arrows do not represent any kind of causal relationships but offer a visualisation which demonstrates the interconnectedness of the three research questions discussed above.

**Figure 1 Conceptual framework**



## **CHAPTER 7: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the empirical study of Malawi public sector utilities used to actualise the objectives and research questions discussed in Chapter 6. The chapter begins by summarising the guiding philosophical paradigm for the study before detailing the methodological choices leading to the adoption of a two-phase qualitative research design involving interviews with line managers at two time points. The chapter also provides the rationale for using a national case study methodology. Data analysis strategy based on Gioia et al. (2013) is discussed, concluding with a consideration of researcher reflexivity.

### **7.2. Philosophical Paradigm: Interpretive approach**

An interpretive philosophical approach guides the study to find answers to the research questions presented in chapter 6. Most scholars support that research on the broader HRM implementation has largely been dominated by two main philosophical paradigms namely functionalist and interpretivist (Brewster 1999; Wijesinghe 2011; Bonache & Festing 2020). A paradigm relates to a set of belief systems or taken for granted assumptions which influence the ways of theorising and working for the different research communities (Guba 1990;17 & Coe et al. 2017;17). The functionalist paradigm, on the one hand, is rooted in the sociology of regulation and views the social world from the objective perspective (Burrell & Morgan 1979:25). Research carried out within this paradigm is often underpinned by positivist research philosophy which comprises concrete empirical artefacts and relationships which can be examined through approaches from natural sciences just like in physical and biological sciences (Burrell & Morgan 1979). On the other hand, an interpretive philosophical approach is based on the subjective philosophical strand which focuses on values and multiple realities which are socially constructed (Crotty 1998;10, Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005;270 & Saunders et al. 2019;133-134).

This research adopts an exploratory approach which seeks to understand how managerial staff, namely, line managers, senior managers, and HR managers, interpret the nature of voice related HRM practices, how they implement such practice, and the contextual influences that shape this implementation. This managerial staff, hence, acts as ‘knowledgeable agents’ who hold firsthand information of the existence and implementation of the voice related HRM practices and can ably explain what they think of it (Gioia et al. 2013). In this way, managers, as experts in the subject under study, are given voice as informants while the researcher does less to

impose the prior theories to generate new insights guided by existing concepts and theories (Ibid). The idea is to gain a further understanding of perceptions of line managers and senior management relating to the implementation of voice mechanisms in a challenging, complex as well as postcolonial environment. This legitimates an interpretivist approach.

### **7.3. Research design**

In line with the interpretivist research philosophy, this study is based on a qualitative design to enable an in-depth understanding of how voice is facilitated by line managers in public sector organizations. The qualitative design aims at obtaining deeper insights relating to the understanding of participants' 'lived experience' towards a phenomenon 'which implies participants' recollections and interpretations of those experiences (Creswell 1998;38 & Saunders et al. 2019;149). Specifically, a national case study methodology is adopted. Case study method has been commonly used in most qualitative research studies that intend to explore organisational processes both in depth and in context (Hartley 2004). Case study method, '*investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be [clear]*' (Yin 2014;2). This in-depth investigation may involve data collection over a given period to understand what Hartley (2004; np) calls, '*processes alongside their (organizational and other) contexts*'. The idea is to either generate or replicate certain theories that relate to the studied phenomenon. Yin (2014;9) presents four conditions which may need to be satisfied by a study to pass the litmus test for using case study method. These include a study answering the 'how' and 'why' questions; a researcher not having control over participants' behaviours; a study emphasizing contextual conditions as being important to the phenomenon being studied; and boundaries between a phenomenon under study and context not being clear (Ibid). In terms of the first two conditions, Yin (2014) argues that most of the exploratory studies can satisfy them because a case study method is all-encompassing hence can also embrace studies with an interpretive orientation. Relating to the last two conditions, chapters 2,3 and 4 demonstrated how contextual considerations are relevant to explaining the implementation of voice-related HR practices. It was also illustrated how HRM research, or the mainstream voice research does not make it clear how multiple layers of the contextual factors namely organisational, public sector and the wider national context explain this implementation. This means that the present study satisfies all the four conditions for adopting a case study method. The present study, therefore, adopts an exploratory national case study methodology.

In a national case study methodology, the study attempts to generate, build or replicate theory through gathering detailed evidence to explain the phenomenon in a single national context (Hartley 2004). This claim about using a single national context leads into another pertinent question in adopting the case study approach relating to, what is my case? A case can be defined as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context (Miles & Huberman 2004;25). The Case(s) could be single such as an individual, organisation, process, or nation. It can also be multiple involving many single cases but what is key is create the boundaries of the case that is under study (Ibid). As defined by the objectives and research questions in chapter 5, the current study focuses on the nature and quality of the voice-related HR practices, how they are implemented by line managers and how the contextual influences explain the process of implementation. This means that the implementation process of voice related HRM practices and line managers would be regarded as the ‘heart’ of the study (Ibid). The boundary for this case, ‘the setting’, has been defined by chapters 3,4 and 5 as being the public sector utility organisation in an African country-Malawi.

In terms of data collection, the study utilised multiple sources of data to have an in-depth and in context understanding of the phenomenon (Easton 2010; Yin 2014). These data sources included semi-structured interviews and the administration of questionnaires which were used not as a survey method but as a ‘questerview’ method. These are discussed below.

In the semi structured interviews, the researcher started with a predetermined list of themes and key questions to guide the conduct of the interviews (Saunders et al. 2019). The semi-structured interview guide (See Appendices 2 and 3) contained open ended questions which were asked in a flexible way including follow-ups (Obuobisa-Darko & Domfeh 2019). The use of the interview guide with open-ended questions allowed that participants express what they felt about the phenomenon (Sapsford & Jupp 2006). The second interview guide (See Appendix 3), for example, provided a list of topics that reminded the researcher about the boundaries of the case being explored while listening to the interviewees as key informants (Thomas 2011). A list of topics in the interview guide was based on the research questions presented in chapter 5. The first part related to participants understanding of working in the public sector in Malawi. This was aimed at obtaining insights on the contextual features that explain how line managers contribute towards the implementation of voice practices. The second topic in the interview guide focused on how participants understood employee voice and its adoption and quality in the public utility organisations in Malawi. This topic was included to gain insights on the

meaning, mechanisms and how those mechanisms were effective in offering voice to employees. The third topic related to the actual involvement of line managers in the implementation process, discussing what line managers were expected by HR to do in implementing voice-related HRM practices against what they ended up doing. The next topic brought participants to the reflection of policies that existed and how they were supportive to the involvement of line managers in implementing voice mechanisms. This was aimed at understanding the opportunities which existed in public utilities within the AMO model for line managers to implement voice mechanisms. The last topic was concerned with exploring all levels of support that was accorded to line managers as they got involved in implementing voice mechanisms. This also had a subtopic that invited participants to the reflection of what personal factors drove them towards ensuring that voice mechanisms were implemented as desired. This topic was also aimed at understanding the abilities, motivation and opportunities that existed in Malawi public utility organisations for line managers to contribute positively towards the implementation of voice mechanisms.

However, using open ended questions raises questions of interviewer and interviewee biases emerging from such factors as the researcher not recording responses accurately or the participant not providing objective or honest responses (Sapsford & Jupp 2006). There is temptation sometimes for the participants in interviews to guess what answers researchers are looking for, respond in ways that elevate their self-esteem or respond with their own contextual anchors, which all lead into responses which do not reflect the exact description of the phenomenon that is under study (Langley 2004). Many steps were taken to address these challenges. First, interviewer biases were addressed through paying more attention to the recording of responses and using recording devices where consent was obtained. As employed in a study by Obuobisa-Darko & Domfeh (2019), reliability and validity were also ensured through pre-testing the interview guide on a few participants to the study. Pretesting the interview guide allowed the researcher to verify the instruments' adequacy and for respondents with actual experience of the phenomenon under study to provide feedback on the content of the tool (Forza 2002). The next section discusses the use of a questionnaire as another way of addressing the interviewee biases and providing richness to the interview responses.

In terms of the questerview method, the questionnaire was employed not as a survey method but rather as part of the interviews. When used in a survey method, a questionnaire serves the purpose of providing a quantitative description of trends, attitudes and opinions of a population,

or tests for associations among variables of a population (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The idea in this case is to collect data which can be analysed quantitatively, establish relationships between variables and produce the models of those relationships (Saunders et al. 2019). This collection of standardized data (mostly from many participants) aims at generalizing findings to other research contexts (Anderson 2009 & Saunders et al. 2019). However, this study does not seek to achieve generalizability of findings but rather ensure the in-depth and in context understanding of the phenomenon. The usage of a questionnaire in this study, therefore, resembles a method that has been called ‘questerview’ (See Langley 2004:131; Adamson et al. 2004:139; Thomas et al. 2015:1348). In this method, standardised, ‘*self-explanatory, open, closed to fixed*’ survey questions are designed into a questionnaire which is administered in an interactive way between the researcher and the participant (Thomas et al. 2015:1348). This questionnaire is administered either before or at the end of a qualitative interview in ways that involve face-to-face interactions where the participant can ask the researcher on clarifications about certain questions in the questionnaire to respond to the questionnaire in ways that reflect their clear understanding of each question (Langley 2004; Thomas- et al. 2015). This interactive administration of the questionnaire addresses the weakness of survey method-based questionnaires which include lacking uniformity in interpretation of questions by all respondents hence requiring more effort to ‘orchestrate, conduct, and draw conclusions’ (Berg & Latin 2008:232; Anderson 2009; 53).

However, other scholars (for example, Langley 2004) question the difference which the inclusion of a structured questionnaire at the end or beginning of a qualitative interview makes. On the one hand, this could be a very difficult task as Langley experienced in a study with her colleagues on the roles of strategic planning (Langley 2004:130). She notes that, among others, the sample size could not allow meaningful statistical analysis and discrepancies were still found between what participants said in interviews and what they circled in the questionnaires (Ibid). However, a study by Adamson and colleagues (2004), as Langley (2004:131) also acknowledges, challenged these weaknesses by illustrating that structured questions designed in a questionnaire can be useful to the creation of rich and detailed narratives if used together with a qualitative interview. Another study by Thomas- et al. (2015) also employed the ‘questerview’ method to collect data on psychological stress. This study concurred with a study by Adamson (2004) in finding that this method makes it easier for participants to understand the questions in a questionnaire and brings richness to the data that is collected in a qualitative interview. It is in this view that this study employs this ‘questerview’ method to provide

richness to the narratives developed from the interviews. The sections below relating to the fieldwork illustrates how interviews were conducted and how a ‘questerview’ method was applied.

In terms of sampling, based on the case study approach and the overall research questions, A purposive non-probability sampling was adopted ‘to obtain insights into particular practices that exist within a specific location, context and time’ (Gray 2017;183). The emphasis in non-probability sampling is subjective judgement in terms of the selection of participants and contextual dimensions (Saunders et al. 2019;315,321). As discussed in Chapter 6, in the four stages of HRM implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), line managers are regarded as primary implementers of HRM with senior managers, HR managers and employees as evaluators. Employees are evaluators because they are the most affected by the implementation process while senior managers and HR managers, are very influential to ensuring that line managers have the ability, motivation and opportunities in implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). It must be acknowledged that using all evaluators namely, senior managers, HR managers and employees as study participants like it was done in a study by Khilji & Wang (2006) offers a comprehensive understanding of how HR practices such as those relating to voice are implemented by line managers. However, this approach runs a risk of not offering depth to the understanding of participants’ ‘lived experience’ and may be more suitable if the intention is to generate causal relationships as was the objective in the above study by Khilji & Wang (2006). But, to qualitatively generate an in-depth understanding of how line managers undertake the implementation, there is need to focus on a few, key and influential participants and go deep into their recollections and interpretations of their experiences in terms of how they see the implementation process (Creswell 1998;38 & Saunders et al. 2019). In this study, the researcher purposively selects managerial staff as participants who include line managers themselves as primary implementers of voice practices and senior managers and HR managers as evaluators of implementation. The next section explains the fieldwork.

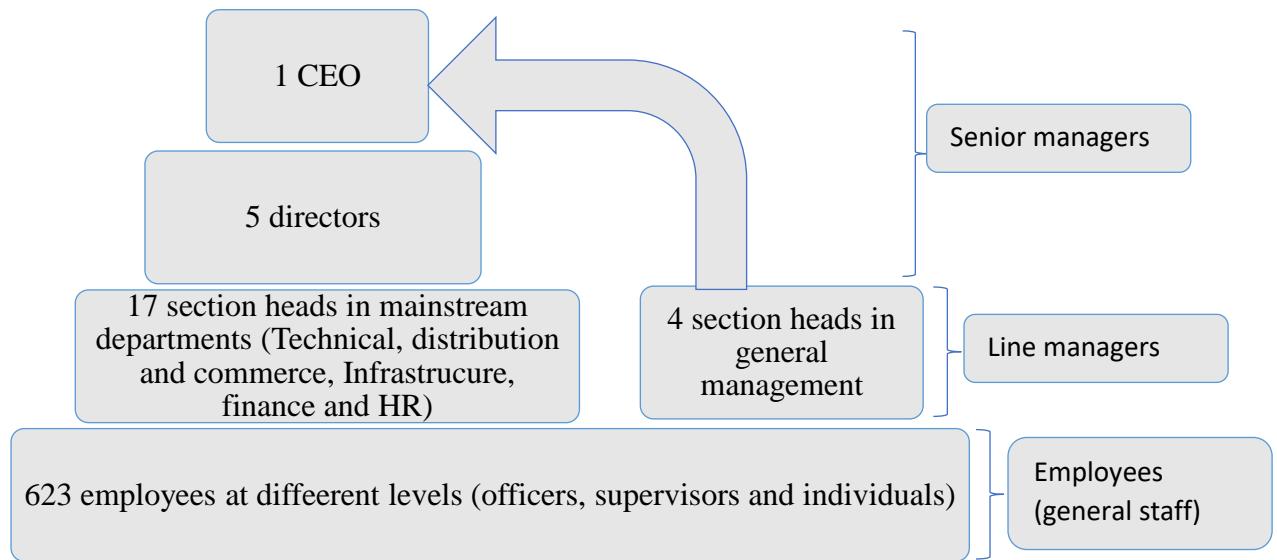
#### **7.4.Fieldwork**

This section attempts to locate study participants discussed in section 7.3 into the organisational structures of the two Malawi public utility organisations. The section further explains how many participants were planned for the study. The researcher purposively selected line managers, senior managers, and HR managers in the two Malawi public utility organisations. Before deciding on how many participants to use, the researcher started with formally obtaining

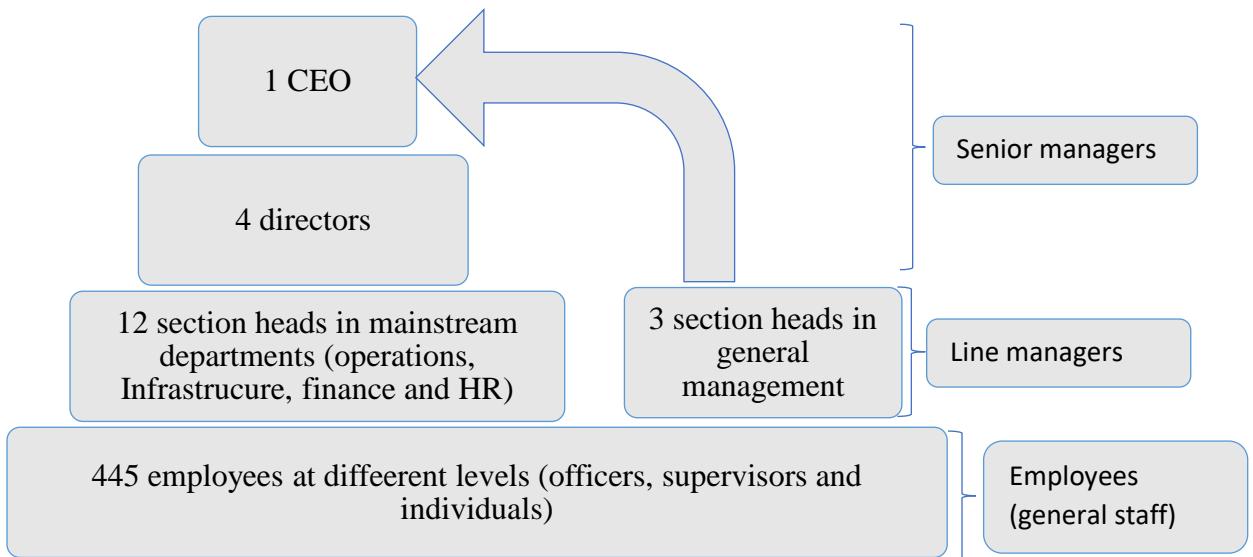
authority of access to the two organisations to be able to obtain any preliminary background information of the two organisations that could inform the methodological choices of the project. The researcher obtained access in November 2020 through the chief executive officers of the two organisations, in which assurance was made that research will involve strict adherence to the ethical code of conduct of the university of Strathclyde. There was also a promise of anonymising both to the organisation and participants, and that data would be used for academic purposes only.

In granting access, both organisations designated a gatekeeper who was given the responsibility of making sure the researcher obtained any information that was relevant to the project. All the documents which were obtained from the two utilities using this contact are listed in Appendix 15. These gatekeepers (who were the HR personnel) were also very helpful in providing the researcher with information on organisational structures of the two organisations which was necessary to know which participants to include in the project. Utilities 1 and 2 were both found to have functional organisational structures (See Appendix 1a and 1b) which were highly bureaucratic and tall in vertical complexity (Price 2007). Lines of command were clear with staff allocated into specialised business areas such as operations, Finance, human resource management and general management. But who may be regarded as line managers and senior managers in these organisational structures? The pattern of managerial control in the two organisations appeared to slightly differ from the categorisation that is made by Townsend and Dundon (2015:2) of ‘executive’, ‘senior’ and ‘middle managers. In both organisations, the ‘executive’ and ‘senior’ managers were clustered into what Utility 1 called, ‘executive management team (EMT)’ and Utility 2 called, ‘corporate management team (CMT)’. This level could best be understood as the ‘strategic apex’ (Townsend 2014;156). Below this level were the heads of sections who were reporting to senior managers and overseeing employees at different levels of employee, supervisor and officer below them. The figures 2 and 3 below show the different levels and numbers of senior managers, line managers and employees in both case organisations.

**Figure 2 Line managers and senior managers in Utility 1**

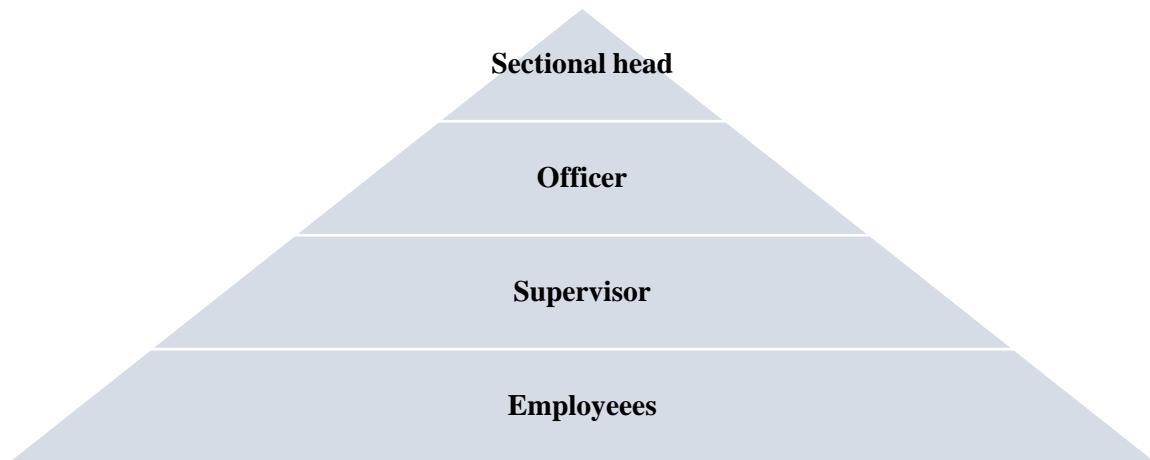


**Figure 3 Line managers and senior managers in Utility 2**



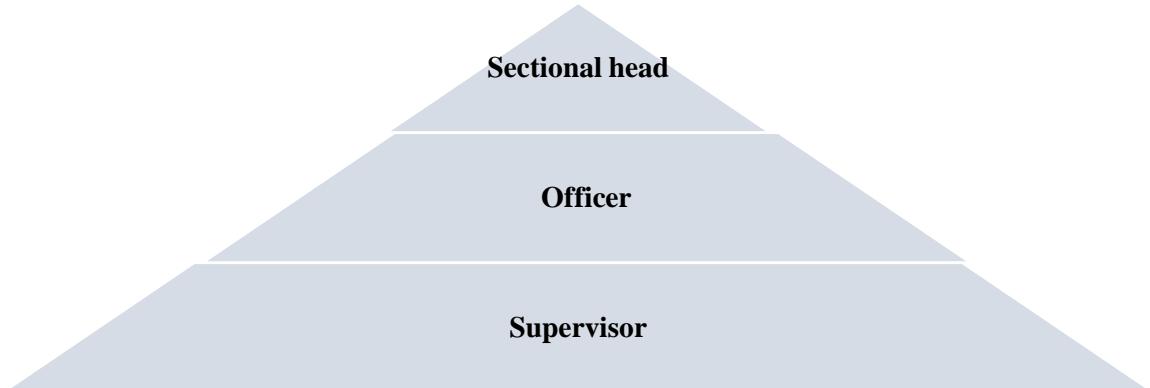
What was noted was that the hierarchy of the general staff in most departments such as Operations, Finance and Human resource management was long consisting of officers, supervisors and individual employees. Figure 4 below shows the hierarchy of general staff in most departments

**Figure 4: Levels of immediate supervisors in most departments**



In other departments such as infrastructure development and general management which had a small size of employees, however, the hierarchy of general staff appeared to be shorter comprising two levels of general staff namely officer and supervisor as shown in figure 5 below.

**Figure 5 Levels of immediate supervisors in other departments**



The discussion above illustrates that the hierarchy of general staff varied across departments depending on the size of employees in those departments. In the different levels of general staff above, one would note that what would constitute an ‘operating core’ (Townsend 2014:156) are employees below the sectional head. The sectional heads, therefore, constitutes the definition of line managers provided by other scholars (Hay 2005:473; Townsend 2014:156) as they existed between top strategic managers and the operating core to whom all non-managerial employees aimed to channel their issues. The operating core, therefore, would be regarded as voicers, subordinates, or employees while sectional heads would be regarded as receivers of voices, line managers or immediate supervisors.

Another decision the researcher had to make related to how many participants to use in the study to generate deep theoretical insights. Researchers have not agreed on the number of interviews a qualitative study should have. However, most researchers (Gerson and Horowitz 2002; Baker & Edwards 2012; Guest et al. 2006; Boddy 2016) appear to suggest that any number of interviews ranging from 12 to 60 enables that a researcher achieves saturation (Gerson and Horowitz 2002; Baker & Edwards 2012; Guest et al. 2006; Boddy 2016). Saturation is defined as, '*a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new theoretical insights are being gleaned from the data*' (Baker and Rosalind 2012:16-18). This is also agreed by Urquhart (2013) and Given (2016) who interpret saturation in terms of when additional data does not lead to any new emergent themes. Considering that most scholars recommend several interviews from 12 to 60 as being sufficient for saturation, the researcher settled for a sample size that comprised all senior managers and line managers in utilities 1 and 2. As noted above, Utility 1 had a total of 6 senior managers and 21 line managers while Utility 2 had a total of 5 senior managers and 15 line managers. This leads to a total of 11 senior managers and 36 line managers. 47 participants, thus, fall within the range of 12 and 60. This sample of 47 participants does not only include senior managers and line managers, but it also comprises HR personnel. In both organisations, there was 1 senior manager who was an HR personnel and one line manager who was an HR personnel. This sample, thus, comprised 4 HR participants which means all study participants defined in section 7.3 were represented in the sample.

#### **7.4.1. First phase of data collection**

The first phase of data collection was done from May to June 2022. In the first phase, an interview guide (See Appendix 2) comprised two main topics namely, policies and mechanisms for employee voice as well as support to line managers for voice. While using the same topics, the actual phrasing of the questions to line managers, HR and senior managers differed based on the roles which these participants play in the implementation process as discussed in section 6.3.4. This interview guide was pre-tested in April 2022 on two line managers and one HR manager from Utility 2. The pretesting was done through zoom interviews because the participant was in UK during this period while participants were all based in Malawi. Through pretesting, the researcher was able to identify some level of ambiguity and redundancy in some of the questions such as those relating to the role of line managers. The researcher also noted that the interview guide contained some concepts such as 'line managers' and 'voice mechanisms' which made it difficult for participants to reconcile. These and other concepts

were broken down to terms which they could easily understand such as section heads replacing line managers and voice ways/channels replacing voice mechanisms.

Before physically travelling to Malawi for interviews in the first phase, the researcher had to seek ethical approval from the university of Strathclyde which involved scrutinizing how participants were recruited, handling vulnerable groups (if any), confidentiality issues, protection of participants and informed consent of the participants. The ethical committee approved three main documents to be taken to the field namely, consent form (See Appendix 4), participants information sheet (See Appendix 5) and privacy notice (See Appendix 6). Despite having prior authorization of access to the two organisations, authority was requested again because now there was a specific topic on which data was going to be collected from the participants relating employee voice in Malawi public utility organisations. Access request letter was, therefore, sent to the two organisations highlighting the topic of research and adherence to ethical principles through; respecting participants; avoidance of harm; ensuring privacy of participants and organisations; voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw; and informed consent of participants and confidentiality of data (See also, Kumar 2014;284-289& Saunders et al. 2019;258-259). Access authorization was granted from the two organisations in March 2022 for Utility 2 and April 2022 for Utility 1.

From the authorisation letter from Utility 2, the researcher was asked to also send the desk officers tentative interview slots for all participants which was done for both case organisations. This helped the desk officers to arrange the venues for the interviews. As the researcher had direct contact to the participants, these office-based venues, in some cases, were not utilized because other participants preferred informal settings such as in venues outside the offices or in their offices but outside the working hours. On average, interviews lasted for 40 minutes in the first phase given that the covid-19 restrictions were still in place which made it difficult to have interviews longer than that. Before each interview, participants were asked to first read the participant information sheet and privacy notice and sign the consent form. They were also asked if they were okay to be recorded. Two participants in utility 2 and 3 participants in utility 1 gave no consent to being recorded. In total, 14 line managers (including an HR manager) and 3 senior managers (Including an HR director) were interviewed in Utility 2 by the end of May,2023. By the end of June, the researcher had conducted, in utility 1, 2 interviews with senior managers (including an HR director) as well as 16 interviews with line managers

(including an HR manager). Table 6 below shows a description of interviews that were conducted in the first phase in organisations X and Y.

**Table 2 Phase 1 interview participants**

Participants	Utility 1	Utility 2
Senior managers	2 (1 HR director & another director), Abbreviated as SM4 and SM5	3 (1 HR director, CEO & another Director), Abbreviated as SM1, SM2 SM3
Line managers	16 (including HR Manager & Administration Manager), Abbreviated as LM14-LM27 and HR2 & HR3	14 (Including HR Manager), Abbreviated as LM1-LM13 and HR1
Total	18	17
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>35</b>

#### **7.4.2. Second phase of data collection**

After data was analysed from the first phase interviews, the researcher reflected on a few things. First, gaps were noticed in the richness of data in relation to some research questions. For example, there was no depth on data relating to the contextual factors explaining line managers' implementation of the voice related HRM practices. What line managers did in implementation was also not fully interpreted through interview responses. While the grievance procedure was found as the formal management-led voice mechanism, the quality of this mechanism was also not fully interpreted. The lack of depth in interview responses, thus, meant that the research questions in Chapter 5 could not be fully addressed from the first phase. The lack of depth in interview responses could be attributed to many explanations such as participants trying to answer in ways they think researchers are looking for or respond in ways that elevate their self-esteem (Langley 2004). The second explanation relates to time-related events (Holloway 2005) in which interview participants respond in certain ways because of events happening at the time of the interviews. What quickly came to mind was that the first set of interviews were being conducted when the world was still experiencing the effects covid-19 (WHO 2024). This pandemic worsened employee's working conditions (Nyasatimes, 2020; Malawi Government 2020; Khamula, 2021) hence creating an organisational environment that attracts remedial

voice expressions (Janardhanan et al., 2022) or defensive voices as is the case in a crisis (Rafique et al., 2023). It also changed employers' approaches to employee voice with a shift towards home working and digital voice means (Matli ,2020; Schuster' et al., 2020; Bezzina et al., 2021; Pradipta & Pertiwi, 2021; Kougiannou.& , 2022). These changes also meant that more control over employee voice shifted to employees as they now had more freedom in interacting with the digital voice channels (Ellmer & Reichel 2020; Fuchs & Reichel 2021). The lack of depth in participants' responses and the time events factor, hence, necessitated a second phase of data collection.

Focus was that the second phase of interviews should improve on the challenges that were encountered in the first phase (Hermanowicz 2013 & Lambert et al. 2020). Many things were, therefore, done. First, the interview guide was modified (see Appendix 4), ensuring that the interview topics and questions were made noticeably clear for participants to understand and be able to provide insightful recollections and interpretations of their 'lived experience' towards the study case (Creswell 1998 & Saunders et al. 2019). As compared to the first phase interview guide which had two main topics, the revised interview guide disentangled the two topics into five individual topics namely, working in the public sector in Malawi, meaning and mechanisms of employee voice, policy framework for voice, line managers' involvement in HRM (and voice) and support to line managers. Many specific open questions were also included under each of the topics to guide the researcher during interviews.

Beyond just the interview guide, the researcher also designed a questionnaire (See Appendix 7) to facilitate at the end of each interview with a line manager. This questionnaire was designed for line managers because they are regarded as the primary or core participants as discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.3.4). In the questionnaire, the researcher included topics structured around participants' responses from the first phase of interviews and other topics based on conceptual arguments in Chapter 5. Part A of the questionnaire focused on gathering biographic data of the line managers to understand, among others, their years of experience, gender, and span of control. The span of control, for example, was important to the understanding of not only the number of employees they manage but also the structures of the two organisations in terms of the hierarchical levels of the 'general staff'. Part B of the questionnaire attempted to deepen the understanding of first phase interview responses relating to the voice channels which exist in the two public utility organisations. This part was designed based on the approach that was adopted in a study by Harlos (2001) who assessed the

availability of the voice mechanisms in terms of whether participants feel that the mechanisms are present or absent and whether they are not sure if they are present or absent.

Part C of the questionnaire focused on what line managers do in implementing voice related HRM practices as discussed in Chapter 2. The questionnaire used the conduit roles discussed by Floyd and Wooldrid (1992). Part D of the questionnaire related to line managers' AMO which was discussed in Chapter 2. In terms of line managers' ability, seven items were included from a study by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013). This study adopts the definition of ability by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013;864) as, '*the HRM-related competences necessary to successfully implement HRM practices on the work floor*'. The idea was to obtain insights on how what line managers thought of the competencies which they had in executing implementation tasks relating to voice mechanisms. In terms of motivation, 13 scales were included from Bos-Nehles et al. (2013). Motivation, in this context, was understood, as argued by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013;865), as, '*line manager's desire and willingness to perform HRM tasks*'. The idea was to obtain insights on what line managers thought in terms of their desire and willingness to perform tasks relating to the delivery of voice mechanisms. In terms of opportunity, the study adopted the definition of Bos-Nehles et al. (2013;866) as, '*Situational support from HR professionals, the capacity to spend sufficient time on HRM responsibilities, and clear and valuable policies and procedures for performing the HRM role*'. The argument is that once line managers are provided with these opportunities, they can execute their roles well in delivering HR practices including those on voice. The idea was, therefore, to understand what line managers perceived as being the opportunities which they were accorded for them to deliver voice related HRM practices. The study used 14 opportunity items from the measures by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) and Rizzo et al. (1970).

Having designed a new interview guide and a questionnaire, the researcher pre-tested them on two line managers from Utility 1, two line managers from Utility 2 and one HR manager from Utility 2. In pretesting, for each participant, an interview was done first, and a questerview session was done at the end of the interview through which participants were able to complete the questionnaire. In other words, participants could not complete the questionnaire independently as it is required in a typical survey method (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). After pre-testing the tools, few minor changes were made to the interview guide on the chronology of some interview topics and wording of some questions. Changes were also made to the questionnaire which mostly related to the use of theoretical-centered terms such as 'voice

mechanisms', 'ability' and 'motivation'. In the pre-tested interviews, these terms were difficult for participants to reconcile and made it difficult for them to understand which answers to circle. Lighter terms such as 'voice policies and practices' were used replacing 'voice mechanisms', 'competency' replacing 'ability' and 'willingness' replacing 'motivation'.

When the instruments were ready for the second phase of data collection, the researcher also requested authority of access to the organisations through the desk officers. This was done to formalize the process though participants and even desk officers were already alerted after the first phase about the possibility of the second phase of data collection. At this stage, the researcher did not have to seek another ethical approval from the university because participants and the objectives of the study were the same. For Utility 2, interviews were done in June 2023 while for Utility 1, interviews were done in July 2023. There was also flexibility in how interviews were conducted with other participants preferring to be interviewed in the formal settings such as their offices or boardrooms while others preferring informal settings such as outside their offices or outside working hours. Before every interview, every participant was asked to read the participant sheet and privacy notice before signing a consent form. They were also asked if they saw no problem with being recorded. After every interview, the participants were provided with a questionnaire. The researcher explained what the questionnaire was about and what the different sections meant. The participants were also given freedom to seek clarity from the researcher on any part or statement that was not clear to them as discussed in the questionnaire. When other issues emerged from these interactions during the completion of the questionnaire, the researcher took notes if the participant did not give consent for being recorded.

In the second phase, compared to the first phase, participants appeared to be more open and detailed during discussion on many topics. Evidence of this was found in the fact that most interviews, on average, lasted for about one hour and forty minutes. This was to the surprise of the researcher who, prior to the interviews, had doubts about the sustained interest of participants in actively engaging in the discussions relating to the interview (which had five topics against 3 in the first phase) and the questionnaire (which also had many statements around sixty-five). The participants' openness was, perhaps, due to the clarity given to the interview guide through the modifications that were done but also relaxation of the covid-19 restrictions which was a factor in the first phase of interviews. In total, by end of July, the researcher was able to interview all participants that took part in the first phase, except one

senior manager in Utility 2 and one line manager in Utility 1. For all 29 line managers who were interviewed, they also completed questionnaires in full. A description of participants who took part in the second phase are shown in Table 7.

**Table 3 Phase 2 interview participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Utility 1</b>	<b>Utility 2</b>
Senior managers	2 (1 HR director & another director), Abbreviated as SM4 and SM5	2 (1 HR director & another Director), Abbreviated as SM2, SM3
Line managers	15 (including HR Manager and Administration Manager), Abbreviated as LM14-LM26; HR2 & HR3	14 (Including HR Manager), Abbreviated as LM1-LM13 and HR1
Total	17	16
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>33</b>	

## **7.5.Data analysis**

The study employed thematic analysis in analysing the interviews and documents that were collected (see Appendix 15). This method has been regarded as a foundational method for qualitative analysis which offers a systematic, yet accessible, approach for analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is regarded as an orderly and logical way of searching for themes and patterns that occur across a variety of data sets such as interviews (Saunders et al. 2019;651). The researcher, therefore, undertook the six stages of thematic analysis namely: familiarizing oneself with data (transcription) immediately after every phase of interviews; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and generating findings (Braun and Clarke 2006;87-93 & King & Horrocks 2010;152-167). In terms of coding of interview transcripts and documents, the researcher started from a predetermined list of conceptual themes (See Appendix 8) to inform the deductive open coding approach (Miles and Huberman, 1984). This approach was integrated with the grounded approach to identify new themes from primary data using. The Gioia et al.'s (2013) approach integrates the deductive and inductive approaches through the three levels of coding. The first order category involves adhering to the informant terms whereas the second order raises questions of whether informant terms, '*suggest theoretical concepts that might help us describe*

*and explain the phenomena we are observing*’ (;20). The theoretical saturation of the second order themes and concepts leads into the theoretical aggregations or third order themes (Ibid). A combination of the first, second and third order themes leads into the data structure which represents a broader picture of progression from the raw, participants’ terms to the theoretical and conceptual aggregations (Ibid). All the interview transcripts and documents were uploaded into the project which was created in Nvivo. The first, second, and third order codes were, therefore, generated in Nvivo. Though this method assumes that the procedure involves liner sequential stages, in practice, the procedure occurred in a concurrent and recursive fashion involving, among others, going back and forth as the researcher refined coding and categorisation of new data and searching for themes (Braun and Clarke 2006 & Saunders et al. 2019).

There is a long debate about applying the principles of validity and reliability in qualitative research. Kumar (2014) suggests that it makes less sense to talk about reliability and validity in qualitative research where research questions have been explored through multiple methods and procedures which have not been consistent or structured but flexible and evolving. Other scholars such as Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest that despite these critical arguments, the goodness and quality of qualitative research can still be measured through trustworthiness and authenticity. Langley & Abdallah (2011; 215), argues, in support, that instead of talking about validity and reliability, for qualitative research it is better to adopt the naturalist inquiry through involving independent, ‘*...multiple researchers and member checking*’ to provide an outside’s perspective and determine the research’s trustworthiness and authenticity. As employed in a study by Corley and Gioia (2004), therefore, the current study adopted the peer debriefing method to determine research’s trustworthiness and authenticity. In this method, the researcher engaged two fellow PhD researchers who were not involved in the study to go through the predetermined themes, interview guide, field notes and random transcripts of interviews to evaluate the conclusions drawn from the study. These independent researchers also coded a few transcripts, and their codes had a high degree of similarity to the codes which were generated by the researcher. The input from the independent researchers not only confirmed to the research’s trustworthiness and authenticity but also authenticity of the codes that were generated initially by the researcher.

The questionnaire was analysed through the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for windows. This involved capturing data on all variables into SPSS. Then, graphs

were used to explore or scan and understand the data followed by testing the normal distribution of data through calculation of z values of skewness and kurtosis measures for all the item scales (Antonius 2003, Anderson 2009; Saunders et al. 2019). Outliers were removed and replaced with minimum expected values after comparing standardised residuals from different models (Field 2018). The researcher also explored the visual images of data plots if they were fitting into a bell-shaped curve by the look of histograms (Saunders et al. 2019).

The presentation of the interview findings followed the Gioia et al., (2013) approach in which data structures were created for each of the three findings chapters which were structured around the research questions presented in chapter 6. The data structures for each chapter were based on the Gioia chart and shows the first order, second order and theoretical aggregations. In the discussion of each third order theoretical aggregations, ‘evidence tables’ were presented illustrating the second order themes and representative quotes for each theme (Ibid). In some cases, the evidence tables are supplemented with the mean scores from the analysis of the questionnaires which participants completed. This approach of using ‘creative ways’ in presenting findings is also supported by Reay et al. (2019;207) as a way of countering the drawbacks of the Gioia approach in limiting, ‘authors’ ability to showcase the richness of their empirical findings’. After the discussion and conclusion chapter, a research framework is drawn that represents not only third order theoretical aggregations (Reay, 2019; Gehman et al., 2018) but also how these contribute to the theoretical and conceptual debates relating to the phenomenon under study.

## **7.6.Researcher reflexivity**

In qualitative research, as Liilrank (2012) argues, the interactions between interviewer and interviewees forms an important context for understanding the latter’s responses. In this section, it is important to discuss the reflective context of the study’s findings.

I worked for over 5 years as an HRM personnel in one of the case organisations before undertaking this project. My working with this case organisation also led me into undertaking numerous other roles in the wider public utility sector where both case organisations belonged. This means that I had prior connections not only to both case organisations but also to some of the participants. I am also someone who believes in fair, ethical and employee-centric HRM practices, and perhaps this is what may have influenced me to think of researching ways in which employees would be supported to have an effective voice at the workplace. With my connections to the case organisations and the values which I hold, it meant that I had to be

careful not to allow them to influence participants in their responses or how I interpreted the participants' responses during data analysis (Gray 2017). One way of doing this was to ask during interviews open as compared to leading interview questions on the different topics which were included in the interview guide (Maxwell, 1996). The Gioia et al.'s (2013) approach was also very helpful to blank out my preconceived ideas in ensuring that only participants' interpretations were represented in the first order codes and linked to the theoretical and conceptual terms in the second order and third order codes.

In addition, I acknowledge the support I received from the desk officers in terms of arranging interviews for me especially in the first phase, I need to also mention that this may have negatively influenced how eventually participants expressed themselves in the interviews. I felt that participants were not open enough to provide deep insights of their experiences in the first phase. Section 7.4.2 has reduced this to the lack of clarity in the design of the interview guide. While this may have been a factor, one would also suggest that by HR personnel arranging interviews, participants may have viewed this as a study being watched by management regardless of indicating the aim of the study. I can support this with the fact that when I arranged most interviews myself, in the second phase, participants were very open with interviews running for one hour and 40 minutes, on average, as compared to the 40 minutes average duration of interviews in the first phase. In fact, interviews which were conducted in informal settings, because of my negotiation with participants, had deep engagement from participants and had a longer duration than most of those conducted in formal settings. This offers proof that the nature of interaction with participants starting from the interview's arrangement had an influence on how active participants became in the actual interview. This is also supported by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) who argue that to have an active narrative production, the interviewer must facilitate the nature of researcher-respondent interactions which creates interviewee's trust and confidence to offer constructive storytelling. However, as Maxwell (1996) argues, these interactions need to be used productively by the researcher or else they can do less to stop the researcher's own preconceptions from influencing the interviewee's perspectives. This is, particularly, an important issue considering my prior connections to the organisation as outlined. In other words, while my prior connections to the participants and the case organisations helped that I should have easy access to the case organisations, I had to be cautious to ensure that these interactions should not influence the data that was obtained and is presented in the next Chapters 7,8 and 9.

## **CHAPTER 8 FINDINGS: ADOPTED VOICE-RELATED HRM PRACTICES AND PERCEIVED AIMS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

### **8.1. Introduction**

In this first findings chapter, in line with RQ1, data is presented focussing on the adopted voice-related HRM practices and the perceived aims for implementing those practices. This perspective sets a baseline for understanding how the managerial staff interviewed assess the nature of voice practices. In most interviews, participants suggested that decisions on the adoption of voice practices are shaped by two managerial motives: ensuring the realisation of organisational goals and ensuring the safeguard of employees' right to participate in workplace governance. Strong emphasis was put on the individualised and management-led voice mechanisms and their implementation by line managers. Management expected employees to channel their issues through their immediate supervisors, using individualised voice channels that included grievance procedure, meetings, WhatsApp, phone calls and other written means. In terms of implementation, while line managers were emphasised, senior managers and HR also played important roles as enablers of positive voice culture and custodians of implementation, respectively. The findings in this chapter are based on the data structure in Appendix 9.

### **8.2. Adopted voice related HRM practices**

From the interviews, the adoption of voice-related HRM practices in Malawi public utilities can be framed through three perspectives: prosocial voice i.e. voices as a tool for realising organisational goals; pro-justice, i.e. voice as a democratic right for participating in governance of workplaces; trust in voicing through management-led channels. These perspectives are discussed in the sections below.

#### **8.2.1. Voice as a tool for realising organisational goals**

The general managerial decisions were that management felt the need to support employee voice because of its contribution to the achievement of various organisational objectives. The first objective relates to the improvement of work methods. In this objective, employee voice was understood as an important tool for the undertaking of job tasks. As one participant (LM24.U1) noted, '*being a CEO doesn't mean you know everything, or you are the best of all, sometimes a junior would provide even better insights.* Consulting all employees at all levels was perceived as important in the making of job-related decisions (HR3.U1). Learning from employees was particularly viewed important '*in the setup of the [utility organisations] where, for [utility service] to be supplied, there [were] several activities to be done which require[d]*

*that there should be mutual collaboration*' (LM11.U2). For example, it was found that managers were undertaking 'cross responsibilities' which meant that to undertake them, they needed to collaborate with managers or employees from other sections or departments (LM21.U1). Even in the same sections, managers were found looking after employees who were working with different processes depending on the magnitude of the challenges they were facing (LM4.U2; LM17.U1).

Allowing employees within the organisation to speak up, therefore, was regarded as important to align these differences in processes and challenges. Through different voice forums, employees were encouraged to suggest new ideas on how to improve processes or work activities which they saw as not being done in a right way for betterment of the institution (LM2.U2; HR3.U1). Managers could also, '*take advantage of the forums to offer feedback on how employees [were] undertaking their activities and make corrections if necessary*' (LM16.U1). This voice exchange was viewed as important in ensuring that there was, '*improvement in work methods*' (LM2; U2) as well as making employees, '*to be productive and effective in the tasks that they [were] given to undertake*' (LM14.U1)

Apart from improving work methods, voice exchange was also regarded as important in the improvement of service delivery to the public. Participants highlighted that voice was used a tool for addressing challenges relating to service delivery. For example, one line manager (LM2.U2) noted that, '*...sometimes it's very surprising, I have three schemes, sometimes you find that someone in one scheme is struggling to find something that is available and not being used in another scheme*'. Similarly, it was found from other participants (for example, LM19; U1; LM16.U1; LM5; U2; LM9; U2) that when employees could not manage to obtain the assistance they were looking for, they could easily give up and not even go to let their managers know until the situation became worse. In such cases, employee voice was regarded as key as, '*...employees could [express] what they had and what they [lacked and then] [managers could] ...link them up to say can you check with this one for this*' (LM2.U2). In other words, '*in the meetings, [they could] look at the challenges, the performance, listen to what the teams suggest being challenges and [they could] address them to move forward*' (LM4.U2). The below daily routine of another line manager (LM19.U1) further illustrates how challenges were addressed to improve the delivery of the utility service through employee voice.

*'Okay so basically in the morning I first go in the control room, check how [production and distribution of [utility product] has been done in the night, then we start finding out with my*

*team where there is more [utility product] and where there is [less which needed further distribution], so we start prioritising, and where is less [utility product] we start finding out what the causes are, the challenges that were encountered in production, were the production team not provided with [production materials]? Were other employees absent? After such morning interactions I pick up what I need to do to address the challenges in the day'*

One would note that from the employee voice forums, employees' promotive ideas became important to identify the challenges and strive to address them to improve service delivery. It was, however, also acknowledged that voice exchange that is effective at improving service delivery could, '*not always involve cordial interactions with employees*' (LM4.U2) but that the same voice exchanges, '*[ironed] out the differences and consensus [was] reached on what could be the best approach to take in terms of ensuring that excellent service is given to [the] customers*' (LM14.U1). In simple terms, employee voice was perceived as a tool that was used for addressing work challenges to achieve improved service delivery.

Beyond being a tool for improving work methods and service delivery, employee voice was also understood as being important for enhancing employee performance. First, it was found that voice created a positive feeling among employees. The argument was that '*If you listen to the issues which [employees] have, they start feeling that they are part of the team and belong to a section*' (LM21.U1). Employees, thus, were said to develop, '*...a mind that what [they] do matters, what [they] think matters, [and] what they feel matters*' (U2; LM3). One should take note that the precondition for this positive psychological feeling (also see, Nechanska et al. 2020:4) was interpreted by most participants (for example, LM21.U1; LM20.U1; LM19.U1; LM15.U1; LM 7.U2; SM2.U2) as being the mere act of listening to employee issues without even having to address them. As one participant (LM20.U1) further added, '*...they start to feel that they are appreciated and valued as employees by just listening to the issues which they have even if those issues are not all addressed*'. Employee voice, in this case, was limited to listening to the issues which employees raised regardless of whether those issues were addressed or not. In other words, focusing on '*[having] a say*' while disregarding having an influence on organisational affairs (See, Wilkinson et al. 2014:5). Participants felt that the positive feeling which employees developed from having a say is enough to enable them to contribute to the positive organisational outcomes. With this positive and happy feeling, employees were viewed as, '*...[working] better unlike when they feel side-lined or not having their issues listened to*' (LM15.U1). Employees were also regarded as developing an extra drive in delivering on the targets which were given to them since they developed not only a positive

feeling towards the organisation but also towards the managers who did the listening of their issues (LM3.U2; LM7.U2; LM19.U1; LM20.U1)

As employees performed better and continued to make constructive contribution to the goals of the organisation, it was also found that voice helped managers to be able know the true potential of the employees they are working with. One line manager in utility 2 (LM5.U2) argued that ‘for me it is always wonderful to see employees fruitfully contributing to the decisions of the organisation because it helps me to understand the kind of people I am working with’. From the employees’ fruitful contribution and how well they worked, managers could, ‘...see their true potential to say, may be this one, maybe he is misplaced, or maybe we [underestimated] his capability’ (SM5.U1). In other words, this, ‘...involvement in decision making [processes] easily [enabled] employees to be viewed as potentials as future leaders and [managers] [could] start to rely on them as future successors since they [started] to feel empowered (LM19.U1). What should be emphasised is that participants interpreted that for employees to engage in these ‘promotive voice behaviours’ (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014;91), they just needed to have a say in the decision-making process of the organisation. This view, however, was challenged in their own interpretation of employee voice as a democratic right as discussed below.

### **8.2.2. Employee voice as a democratic right**

Participants felt that management also regarded employee voice as a right which the public utility organisations needed to safeguard. As suggested by some senior managers (for example, SM1.U2; SM2.U2; SM5.U1), as a democratic right, employee voice had the backing of national laws and statutes. Through this right, employees were expected to speak out freely on the issues they had and contribute to the decisions of their organisations (LM20.U1 SM4.U2). The idea was to give employees, ‘*a say at a place [they were] working*’ (LM3.U2). From this say, employees could express the grievances which they had to management and if they saw that things were not right, they were also encouraged to speak up (LM20. U1; SM3.U2; SM2.U2).

However, participants explained that this right was nothing without the organisation, through management, accommodating what employees spoke. As one line manager commented, ‘*...they have the right to voice out their concerns, but I also strongly feel that when employees speak, they should have their issues heard or considered*’ (LM6.U2). In other words, management was regarded as shouldering a great responsibility of not only ensuring that

employees speak but that when they speak, their voices should be considered in the consequent decisions that were made. This responsibility was viewed as being placed on organisations by central government which, '*[expected] that as [public institutions] they should be able to promote an environment where all employees [enjoyed] the freedom of expression and opinion as enshrined in the republic constitution and that those expressions should be taken into account when decisions are being made, not just listening for the sake of listening (participant laughs)*' (SM4.U1). In other words, accommodating employee views was viewed as the mandate which state regarded highly and was seeking to enforce it on the organisations through the laws such as the 1994 Malawi Constitution and other parliamentary statutes such as Labour relations Act and Employment Act (LM7.U2 & SM1.U2; LM22.U1; LM23.U1; SM3.U2). One senior manager stated that '*the constitution...clearly mandate[d] central Government to have an interest on [organisations] to ensure that [they] give employees freedoms such as of speech or expression*' (SM3.U2). The HR director for utility 2 further cited that in the 1996 Malawi labour relations Act,

*'there is provision of a tripartite arrangement which government, employee representatives and employer representatives can sit down and have a dialogue when employees have unresolved issues with employers. This is well established, and government is very influential in bringing employer representatives to roundtable discussions with employees' representatives when there are burning issues'* (SM2.U2)

In this tripartite arrangement, thus, central government is mandated to enforce employers' obligation of considering views of employees in the decisions that are made. Apart from national laws and statutes, central government, through the board of directors, was also understood as taking direct interest in monitoring that indeed the views of employees were regarded in the decisions that organisations were making (SM5.U1). As one senior manager (SM2.U2) outlined from his own experience,

*'Whenever we are having board meetings, when I present my suggestions about what we should do may be to the customers or indeed my staff, I usually get asked by board members about what employees think about those suggestions, such enquiries become our always reminder that you know when we are making these decisions, we should take into account what employees are saying...'*

One would note that board members not only monitored that management was considering employee views but also pushed for that to happen. Apart from the laws and board of directors,

many other participants (for example, LM10.U2; LM5.U2; SM5.U1) also suggested that there were other labour-related institutions which aimed at ensuring that the voice right was safeguarded in organisations. Some of the labour institutions that were mentioned included Malawi labour office, ombudsman, and industrial relations court (HR2.U1; SM2.U2; LM5.U2). If employees had their issues not considered, they could go to such institutions which could intervene and safeguard their voice right from being violated by their organisations (SM2.U2). These institutions could also provide guidance, with the aid of practical cases, to organisations on how to safeguard an employee's voice right. From the above discussion, one would note that participants felt that the state, through national laws, board of directors and labour institutions, mandated and worked to enforce that organisations were not only allowing employees to have a say but also ensuring that what they said was considered in the decision-making processes.

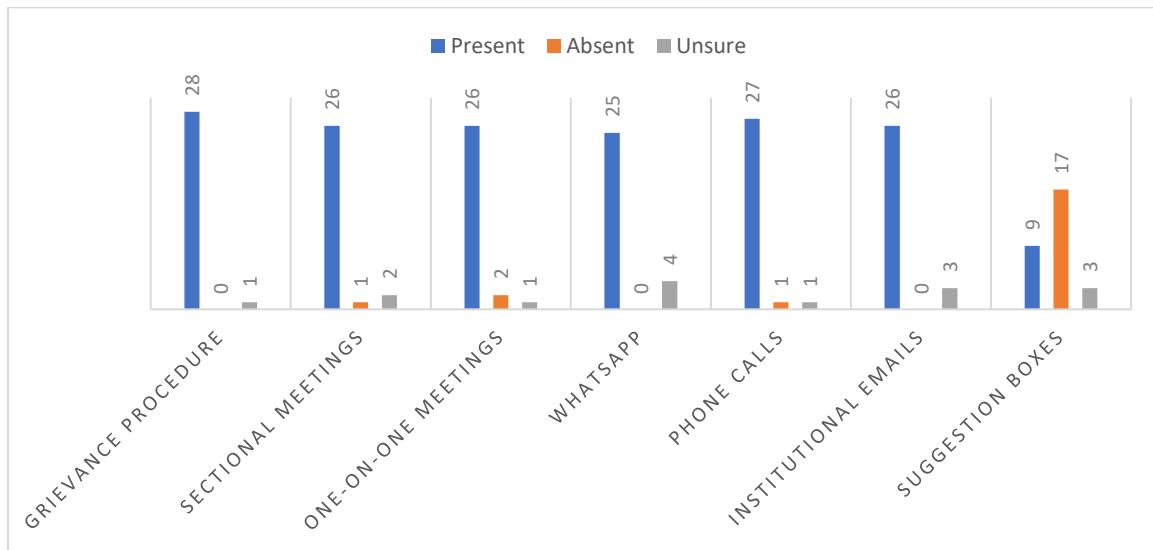
Though employee voice as a right was understood as legally binding and attracting strong state's interest to safeguard it, participants did not think it was, in the organisations, treated by management as an absolute right. In other words, '*...not anything [was] tolerated...there [were] some limits to the freedoms which employees [had] to express their views*' (LM6.U2). In some cases, it was explained that heads of departments or HR were believed, '*to carry a whip, so sometimes they [would] ask employees to speak because they want to hook them to take discipline action*' (SM2.U2). This was also concurred by one line manager who explained that '*for a long time here management has been able to create an environment by only a word of mouth, practically, they haven't been comfortable with that as evidenced by penalising employees who speak up*' (LM1.U2). The consensus among most participants' views (for example, LM15.U1; LM17, U1; SM5.U1; LM1.U2; LM2.U2) was that management paid attention to the tone of employee voices and the means they chose in raising their issues for those issues to be considered in decisions that were made. These restrictions on employee voice were further amplified by the finding that employees had to voice through the management-led voice channels that are discussed in the next section.

### **8.2.3. Voicing through management-led voice channels**

With the two voice motives explained in sections, 8.2.1 and 8.2.2, managerial staff interviewed appeared to advocate for the management-led and individualised voice mechanisms as compared to the employee-led and collective means. The individualised voice means were portrayed as being the recommended channels which employees had to use in expressing the issues which they had to realise organisational objectives and safeguard voice as a democratic

right. These voice channels included non-unionised grievance procedure, meetings (one-on-one and sectional), WhatsApp, phone calls as well as written means (emails, memos and suggestion boxes). Figure 6 below represents these voice channels as summarised from the questerview responses.

**Figure 6 Formal voice avenues available in utility organisations**



The non-unionised grievance procedure (also see Lewin 2020) was remarkable since it aligned the line manager with a strong topic: Grievances. This channel was backed by HRM policies of the two utility organisations. In utility 1, the Staff service regulations (SSR.U1), stated that,

*'If an employee [has] a grievance in relation to his/her employment (e.g. wages/salaries, leave, promotion, seniority, management styles, job assignment, interpretation of service agreements and termination of service) he/she shall submit his/her grievance forward for investigation and action. The employee shall report to his/her immediate supervisor, stating the nature of the grievance preferably in writing'.*

Equally, this channel was regarded as the a ‘normal’ (LM2.U2), ‘traditional’ (SM5.U1) or ‘natural’ (SM3.U2) process of raising grievances. In expressing these grievances, employees were expected to direct them through their immediate supervisors who were expected to act as a first point of contact. Section 7.3 of chapter 7 highlighted that immediate supervisors should be understood as line managers who are receivers of voices. Line managers, thus, were placed at the centre of not only listening and addressing employees’ grievances but also enforcing that

employees were expressing them as per the grievance procedure. In questionnaire responses (see figure 6 above), 28 respondents rated voice through line managers (or hierarchy of authority) as a channel that was present in all utility organisations. In the interviews, as well, most of the participants in utility 1 (for example, LM22.U1; LM14.U1; LM17.U1; LM23.U1) and utility 2 (for example, LM5.U2; LM10.U2; LM6.U2; SM2.U2) agreed that when employees had individual issues, they were expected to raise them through their line managers as the first level of contact.

The grievance procedure offered a formalised way of not only raising grievances but also addressing those issues for the good of the organisation (SM1.U2; LM14.U1). It also enabled that information about grievances is not lost in between but, rather, captured and stored to be reviewed later for use in decision making processes (LM5.U2). This storage and recording of information were regarded as good, '*...both for continuity and good follow up on handling employee issues even if [an immediate supervisor] [goes] on leave and someone comes in [his/her] place to act...*' (LM26.U1).

When grievances were taken to line managers through the grievance procedure, the expectation was that they will, '*...attempt to address them*' (LM12.U2). The HRM policy in utility 1 (SSR.U1) provided that, '*the supervisor shall discuss the grievance with the employee and attempt to resolve it through contact and dialogue*'. A senior manager in utility 1, SM4.U1, also added that when line managers received issues, they were expected to, '*come up with solutions on those issues*' (SM4.U1). Similarly, in utility 2, the HRM policy (COS.U2) provided that once a grievance had been channelled to the line manager, he/she needed to, '*...try to resolve it*'. Coming up with solutions involved liaising with fellow line managers or reaching out to HR for assistance depending on the nature of the issue (LM3.U2; LM4.U2; LM17.U1; LM19.U1). For example, for welfare-related issues like sickness and hospitalisation of the employee or direct dependant, a line manager would contact HR for guidance on procedures of addressing them (LM4.U2; LM13.U1). Line managers would also contact HR for guidance on rules and procedures of handling employees' training-related issues (LM16.U1). On the same training-related issues, for example, line managers would reach out to HR if employees were expressing being, '*...unhappy with their grade after obtaining another qualification*' (LM9.U2). Line managers would also consult HR on issues that needed resources. For example, one line manager (LM18.U1) illustrated that, '*...recently plant operators were fighting to be considered for training to go at least to [another city] for their*

*training, so I had to go to HR, of course they responded that training should be done locally [within the city] ...*'. In short, one would note that within the grievance procedure, line managers were expected to contact HR to address employee issues which they could not address on their own such as those relating to welfare, promotion, training and resource constraints.

Most of the issues line managers took to fellow line managers were difficult and sensitive issues which they could not right away take to HR or senior managers issues (LM2.U2; LM3.U2; LM20; LM22). For example, one line manager (LM19.U1) cited issues expressed by employees who had connections to senior managers. Contacting fellow line managers, therefore, was meant to seek guidance first on how they would go about handling such issues. Liaising with fellow line managers was also encouraged in the grievance procedure as a way of, '*...[achieving] consistency across the board in how employee issues [should] be handled*' (LM2.U2). This consistency was importantly required when addressing employee-specific issues such as emergency loan requests (LM18.U1) or transfers between duty stations (LM11.U2). Contacting fellow line managers, therefore, was necessary for seeking guidance on how to handle employee issues and with consistency.

If line managers could not address issues on their own or after contacting HR or fellow line managers, the next step was to escalate to senior managers. This was also supported by HRM policies in the two utility organisations. In utility 2, the HRM policies (for example, COS.U2) required that, '*If [immediate supervisor] [failed] to resolve the grievance, he/she [could] refer the same to the head of section*'.

The policy in utility 1 (SSR.U1) added that even an employee could escalate a grievance to the head of the section. Senior managers, however, preferred line managers, and not employees, to be the ones escalating issues. One senior manager (SM3.U2) wondered why, '*[his subordinates] [had] this tendency of sending employees to [him] instead of either addressing the issues themselves or themselves [taking] issues to [him]*'. This was also agreed by another senior manager (SM5.U1) who added that '*...if the [issue] comes from an employee in the zone...you have to send it back, otherwise the hierarchy demands that sectional heads should be coming to us*'. The HR director in utility 1 (SM4.U1) also felt displeased with employees escalating issues to senior managers by stating that,

*‘...I normally try to discourage my three sectional heads, sending their employees to me, if employees come to me with issues, then why are they there? I thought I need to be hearing from them as the reporting lines demand, unless in very exceptional circumstances I would agree. Of course, sometimes you understand each other employees become too pushy for answers and can’t be contained...’*

One would note that though the policies made a provision that either line managers or employees could escalate issues to senior managers, senior managers preferred that this should be done by line managers. Regardless of whether it was an employee or the line manager escalating the issue, what was clear in both policies (SSR.U1; COS.U2) and interviews (HR3.U1) was that there was need for a written record that the matter being escalated has gone through the progressive levels of authority within the grievance procedure and has failed to be addressed by the line manager.

When employee issues were escalated to senior managers, they were expected to be addressed by those senior managers. As one senior manager (SM2.U2) commented,

*‘...when we receive issues from sectional heads, we try to address them first after which we give feedback but if we can’t, I must report it for consideration during the CMT meetings which we conduct every Monday but sometimes these issues can still not be addressed during CMT, so we have to push them to the quarterly board meetings.*

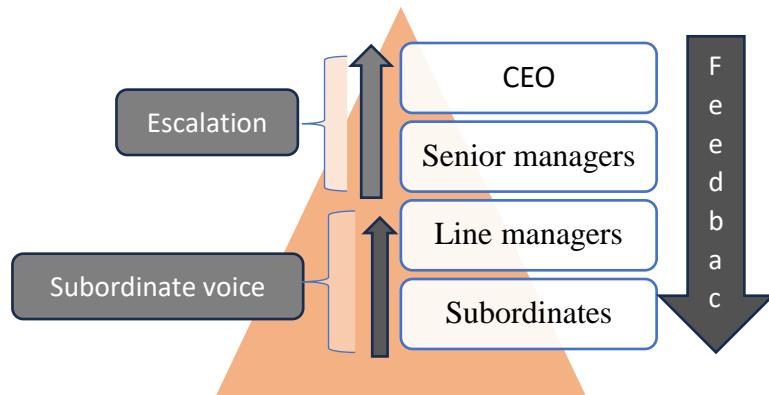
Another senior manager (SM1.U2) also supported by explaining that,

*‘...when I receive issues from my fellow CMT members or indeed from managers in GMT [General management], if I can address them, I do address them but if I can’t, I normally ask EA to include them on the CMT meetings’ agenda. Normally employee issues are addressed at CMT’.*

One would note that employees’ escalated issues were expected to be addressed by individual senior managers. If they could not be addressed by individual senior managers, they had to be addressed during weekly executive management meetings (EMTs) for utility 1 (SM4.U1) or corporate management meetings (CMTs) for utility 2 (SM2.U2). The Chief Executive Officer as the final decision-making authority for employee issues (SSR.U1 & COS.U2), thus, used

these management meetings to address issues which could not be addressed by individual senior managers. Once a solution was found from either individual senior managers or from management meetings, the response or feedback to employees had to also go through the same structure, from the CEO, heads of departments to line managers and then to employees (LM5.U2; SM5.U1). This grievance structure can be illustrated in the figure 7 below.

**Figure 7 Grievance procedure**



Apart from the grievance procedure, another management-led voice channel was meetings. Two types of meetings were encouraged in transmitting subordinate voice to line managers namely one on one and sectional meetings. A majority (26) of questionnaire respondents (see figure 8 above) concurred to this. One on one meetings were expected, '*...not [to be] planned or arranged and had to take place as and at when the need [arose] for employees to raise work issues to [the immediate supervisor] or when [immediate supervisors] decide[ed] to meet the subordinate*' (LM13.U2). Of course, in some cases, these line managers (for example, LM20.U1; LM16.U1; LM6.U2; LM10.U2) could have these one-on-one meetings pre-arranged and jotted down in their weekly diaries. Apart from subordinates walking into line managers' offices, line managers could also, themselves, visit subordinates in their offices and ask them to open and express the work challenges they were facing to improve work methods and performance (LM11.U2; LM7.U2; LM22.U1)

Another category of meetings were sectional ones. Just like one-on-one meetings, 26 questionnaire respondents indicated sectional meetings as a voice avenue as shown in figure 8 above. This was also agreed by most participants (for example, LM10.U2; LM4.U2; LM12.U2; LM12.U2) in their interview responses. As stated by one line manager (LM3.U2), '*...these zonal meetings are very helpful, you like move together, you are in tune, everybody knows what*

*has to be done and they tell you their suggestions and it does help to get work tasks done in a timely manner*'. In other words, the sectional meetings were not only expected to offer an, '*opportunity to address the challenging work issues which employees [had] but also [provided] two-way feedback due to their involvement of face- to face interactions*' (LM18.U1; HR1.U2; LM4.U2). This was also supported by one senior manager who commented that, '*...we promote...that right from their section, there should be sectional meetings, people should discuss their issues...[to ensure] ... there is a set up where at least [top managers] are sure that [line managers] share information with their subordinates or employees, and [they] also learn what employees are saying*' (SM5.U1). Through these sectional meetings, it was also felt that it would be '*... easy to see why employees [were] voicing their issues and what their feelings [were] right from the basic level*' (LM3.U2; SM4.U1). It is in this view that senior managers and HR enforced the preparation and submission of minutes after every sectional meeting (SM4.U1; LM21.U1). In simple terms, participants regarded sectional meetings as a good platform for ensuring that employees' work issues were obtained by immediate supervisors, and employees were made aware of organisational issues so that they fruitfully contributed towards the decision-making process.

Apart from meetings, another voice channel was WhatsApp. The usage of WhatsApp was also supported by interview and questerview responses. The expectation to use WhatsApp was mentioned by many (25) questionnaire respondents as shown in figure 8 above as well as most interview participants (for example, LM21.U1; LM3.U2; LM11.U2; LM26.U1). Through WhatsApp, a lot of formal groups were created within different sections to offer employees an opportunity for expressing their issues which they had to immediate supervisors (LM21.U1; LM5.U2; LM3.U2). Individual employees could use WhatsApp platform to raise issues such as lack of working materials (for example, LM2.U2; LM23.U2) or '*welfare issues that needed the attention of the zone manager*' (LM22.U1). Subordinates could also directly WhatsApp the immediate supervisor, '*...when they had issues which they could not raise on the group forums*' (LM6.U2). Another line manager (LM19.U1) also agreed that '*...these days, WhatsApp makes life easier because juniors [can be] able to quickly speak to you and you are able to handle work issues sometimes even in your most busy schedules*'. This issue of WhatsApp being quicker in eliciting input from employees on work issues was also supported by many other participants (for example LM21.U1; LM7.U2; LM25.U1).

Another voice avenue that employees were encouraged to use in raising issues to their supervisors was phone calls. From the questionnaire responses in figure 8 above, 27 respondents indicated phone calls as the voice avenue. In interviews, many participants (for example, LM2.U2; LM5.U2; LM21.U1; HR3.U1; LM27.U1) also mentioned telephone calls as a route which subordinates were expected to use in raising work issues or challenges which they had to their immediate supervisors. In utility 1, the use of phone calls appeared to be well supported with resources for making calls. As the HR manager (HR1.U2) pointed out, '*...what we have also done is to make a provision of monthly airtime depending on grade to all employees so that if they encounter any work-related issue...they should be able to call relevant authorities...*'. The HR director (SM2.U2) also concurred that,

*'...deliberatively, we have said employees, and their supervisors should be given airtime and at certain levels from supervisors, depending on the nature of work, we also buy them actual phones, so you can see that we really encourage this issue of voicing. Of course, I know also that even if we give them, some may not use them for intended purpose but at least from us we do our part...'*

To support this further, in utility 2 there was a policy called, 'the blackberry policy' (SM1.U2) which provided that the organisation should buy phones to employees for work use. These examples illustrate how the usage of phone calls was being encouraged for employees to use in raising work-related issues or challenges to their immediate supervisors.

Apart from phone calls, written avenues were also encouraged. The written means were supported by HRM policies of both utility organisations. For example, in utility 1, the HR policy (SSR.U1) provided that in reporting issues to the immediate supervisor, a subordinate needed to consider putting them in writing. Written means largely included the use of institutional emails and memos. In institutional emails, a lot of interview participants (for example, LM21.U1; HR3.U1; SM4.U1; LM7.U2; LM5.U2) and questerview respondents (see figure 8 above) regarded it as a formal voice option. In utility 1, it was noted that line managers were obtaining issues through organisational emails. As one participant, LM20.U1, observed, '*...we normally use outlook, and all employees are made to have an [institutional email] to use when they want to for example submit reports or most of their work.*' The HR manager (HR2.U1) further added that, '*...most of the times we also use the same outlook when we want to communicate something to employees as a whole or to individual employees.* Similarly,

participant LM11.U2 supported that institutional emails were widely used for employees to follow up on requests such as those relating to work materials and feedback was also given through the same emails. Also, the fact that, '*...employees from supervisory level were given phones...it [was] mandatory that every smart phone should be set up to institutional email*' (Ibid). One would note that institutional emails were regarded as the voice option which employees could use in expressing work related issues to immediate supervisors.

Memos were the other written avenue mentioned by many participants (for example, LM13.U2; LM5.U2; LM9.U2; LM20; U1; LM18.U1). Participants (for example, HR3.U1; SM2.U2) suggested that a memo template existed which employees needed to use if they had issues which needed to be expressed to immediate supervisors. Usage of memos could, at times, formalise verbal discussions with the immediate supervisor. As one line manager (LM14.U1) noted,

*'...[subordinates] would come to follow up on issues all the time, I have this issue, I would tell them okay fine, write a memo about the issue so that it should come official, so if they come to me and explain about say the need for another computer or indeed asking for an emergency loan, so we will discuss and they will write a memo later on and probably it requires authorisation, we push them through...'*

In other words, memos were expected to be utilised for officialising the verbal discussions. This was also agreed by another line manager (LM20.U1) who mentioned that '*...sometimes when you talk on the phone, you ask the employee to say okay for us to consider giving you extra plumbing materials can you put it in writing which means they need to bring me a memo...*'. Similarly, another line manager (LM3.U2) in utility 2 also explained that '*...you would also find that in a day employees would come with different issues, they could be personal like requesting for fuel advance when they have a funeral or could be to do with their work , and if I can't address them or I need support from other departments, sometimes I ask them to go back and bring a memo so that its official*'. These responses suggest that line managers encouraged employees to write memos after verbal discussions on personal issues like emergency loan or fuel advance or work-related ones like work materials.

What is common in all the management-led voice channels presented above is that these were expected to be used by employees to express to line managers their individual, work-related or

personal issues, challenges or grievances which they had. These encouraged voice channels were also largely formalised as backed by HRM policies. Line managers were expected to be the primary receivers of voice issues but to address them they had to liaise with fellow line managers, senior managers or HR personnel. Table 8 below summarises the voice channels, their use, targeted voice receiver and handler.

**Table 8 A summary of voice channels and their intended use**

No	Voice channel	Utility 1	Utility 2	Topic covered	Voice receiver	Voice handler(s)
1	Grievance procedure	Available	Available	Grievances (Welfare, promotion, training and resource constraints)	Line manager	Line manager, HR, senior managers
2	Meetings (one on one and sectional)	Available	Available	Work-related issues (suggestions for improvement/work challenges)	Line manager	Line manager, HR, senior managers
3	WhatsApp	Available	Available	Work-related and welfare issues	Line manager	Line manager, HR, senior managers
4	Phone call	Available	Available	Work-related and welfare issues	Line manager	Line manager, HR, senior managers
5	Written means (emails and memos)	Available	Available	Work-related, welfare and	Line manager	Line manager,

				personal difficulties		HR, senior managers
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### **8.3.Intended implementation of the management-led voice channels.**

The previous section showed that line managers were placed at the centre of ensuring that employee issues or grievances were voiced through the recommended channels as well as addressed either by line managers themselves or through escalating to senior managers. This suggests that line managers acted as primary or key actors in implementing the voice mechanisms which were put in place or facilitating that voices were channelled through the management-led avenues and addressed. The findings on the expected role of senior managers as enablers of positive voice culture and that of HR as custodian of the voice mechanisms' implementation are also presented. Before jumping into the implementation role of line managers, this section first presents findings on the roles of senior managers and HR. This is, as per the data structure in Appendix 9, supported by three third order theoretical aggregations namely, senior managers as enablers of positive voice culture, HR as custodian of voice mechanisms' implementation and line managers as conduits of voice mechanisms' implementation.

#### **8.3.1. Senior managers as enablers of positive voice culture**

This influential role of senior managers towards line managers' implementation of the grievance procedure was found in the study. Interview participants generally appeared to agree that senior managers were expected to hold an overall responsibility of ensuring, as also suggested by Schein (1986), that there is a positive voice climate or culture for the implementation of the grievance procedure. When interview participants were asked whom, they regarded as holding the ultimate responsibility in grievance implementation, 13 out of the 31 of participants nominated senior managers. This supports how highly participants regarded the influential role which senior managers held in relation to the implementation of the grievance procedure. This role of senior managers comprised three main responsibilities namely setting the tone for employee voice culture, creating a conducive workable environment for voice to thrive and leading voice facilitation. These are discussed below.

Setting the tone for employee voice culture is the first role which participants felt that senior managers undertook. Participants felt that line managers would not be able to implement the grievance procedure if senior managers did not create, '*...a conducive environment where employees [were] able to speak up when they [had] issues in an open manner*' (LM1.U2). This was also found in interview responses from many other participants (LM15.U1; LM21.U1; LM7.U2; LM12.U2; LM11.U2; SM2.U1). Thus, a '*...tone [had to] be set from the top for employees to speak freely*' (LM15.U1). Another line manager (LM12.U2) also mentioned that, '*the one who [were] better placed [were] members in CMT [corporate management team], those ones [needed] to champion a tone for people to be able to speak without fear...it need[ed] to start from management*'. This was also the idea supported by participant HR2.U1. Beyond just setting a tone in which employees could speak freely, another participant (LM24.U1) also highlighted that, '*...employees [could] only come up and speak if management...[created] that environment where it [did] not become a crime to speak what one thinks*'. This was also concurred by another line manager (LM4.U2) who suggested that '*...for [employees] to be open enough its [senior managers] whereby [they] [had to] say when employees speak up, no strings attached...*'. An obligation was, thus, placed on senior management to '*...create...a voice culture where employees [were] able to vomit what [was] in their chest without any fear that they [were] going to be penalised*' (LM11.U2). In simple terms, participants felt that senior managers were responsible for setting the tone for voice culture in which employees voiced freely and without fear of repercussions.

Senior managers were also expected to create a conducive workable environment for voice to thrive. As one line manager (LM15.U1) noted, senior managers needed to set the tone, '*... not only by word of mouth*' (LM15.U1) but also through ensuring that suitable voice policies and procedures [were] put in place to, '*...guide how sectional heads [could] go about ensuring that their juniors openly [expressed] their grievances and [followed] right channels in doing so...*' (LM7.U2). Other participants also added that senior managers could '*...dictate things*' through, for example, demanding HR to put in place policies, procedures or other documents relating to employee voice (LM5.U2; SM5.U1). Beyond driving policy development, participants also felt that senior managers could create a conducive environment through, '*...seeing to it that employees [were] working in a good workable environment in which [they were] free to work and contribute to the general goals*' (LM8.U2). A good workable environment included providing line managers with the working materials or other resources they needed to do their work (LM8.U2; LM4.U2; LM2.U2; LM25.U1; LM20.U1). Through this good workable

environment, employees were viewed as being, '*...able to speak up when things [were] not right*' (LM8.U2). One would note that senior managers were the ones calling the shots in creating a good workable environment through driving voice policy development and ensuring the provision of working materials to line managers.

Apart from creating a good workable environment, senior managers were also expected to lead other actors, HR, and line managers, in terms of making sure that voice mechanisms were implemented. To HR, senior managers delegated the custodianship of the implementation. As the HR director (SM2.U2) for utility 2 explained,

*'...also, this falls us as HR, once management sets the corporate objectives of the board, they make us custodians of these employee-related policies and we are tasked to ensure policies such as the conditions of service are implemented effectively which include seeing to it that employee views are considered in the decisions that we make'*

A closer look at the job description of the HR manager for utility 1 also appeared to support this claim that senior managers tasked HR to be overseeing the process of implementing all employee-related policies. As shown in Appendix 12, the first role reads, '*providing leadership in the implementation of human resource policies and strategies to ensure that the department contributes effectively and efficiently to the goals of the board*'. Besides overseeing and leading the implementation of voice mechanisms, it was also found that HR was expected by senior managers to periodically review these employee strategies and policies and make necessary recommendations on the changes that were needed. This was supported by the Human resource strategic plan for utility 1 (HRSP.U1) which tasked HR to continuously examine organisational needs and priorities and using them in formulating and reviewing policies including those on voice. In doing this, HR still relied heavily on senior management (LM4.U2). As participant LM7.U2 agreed, '*...the CEO and the directors [occupied] the driving seat though HR [was] placed in front to chase the implementation of policies or other mechanisms to ensure employees [were] given the opportunity to speak*'. This suggests that much as senior managers assigned HR to be a custodian of implementation process of the grievance procedure, they still retained the driving seat in this role.

Participants also felt that senior managers were expected to lead line managers towards grievance procedure implementation. One way was seeing to it that line managers were

conducting meetings with subordinates for issues to be raised through demanding minutes for sectional meetings (SM5.U1; SM4.U1; LM21.U1; SM3.U2). Senior managers were also expected to make approvals for resources which line managers needed to facilitate voice. As one line manager (LM27.U1) noted, '*...my director is there to help me, for example when I want to go and have routine employee visits, or I want to conduct meetings, I write a memo to him requesting for what is needed*'. Many other participants (for example, LM20.U1, LM19.U1; LM13.U2; LM8.U2; LM21.U1; SM1.U2) agreed that senior managers were expected to provide or approve request for resources such as refreshments, fuel and allowances for either meetings or travels to meet employees. What this means is that apart from just enforcing meetings, senior managers also undertook a major role in providing resources to line managers for employee voice facilitation.

In leading line managers, senior managers were also expected to ensure that employee issues presented to them by line managers were being addressed. One line manager (LM2.U2) commented that, '*...I would say it's the head of departments who have the ultimate responsibility because they are the ones who help that issues from juniors are addressed...*'. These senior managers would for example give direction on how line managers should handle the issues from employees (LM14.U1). Participant LM15.U1, for example, illustrated that, '*...if my junior raises a work-related issue, I will go to my director and I say we have this, what's your thought, we get the necessary direction on how we can handle it*' (LM15.U1). Another line manager (LM17.U1) also recalled that,

*'...when juniors come to me with an issue where maybe they have a difficult encounter with the influential customers, they can be big people in government or big business tycoons, before responding I go to my director and seek direction to avoid shooting myself in the foot (laughs), so he would explain to me the approach we need to take'*

In all these participants' illustrations, one would note that when line managers were faced with a difficult employee work-related issue, they expected to seek guidance or direction from their senior managers to have the issues addressed. To support this further, when line managers were asked where they went to seek assistance when faced with the most difficult work-related issue from their subordinates, most of them (for example, LM11.U2; LM13.U2 LM3.U2; LM25.U1; LM18.U1; LM8.U2LM2.U2; LM4.U2) mentioned senior managers for the same reason of

obtaining guidance and direction to address the issue. Senior managers were, thus, addressing employee issues from line managers and guiding them in addressing other voice issues.

Senior managers were also expected to assess line managers' behaviours in voice facilitation. Many participants in utility 1 (for example, LM1.U2; SM2.U2; LM10.U2) highlighted that senior managers were expected to closely monitor and regularly assess how line managers related with their subordinates for them to express the issues they had. As illustrated by participant LM19.U1, '*...the heads of departments also judge us during the appraisal how we can relate well with our juniors, it's part of the appraisal, because it affects how employees achieve targets, we first have to rate ourselves then my boss assesses*'. This idea of senior managers assessing the behaviours of the line managers in utility 1 was also supported by many other participants (for example, LM21.U1; LM14.U1. LM27.U1; SM4.U1; HR2.U1). Line managers were assessed on areas such as '*...how [they] we talking to subordinates, how [they] were addressing employee complaints [and] the relationship [they built] with juniors*' (LM9.U2). In other words, senior managers were assessing how well line managers were facilitating voice.

A closer look at the behavioural assessment form for utility 2 (See appendix 13) which senior managers were using in assessing line managers also appeared to concur that senior managers were assessing how well line managers were facilitating voice. First, senior managers were expected to rate how well line managers were communicating issues to employees and solving problems under leadership and problem-solving traits, respectively. Under creativity trait, second, senior managers were expected rate how well line managers were able to support and accommodate employees' ideas on new ways of doing things or novel solutions to problems. Through communication trait, third, senior managers were expected to rate how line managers were able to listen well to employees and give feedback. Under people management trait, lastly, line managers were assessed on how well they could create good relations with their subordinates and maintain good employee welfare. What is common among these and other behavioural assessment traits in appendix 13 is that they relate to how well line managers were able to facilitate employee voice.

In both utilities, it was also found from interviews that there were other behavioural expectations for line managers that were not written down. Firstly, senior managers expected line managers to, '*...avoid...outrage and conflict where [they] literary [had to] go up in arms,*

*[they were] better off to allow [subordinates] to voice out, if [they didn't] allow them, they [would] voice in other forums' (LM6.U2). This was also agreed by one senior manager (SM5.U1) who explained that, '*...It's a known thing, I think the issue is, as a manager, you are not supposed to overreact, so to say, I think that's what may be assist them*'. Similarly, participant LM5.U2 agreed that senior managers told them, '*...not to fight characters or else [they] wouldn't achieve anything*'. A line manager in utility 1 (LM23.U1) also explained that, '*...[they] needed to avoid turning meetings into battlefield*'.] In all these responses, participants suggested that senior managers expected line managers to desist from overreacting or fighting the overly critical voicers.*

The HR director for utility 2 (SM2.U2) also explained that, '*...I know here some sectional heads come to us that we are tolerating too much, that there is a level employees speak that is not acceptable but I normally say that we must give them a window because others are just looking for a place where they can vomit, they feel good*'. Thus, instead of fighting the characters, line managers were expected to give destructive voicers a window they would express the issues (also, LM8.U2). Another line manager in utility 1 (LM17.U1) also concurred that, '*...there are some who are, I wouldn't say disrespectful, but too blunt to a point where if you are not a person who wants to actively listen or take criticism, you can take offense, but we are told not to make that become barrier to communication*'. This suggests embracing negative criticism and not regarding contrary views as cause for enmity but rather opening for subordinates to speak their mind (also, LM16.U1; LM2.U2). As participant LM7.U2 also agree, '*...they also say that if people in our areas of responsibility have voices, don't shut them out, let them speak*,

The way to deal with critical voicers is suggested by the HR director for utility 2 (SM2.U2) who commented that, '*...how you react to negative situation, you react in a positive way even if it's the negative situation, trying to avoid looking at the person giving negative feedback, there it means you are fighting a losing battle*'. Thus, sectional heads were expected, as LM8.U2 put it, '*...not to respond with emotions...but absorb the pressure*'. In the same approach of reacting positively, another line manager (LM5.U2) commented that, '*...we are advised not to stick so much on the negative aspect of what they are saying, you can still go back and improve based on their critical feedback*'. Apart from reacting positively, another expectation on sectional heads was concentrating on the key message. As participant (SM1.U2) highlighted, '*...it's about the sense in what that person is saying, he can say it in a rude way*

*but then he will still pass on the message, if it's really an issue, you get it and you try to address it*'. This is the same idea presented by another line manager (LM17.U1) by saying, '*...it shouldn't matter that they are expressing the raw emotions because I just get what they are saying*'. Participant LM8.U2 also alluded to the fact that they were expected to focus on key message from voices. In other words, the expected behaviour for line managers' handling of overly critical voicers is focusing on the key message apart from reacting positively, giving open window and nor fighting them.

To sum up, one would note that senior managers not only were expected to set a tone for voice culture and create a good workable environment for voice to thrive but also were expected to lead other actors, namely HR and line managers, towards the implementation of the voice mechanisms and assessing line managers' voice facilitation behaviours. In leading other actors in voice mechanisms' implementation, HR was delegated the custodianship role of the implementation process with senior managers expected to occupy the driving seat. Senior managers were also expected to enforce that line managers conducts meetings, ensure that issues presented by line managers are addressed and assess line managers' behaviours in terms of voice facilitation. In short, senior managers were not only responsible for creating a good climate for voice culture but also influencing other actors in effective implementation of the voice mechanisms. The next section elaborates on HR's custodianship role in the implementation.

### **8.3.2. HR as custodian of voice mechanisms' implementation**

As discussed above, HR was delegated the custodianship of the voice mechanisms' implementation. 10 of the 31 respondents nominated HR as holding the ultimate responsibility in implementation through the custodianship role. This corresponds to the monitoring role suggested by Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) of the grievance procedure implementation. In this role, interview responses suggested that HR was expected to act as policy custodian, provider of implementation guidance to line managers and coordinator of voice implementation. These HR tasks are explained below.

The first HR task relates to policy custodianship. In this role, HR was first responsible for ensuring policy compliance in implementation. In this role, as explained by participant HR2.U1, HR had to ensure that, '*...staff service regulations and policy and procedure statements were being followed by everyone*'. Many other participants agreed that HR was

expected to ensure that the voice policies were being adhered to in the way employee issues were addressed, for example (HR3.U1; SM2.U2). One line manager (LM16.U1) also agreed that, '*...HR is there to guide us to say these are the instruments we have, and this is how they apply in dealing with issues from employees.*' In the policy custodianship, HR was also expected to make updated policies on managing employee voice available to line managers (HR1.U2; HR3.U1). Beyond just making policies available to line managers, they also had to hold, '*...orientation sessions to explain these about these policies*' (HR2.U1). Besides policy orientation, HR was also responsible for making recommendations to management for the review of these policies based on the changing events in the organisation and other complaints from employees (SM2.U2). In the review process, HR was seeking input from both employees and line managers (HR3.U1; HR1.U2; SM2.U2). In short, one would note that in policy custodianship role, HR was expected to ensure that there was policy compliance, availability, orientation, and review.

The second HR task relates to guiding line managers in implementation. One line manager (LM22.U1) noted that, '*...I think for me its administration or HR...they are the ones who guide us on what employees can do and what we can do to help them.*' This was also supported by other participants (for example, LM15.U1; LM20.U1; LM9.U2; LM6.U2) who mentioned HR as being the provider of guidance in response to a question on who they were consulting when faced with difficult issues from their subordinates. These participants agreed that they expected HR guidance on many personal employee issues they faced such as absences due to sickness, redeployment requests and bereavement support. HR was also expected to guide line managers on issues that came from subordinates on how HR processes such as performance appraisal, discipline as well as promotion were unfairly applied to individual employees (LM15.U1; LM7.U2; LM23.U1). Line managers, thus, '*... [did not] regard [themselves] as experts on issues that came from employees but [depended] on HR for advice*' as explained by participant, LM4.U2.

Apart from providing guidance, HR was also expected to undertake the coordinating role. HR had to coordinate not only line managers' activities in implementing voice mechanisms but also ensuring that employees were voicing through the management-led voice channels (LM10.U2). In this task, HR was expected to coordinate performance appraisals which, among others, involved assessing that employees were voicing within the management-led voice structures (HR1.U2). They had to do this through encouraging line managers, senior managers,

and all employees to ensure that appraisals were done within the set calendar (SM4.U1). Once appraisals were done, HR had to also, '*...consolidate the results and submit to management*' (HR1.U2). This coordinating role was viewed as being better placed in HR because it was viewed as a section that was already designated to oversee all employment-related issues (LM19.U1; LM10.U2). As the Human resource strategic plan for utility 1 (HRSP.U1) stipulated, '*the department of human resource and administration...is charged with the overall responsibility of the management and administration of all employee-related matters*'. Most participants (for example, LM5.U2; LM21.U1; LM16.U1) also regarded HR personnel as being '*experts*' who understood the implementation of the voice mechanisms. In other words, participants understood that HR personnel, as one line manager (LM10.U2) explained, had expertise and understanding of not only implementing voice mechanisms but also, '*...how employees [behaved] and how they could be made to speak through the recommended forums*'. This is the expertise which HR was expected to bring to their custodianship role and provision of support to line managers who were at the centre of obtaining and addressing employee issues (LM9.U2). One would note that in the custodianship role, HR was expected to have an influential role in the implementation of the voice mechanisms through ensuring policy compliance and review, guiding line managers and coordinating the implementation process. The next section discusses the intended role of line managers in voice mechanisms' implementation.

### **8.3.3. Line managers as conduits of voice mechanisms' implementation.**

Section 8.2.3 discussed how line managers were placed at the centre of implementing the grievance procedure. Sections 8.3.1 and 8.3.2 further discussed how senior managers and HR, respectively, held influential roles for line managers' voice mechanisms' implementation. Because of the influential role of senior managers and HR, it was of no surprise that only a few line managers (for example, LM16.U1; LM4.U1; LM3.U1; LM15.U1) appeared to accept this implementation role. In fact, when most participants were asked who held an ultimate responsibility in implementing voice mechanisms, a lower number of respondents (6 out of 31) nominated line managers. In implementation, line managers were expected to be the conduits (Harney and Yi Lee 2022;21) of the voice mechanisms in which they had five roles namely, enforcing policy adherence, torchbearer, handling voice through performance management, selling voice mechanisms to subordinates and accommodating destructive voicers. These are discussed in the sections below.

The first line managers' implementation responsibility related to enforcing policy compliance. To ensure policy compliance, line managers were, first, expected to sensitise employees of the existing policies. As the administration manager for utility 1 (HR3.U1) observed, '*...we also rely on the heads of sections to make their juniors understand these policies, you know it's one thing to print and give them policies but it's another for them to really take an interest in reading them*'. A line manager in utility 2 (LM6.U2) also agreed that, '*...may be some people are not even clear about these policies such as conditions, that's why we need to tirelessly remind them*'. Similarly, one line manager in utility 1 (LM20.U1) explained that, '*...yes, we have policies, there is staff service regulations, we have this document (points to the policy), of course not many employees may have read it as they don't like reading (laughs), that's where we come in to make them understand*'. Another line manager (LM19.U1) gave an example of the training policy which they had been sensitising by explaining that,

*'...the policy on training has been contentious where employees failed to understand the conditions for going on long term or short-term training sponsored by the Board. In view of the issues, the Board drafted another policy on training which we have been tasked to interpret to employees after HR oriented us first'.*

In all these illustrations, one gets an idea that line managers were expected to sensitise their subordinates on the policies which covered most issues which employees were likely to express.

Apart from policy sensitisation under policy compliance, line managers were also expected to ensure adherence to those voice policies. As one line manager (LM3.U2) explained, '*...efforts are needed to ensure that policies on voice are effectively implemented for employees to have voice opportunities*'. Another line manager (LM16.U1) illustrated that, '*..., if the conditions say that employees should come at 7:30 and they are coming at 9, we need to call them to understand why they are being late and possibly caution them*'. The idea was to ensure that, '*...what was written was being followed and implemented, and where there were gaps, they were expected to take action*' (LM4.U2). This was also agreed by another line manager (LM11.U2) who explained that, '*...there are many things you find in policies like conditions of service, they guide how juniors can go about to say the issues they have. As a sectional head, I need to make sure that these channels are being followed not doing shortcuts*'. Many other participants (HR3.U1; LM19.U1; SM2.U2) also agreed that sectional heads were expected to

see to it that voice policies were being followed in terms of either the way employees were working or the way they were expressing issues in line with the standards that were set for behaviour. If employees were not adhering to policies or expected behaviours such as voicing rudely, line managers could take discipline action on those employees (LM22.U1; LM15.U1). All in all, in enforcing policy compliance, line managers were expected to sensitive voice policies, ensure policy adherence and disciplining lack of policy adherence.

Apart from enforcing policy compliance, line managers were also expected to sensitise the voice mechanisms. One way of doing this was through appraisal meetings where they had to, '*...remind juniors about how they [could] go about reporting the issues which they [had]* (LM22.U1). Another line manager (LM25.U1) also agreed that, '*... we raise awareness of the right channels to use when we are doing performance appraisals*'. Similarly, another line manager in utility 2 (LM3.U2) agreed that, '*...even when we are conducting performance appraisals, we also bring that awareness on what they can use to voice issues*' (LM3.U2). Apart from using appraisal meetings, line managers would also raise awareness of the grievance procedure during meetings. As one line manager (LM17.U1) recalled, '*we also have periodic meetings with our subordinates through which we remind them of the mechanisms that exist within the Board for employee voice*'. This was done through either face to face meetings (for example, LM25.U1; LM26.U1; LM21.U1 LM6.U2) or sectional meetings (for example, LM17.U1; LM18.U1; LM22.U1; LM13.U2; LM3.U2; LM16.U1). As mentioned by participant, LM13.U2, in such meetings, line managers, '*...encourage[d] employees to be coming forward and [raising] their issues through [their] immediate supervisors*'. The key emphasis in such meetings was, '*...taking [issues] to the right forums*' (LM2.U2). Apart from meetings, other participants (for example, LM19.U1; LM21; LM12.U2) also indicated that they raised this awareness through WhatsApp. Regardless of the way line managers used to raise awareness, but the key message was found in what one line manager (LM14.U1) explained that, '*...I want them to know what they are supposed to do, if they have a problem they have to bring it to me before they cross it to someone else*'. In simple terms, emphasis to subordinates was on voicing through the immediate supervisor.

The third task which line managers were expected to do related to be a torchbearer in voice mechanisms. In this role, participants felt that line managers, as immediate supervisors, needed to avail themselves to the subordinates for them to be able to speak. As one line manager (LM10.U2) noted, '*...mostly they do have very helpful suggestions on how we can improve the*

*billing and what have you...what I need to do is to go around the schemes to meet them and hear from them*'. This, as another line manager (LM21.U1) noted would provide an opportunity for subordinates to have easy access to line managers to whom they had to express their issues. Line managers (for example, LM13.U2; LM19.U1; LM16.U1) also suggested that they had to ensure that meetings were done. These meetings were regarded as not only offering a platform where they would obtain issues from subordinates but also for relaying information to subordinates (LM25.U1; LM27.U1; LM7.U2). During meetings, if line managers saw that employees couldn't speak, they had to encourage them to raise issues during any other business (AOB) section of the meetings (LM13.U2; LM21.U1). Another participant (LM16.U1) also added that, '*...when we are in the meetings, I emphasise that they should not be waiting for me to bring the solutions...they should be bringing out the suggestions and issues which they have...I can't know everything*'. What was key was, '*...not just communicating or listening to issues but also encouraging them, always inspiring them for them to express their issues*' (LM5.U2). In other words, as participant LM11.U2 highlighted, line managers '*...had to be a torchbearer may be sort of...a leader to [their] subordinates so that should there be issues, [they] should [act as] subordinates' first line of contact*'. This demanded line managers to create an environment where subordinates were open and free to raise issues (LM8.U2) without '*...[shooting] down what they are suggesting*' (LM9.U2) or imposing already decided ideas (LM20.U1). There are many other line managers (for example, LM15.U1; LM1.U2; LM5.U2; LM7.U1 LM17.U1; LM18.U1; LM22.U1; LM12.U2) whose interview responses suggested that they had a responsibility of ensuring that they, as leaders, needed to create an open environment for their subordinates to freely express the issues they had.

Beyond creating an open voice environment as torchbearers, line managers were also expected to be accommodative to critical views. As participant LM8.U2 noted, '*...when people speak up and speak something which is not working well with you don't need to be emotive about it but understand why they are voicing that and if there is substance in it, consider it*'. This was also agreed by participant LM15.U1 who added that, '*...we should be creating that environment where people should be able to vent in an official way*'. A senior manager for utility 2 (SM3.U2) also explained that, '*...I am open to them even negative feedback, I expect them to do the same with their subordinates, if their subordinates have negative issues to raise to them, let them allow subordinates to do that*'. There are many other participants (for example, LM25.U1; HR3.U1; LM20.U1; LM8.U2) who supported that line managers were expected to be accommodative to critical or, as Pohler et al., (2020) puts it, remedial type of

voice. In short, the torchbearer role demanded that line managers should avail themselves to subordinates, ensure meetings were done, inspire subordinates to voice, creating an open voice environment and accommodating critical voice.

Line managers were also expected to handle voice through performance management process. Target setting came first in this process. The code of conduct for utility 1 (COC.U1), in its section 6.12, provided that, '*supervisors [were] responsible for the conduct and performance of their subordinates [and they were] accountable for failure to manage performance of their employees*'. In this process, line managers were expected to set targets for employees at the start of the year (LM6.U2). In this target setting process, the HR manager for utility 2 (HR1.U2) explained that,

*'...sectional heads [were] expected to look at the departmental goals which they [needed] to achieve and then come up with individual targets which their subordinates [needed] to achieve...[then] design a template for assessing...behaviours of employees [for] achievement of the targets...'*

The behaviour assessment template for juniors comprised assessment scales for junior employees' voice behaviours. For example, in utility 2 (See Appendix 14) under problem solving trait, juniors were being assessed for their ability to communicate work problems to their immediate supervisors. Similarly, under communication, subordinates were being assessed on how they were able to clearly and timely express issues to their immediate supervisors. Under teamwork, as well, subordinates were also being assessed on the working relationships with the immediate supervisors which involves sharing critical information. The case in utility 1, however, was different as sectional heads were only asked to set the strategic targets and sign with their subordinates. As a line manager for utility 1 (LM21.U1) explained,

*'...I will talk in terms of different levels, firstly, HR is a function that actually assists us to help the institution achieve its objectives, here we set balance scorecard at strategic level, so once that is set at that level, it goes to the departmental level, there it trickles to the division level, HR is in the forefront, is expecting me to ensure that all my employees they have their scorecard'*

Many other participants also supported that line managers were only expected to set strategic targets for employees without behavioural targets as was the case in utility 2 (HR2.U1; LM23.U1; LM16.U1). The belief in utility 1 was that behaviours would automatically reflect themselves in the way subordinates would achieve the strategic targets such that assessing strategic targets would also enable the assessment of behavioural targets (HR2.U1). As a matter of fact, the code of conduct (COC.U1) for utility 1 emphasised that line managers should be paying attention to the behaviours of their subordinates. Section 5.1(b) of this policy if supervisors should be; '*...addressing inappropriate behaviour and or workplace conflict immediately to avoid escalation*'. For example, in its section 6.3, the code of conduct (COC.U1) gave line managers a responsibility of ensuring that, '*employees... [were being] professional and courteous in the way they [communicated and] ..., not [using] inappropriate or offensive language, either verbally or in written communications*'. This demonstrates that despite not specifically assessing behaviours as in utility 2, utility 1 also attached value to the consideration of subordinates' behaviours.

Besides target setting, line managers were also expected to monitor the achievement of targets by their subordinates. As one line managers (LM8.U2) explained, '*...one thing I know is that I have a team, so what I need actually to do is to make sure that a team functions, so I look at what is it that they are defined to do, and try to ensure they are doing it in the way I want them to...*'. This involved monitoring if subordinates were doing what they were expected to be doing (LM16.U1). Many other line managers (for example, (LM6.U2; LM12.U2; LM3.U2; LM9.U2; LM20.U1) agreed to the issue of monitoring the achievement of strategic performance targets which they assigned their subordinates to undertake. Besides these strategic targets, line managers were also expected to monitor subordinates' voice behaviours. One line manager (LM12.U2) highlighted that, '*...I need to ensure that there is good professionalism, coming to work on time, being available when at work and not leaving early, and more importantly coming forward to explain why they can't do certain things*'. Other line managers also agreed that they were expected to not only monitor achievement of strategic targets but also ensuring that they are properly voicing issues and using right channels (LM18.U1; LM4.U2). In monitoring the achievement of targets, thus, line managers were expected to pay attention to voice behaviours such as voicing issues in a proper manner through immediate supervisors.

Line managers were also expected to conduct performance appraisals. In these appraisals, line managers were expected to assess subordinates' performance which included voice behaviours. As one line manager (LM6.U2) explained, '*...I also know that HR expects us to do performance reviews at the end of the year. They give two forms which we give juniors to first rate themselves then I rate them before having verbal discussions*'. Performance assessment in utility 2, as discussed earlier on, is based on the score from the behavioural assessment form in Appendix 14 as well as the score from the assessment of targets. As written in Appendix 14, '*...behaviours...contribute[d] 30% to the final score for junior employees while performance on targets...contribute 70%*'. The expectation of line managers using 30% of the behavioural score to the final score demonstrates the value which utility 2 gave to positive voice behaviours which were included in the behaviours that are assessed. The appraisal meetings also became a platform which line managers were expected to use in obtaining issues from subordinates on the challenges they faced to achieve targets (for example, LM18.U1; HR2.U1; LM5.U2; LM19.U1), suggestions for performance improvement (for example, LM18.U1; LM17.U1; SM1.U2) and employees' training needs (LM7.U2; LM4.U2; HR1.U2). To sum up, line managers were expected to use performance appraisals for assessing targets and voice behaviours as well as obtaining issues from subordinates.

Apart from handling voice through performance management, line managers were also expected to handle subordinates' resource related issues. The first category of resources related to working materials. As participant LM2.U2 noted, '*before sending my subordinates to work, I need to ask myself, do they have necessary resources? you can't just say go and do cash collection, will they go by foot? do they have what it takes to work*'. Another line manager (LM18.U1) also explained that, '*...when [my subordinates] come to report faults or the need for materials, I am also supposed to make sure that we provide them accordingly*'. A senior manager for utility 1 (SM5.U1) also added that, '*employees also need support from their supervisors, where they are stuck or where they need to enhance their work, so supervisors need to make sure this support is readily available be it materials or other things*'. Working materials also included the personal protective equipment (PPEs) (LM3.U2; LM2.U2; LM21.U1). Line managers were also expected to ensure that employees had good welfare. As participant LM2.U2 explained, '*...I am also expected to ensure that people I am leading are ready and willing to work, looking at their welfare, you know, I can't work with people who are down*'. This means attending to them when they reported sick, bereaved or when they needed transport to go to hospital (LM13.U2; LM21.U1; LM4.U2). Other participants (for

example, LM16.U1; LM2.U2) added that they had to see to it that subordinates had the necessary skills to do the assigned work. According to the Policy and procedure statement for utility 1 (PPS.U1) line managers were expected to, '*...identify training and development needs of their subordinates through formulation of personal development plans from performance appraisals*'. Besides trainings to subordinates, Participant LM4.U2 also explained that when subordinates complained about increase in the amount of work, they had to send recommendations to the departmental for more staff. In short, line managers were expected to address subordinates' voice issues that centred on the need for resources such as working materials, PPEs, workload, and training.

The conduit roles of line managers discussed above appeared to correspond with HRM devolution process (Van Mierlo et al. 2018; Townsend and Mowbray 2020) as they appeared to be devolved to line managers from HR and were, largely, rooted in the HRM policies. This is although some line managers (for example, LM4.U2; LM6.U1; LM10.U2; LM25.U2; LM23.U1; LM20) could not precisely confirm whether their expected implementation tasks were delegated to them by HR or senior managers. Without engaging into this debate of where these roles were delegated from, what is key is to emphasise that the above roles were aimed at ensuring that they help in intendedly implementing the voice mechanisms.

#### **8.4. Chapter summary**

The chapter argues that decisions to adopt voice related mechanisms in the Malawi public utility organisations were shaped by managerial desire to realise organisational objectives and safeguard employees' voice right. These promotive voice motives necessitated managerial orientation and advocacy for individualised and management-led voice related mechanisms. Within these mechanisms, employees were limited to taking their grievances and other work-related issues and challenges to immediate supervisors through voice channels which included, grievance procedure, meetings, WhatsApp, phone calls and other written means. The chapter also argues that line managers were put at the centre as primary implementers of the voice mechanisms in which they were delegated five conduit roles namely, enforcing policy adherence, torchbearer in voice mechanisms, handling voice through performance management, selling voice mechanisms to subordinates and accommodating destructive voicers. To undertake these implementation roles, line managers had to be supported by senior managers as enablers of positive voice culture and HR as custodians or monitors of

implementation. Much as line managers were delegated implementation roles which were aimed at the intended implementation of the voice mechanisms, as argued by Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013), we also know that line managers must make decisions as to whether to utilise these implementation responsibilities or not or to use the delegated roles in intended ways. These decisions raise an important question of the resulting quality of implementation. The next chapter, therefore, focuses on the actual implementation and quality of the voice mechanisms.

## **CHAPTER 9: FINDINGS: ACTUAL IMPLEMENTATION AND QUALITY OF VOICE-RELATED HRM PRACTICES**

### **9.1. Introduction**

This chapter builds on Chapter 8 by presenting findings, in line with RQ2, on the actual implementation of adopted management-led voice mechanisms and how that implementation contributed to the quality of those mechanisms. The chapter illustrates that instead of adhering to the conduit implementation roles presented in Chapter 8, line managers had to adapt delegated responsibilities to suit the context of implementation. These adaptability responsibilities, however, could not contribute towards the quality of the adopted management-led voice mechanisms. In other words, through these adaptability responsibilities, line managers were not able to inspire subordinates, who held remedial voice intentions, towards voicing through the individualised voice channels. Instead, employees preferred voicing through their own employee-led and collective voice channels which included, anonymous letters, grapevine, senior managers, HR and union. The findings in this chapter are based on the data structure in Appendix 10.

### **9.2. Actual line managers' implementation of voice mechanisms**

Many interviews supported the idea that line managers could not robotically adhere to the delegated responsibilities but created their own discretionary ways of executing the conduit roles to secure informal cooperation not only from employees but also from senior managers. These discretionary ways, as per the data structure in Appendix 10, are represented by four third order theoretical aggregations namely line managers' stages of voice facilitation, managerial discretion as a binding practice in addressing personalistic issues, reinforcing respectful voice and discouraging destructive voice and defending management instructions while denying ear to subordinate voice.

#### **9.2.1. Line managers' stages of voice facilitation**

The work of most line managers in terms of facilitating employee voice appeared to occur in a cycle. In this cycle, the starting point appeared to be the interface with senior managers (LM10.U2; LM11.U2; LM2.U2; LM13.U2). One line manager (LM1.U2) referred to this interface as '*debriefing sessions*'. Debriefing sessions, as they will be called throughout this chapter, served two main purposes. First, they offered an opportunity for line managers to present to senior managers employee issues which they could not address at their level

depending on the gravity of those issues (LM1.U2; LM20.U1; LM22.U1; LM19.U1). As one senior manager (SM3.U2) also agreed, '*...if they have issues there which they can't deal with at their level, they come to me and say look this employee brought this, how do we go about this?*'. In presenting issues to debriefing sessions, line managers had to be professional and desisting from delving into personal or family-related issues (LM15.U1), being honest in presenting issues (LM17.U1) and presenting issues based on thorough analysis (LM2.U2). They also had to filter issues to be presented either based on political reasons (LM16.U1; LM17.U1; LM18.U1; LM21.U1) or work-related challenges (LM2.U2; LM7.U2; LM9.U2). Based on political reasons, issues which line managers took to debriefing sessions included dealings with influential or politically connected customers (LM17.U1; LM21.U1). These '*headaches*', as described by participant LM18.U1, had to be taken to debriefing sessions regardless of how small they looked (LM17.U1; LM16.U1). Line managers also took to debriefing sessions resource-related challenges such as lack of working tools (LM10.U2; LM8.U2; LM15.U1; LM21.U1). In short, debriefing sessions served the purpose of addressing line managers' headaches and resource-related challenges.

Obtaining of guidance was found to be the second purpose of debriefing sessions. When issues were presented, senior managers had to provide guidance or solution to the issues (LM14.U1; LM11.U2; LM22.U1). One line manager (LM8.U2) exemplified that, '*...I will take up the issue to my director, I want to do ABC on this issue from such an employee for the reason of ABC, he will tell you go ahead and do it, if not he will tell you no or may be do it this way*'. Senior managers would, thus, '*... explain to [line managers], that take this approach*' (LM17.U1) or wait until the issue is resolved during corporate management meetings (LM16.U1; HR3.U1; LM10.U2; LM19.U1). Apart from issuing instructions on handling employee issues, senior managers were also giving feedback on previous issues that were resolved at management meetings (LM1.U2; LM19.U1; LM22.U1). Seeking guidance from senior managers was important to line managers for maintaining a working relationship with senior managers (LM2.U2; LM26.U1). As one line manager highlighted, '*...you know our jobs for one to successfully deliver, you need to build that kind of personal relationship with the boss, once it is broken, forget about working here...*' (LM1.U2). Senior managers' guidance also offered legitimacy to line managers' ways of handling employee issues. Participant LM17.U1) for example explained that, '*... if I am not convinced with how I am handling the issue, I would go to the director...to avoid 'kuotcha manja' (burning hands)*'. In other words, seeking guidance helped that line managers should handle employee issues in ways desired by senior

managers. One would note that seeking guidance helped maintenance of relationship with senior managers and having legitimacy in line managers' handling of employee issues.

After debriefing sessions with senior managers, line managers had to sit down and review their weekly workplans. Most line managers were found to have the annual, monthly and weekly workplans. They were called different names such as 'workplan' (LM1.U2; LM3.U2), 'workbook' (LM21.U1), 'work programme' (LM6.U2; LM22.U1) or 'work schedule' (LM16.U1). Regardless of the name, they all referred to one thing, as participant LM21.U1 puts it, '*a schedule or guide to what activities [needed] to happen in a day, week, month or year*'. In other words, line managers had to break down the annual plans into monthly, weekly, or daily tasks which they had to do and assign to subordinates (LM1.U2; LM22.U1; LM3.U2). Workplans also included the challenges or issues from employees which line managers had to address in the achievement of the tasks (LM9.U2; LM4.U2). However, the daily or weekly tasks which line managers had to achieve or ask their subordinates to achieve were strongly shaped by discussions in the debriefing sessions. As participant LM16.U1 explained, '*...after meeting my supervisor, I have to re-assess or reschedule what I need to do in that day or week because normally when you meet the boss you are given priorities you need to focus on*'. This was also concurred by many other line managers (LM21.U1; LM6.U2; LM1.U2; LM22.U1). In short, debriefing sessions gave line managers priorities which were used in reviewing workplans on what activities to concentrate on or ask subordinates to focus on.

After reviewing workplans, it was found that line managers needed interface with their subordinates. This interface could be done through different forums such as WhatsApp or meetings. This interface with subordinates was meant to articulate the message from the debriefing sessions. This message included either new information or instructions or feedback to the issues raised earlier (LM4.U2). To deliver the message, line managers tried not to articulate issues the way they obtained them from the debriefing sessions. As participant LM5.U2 highlighted, '*...most of the times you have problems when you get message from management and relay it the way it is to juniors, you weigh the people you are talking to, so that the message lands on the minds that can understand*'. What was key was to simplify the message to the level everyone would understand or to the level of their thinking (LM12.U2). Besides simplifying the message, line managers had to also be detailed in their message with clear justification of the decisions that were being adopted (LM6.U2; LM5.U2; LM16.U1; LM1.U2). For example, participant LM9.U2 illustrated that when they wanted to install solar

system, they received resistance but when they went back to subordinates with clear and detailed Information on why they wanted to install the solar system, they received constructive suggestions.

Other line managers also talked about considering the environment in delivering the message to subordinates. For example, '*if [they were] going to address subordinates when resources [were] not available, the wording of the message [had] to suit that*' (LM5.U2). This is because some line managers (LM5.U2; LM15.U1) felt that subordinates were positive and constructive when being addressed at a time resources were available and negative and destructive when addressed at a time resources were unavailable. However, senior managers highlighted that line managers had problems with simplifying the message to make subordinates understand (SM3.U2) or articulate detailed message to subordinates (SM4.U1). As participant SM5.U1 explained, '*...feedback rarely [went] back to employees on the issues which they raise[d]. This [had] been a very big problem*'. In short, much as line managers claimed that in articulating the message, they were able to simplify and detail the message while considering the environment, senior managers felt that line managers were not able to do this.

Apart from articulating the message to subordinates, interface with subordinates was also meant to monitor how subordinates were doing their work. The idea was to check how the previously assigned tasks were being undertaken (LM7.U2; LM11.U2; LM20.U1). Subordinates' interface was also important to check how other routine production processes or workflow were being done (LM19.U1; LM3.U2; LM8.U2). From these interactions, line managers aimed at obtaining challenges or any issues which subordinates were facing in undertaking their tasks (LM1.U2; LM5.U2; LM10.U2). As participant LM9.U2 explained, '*...then I have to meeting my juniors to understand what challenges they are encountering in the work I tasked them to do*'. However, some line managers (for example, LM4.U2; LM1.U2; LM19.U1; LM11.U2; LM22.U1) explained that very few employees raised pertinent issues or challenges during such meetings. Instead, these meetings were felt as being used by line managers for giving feedback and instructing or assigning new tasks to subordinates emerging from the reviewed workplans or the debriefing sessions (LM1.U2).

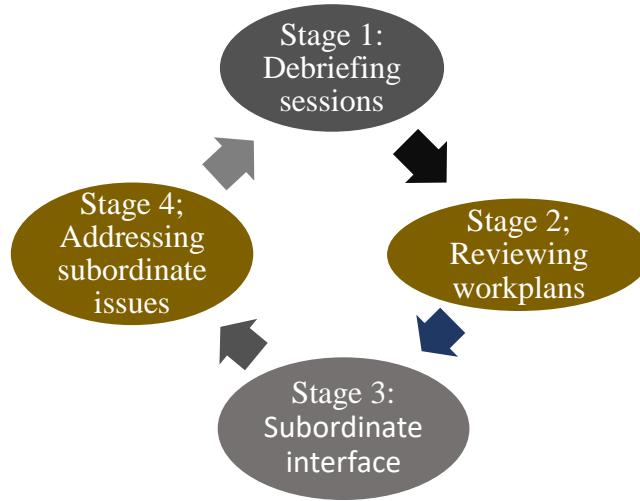
After having the interface with subordinates, line managers had to start addressing subordinate issues they couldn't address during the interface. As participant LM11.U2 puts it, '*...from there I would come back in the office, sit down, and start figuring out how to address issues I have*

*got from my juniors*'. In this process, line managers had to also, '*[go] back to the workplan and incorporate the issues from subordinates*' (LM16.U1). The idea was to organise and analyse the issues and look at how to go about addressing them or who to contact to have the issues addressed and prioritise in addressing them (LM10.U2; LM2.U2). For example, as noted by other line managers (LM18.U1; LM17.U1), issues like faults had to be prioritised and addressed by the following day. Furthermore, if employees raised issues of service interruption in an area, that also needed to be handled as a matter of urgency (LM19.U1; LM3.U2; LM8.U2).

Besides subordinates' interface, line managers also had office walk-ins by subordinates. Subordinates could visit line managers with issues such as on resource constraints, sickness, bereavement (LM5.U2; LM3.U2; LM20.U1; LM18.U2; LM4.U2). Line managers would contact the concerned subordinates to gather more information if issues were not clear (LM6.U2; LM11.U2; LM12.U2; LM13.U2). It was also found that in addressing most employee issues, line managers could interact with different departments such as finance to follow up on financial resources, procurement, and stores to follow up on materials and HR to seek guidance on some employee issues (LM5.U2; LM17.U1; LM2.U2; LM19.U1; LM4.U2). For issues which they could not still address after making these contacts, were taken back to the debriefing sessions described in the first stage.

The above discussion provides a very brief overview of what line managers were doing in the implementation of the voice mechanisms. This discussion suggests that what line managers were doing can be understood in four cyclic stages presented in figure 8 below. From these stages, one would note that in terms of interacting with subordinates, obtaining voice issues, and addressing them, stages 3 and 4 are crucial. The next sections will, therefore, delve deep into elaborating on the approaches which line managers were adopting in these stages to obtain and address subordinates' issues.

**Figure 8: Line managers' stages of voice facilitation**



### 9.2.2. Reinforcing respectful voice and discouraging destructive voice

During subordinates' interface in stage 3 of voice facilitation, line managers were expected to sensitise subordinates on the voice mechanisms as discussed in chapter 8. However, in sensitising the mechanisms, through the delivery of message, line managers appeared to be discouraging destructive voice and reinforcing respectful voice. In terms of discouraging destructive voice, line managers appeared to, first, discourage subordinates from regarding the interface as a battle ground. During meetings, other line managers (for example, LM22.U1; LM21.U1; LM3.U2) explained that other subordinates became overly critical to the level of personal attacks. This is the voice behaviour which line managers were trying to discourage (LM22.U1; HR2.U1). As participant LM16.U1 puts it, *'... we try avoiding that these forums should be used as a battle ground, when an employee has an issue with management to use the forum to fight'*. Similarly, another participant (LM6.U2) explained that, *'I correct my subordinates where I find them speaking rudely'*. Overly critical voicers were discouraged to prevent them misleading or misinforming other employees (LM4.U2; LM3.U2). After all, these voicers were regarded as having a mentality of just criticising anything without offering tangible suggestions or solutions (LM21.U2; LM22.U1).

One way of discouraging overly critical voicers was punishing them through denying them opportunities. Line managers could, for example, deny them field trips (LM1.U2; HR3.U1; LM4.U2; SM1.U2). As one senior manager (SM5.U1) commented, *'...those things are there, you just find that an employee was trying to speak too much, and they just start ignoring him in errands where they would get a little something, but we can't interfere in such things'*. Apart

from denying critical voicers field trips, they could also side-line them from trainings. Participant HR2.U1 explained that there were times they would see other line managers recommending the same employees for trainings while sidelining others and when they tried to find out why, they realised that it was because of the way those sidelined employees were expressing their issues. An example of subordinates who were said to be side-lined were the machine operators who many participants (for example, LM18.U1; LM19.U1; LM3.U1; HR2.U1) regarded as being the most frustrated employees, who were also mostly overly critical about issues in subordinates' interface. Being side-lined from training was viewed as punishment because trainings were regarded as a reward (HR2.U1). An example was given by participant LM18.U1 in which machine operators had been requesting for refresher trainings but when the refresher training was provided, they boycotted it because it was done locally, and they were not going to receive allowances from it. Line managers also appeared to discourage overly critical voicers through restricting voice through WhatsApp (LM17.U1; LM4.U2; LM22.U1; LM2.U2). As one line manager (LM2.U2) noted, '*...you would even regret having the WhatsApp forums for example*'. This was because subordinates could personally attack line managers in raising issues or when commenting on information that was shared (LM21.U1; LM22.U1). In short, line managers discouraged overly critical voicers through denying them opportunities such as field trips and trainings as well as restricting WhatsApp as a voice channel.

Apart from discouraging destructive voice, line managers also emphasised respectful voicing during subordinate interface. Line managers felt that subordinates were expected to voice in a respectful manner and not in a rude manner because this was the only way good feedback would be provided (LM10.U2). Participants LM20.U1 and LM5.U2 supported this by suggesting that employees had to be mindful of the words to use in voicing and not shouting or personally attacking line managers. This was also agreed by another line manager (LM20.U1) who noted that, '*...I wouldn't go to the director and shout or personally attack if I want to something...*' Participant LM5.U2, similarly, recommended, '*being mindful of the words to use in speaking to [line managers]*', One would note that these participants suggested that choice of words in expressing issues to line managers was an act of respectful voicing in which subordinates needed to avoid being rude and shouting when voicing.

Another act of respectful voicing involved being indirect or meeting privately when expressing negative or destructive issues. As one line manager (LM13.U2) noted, '*...when its negative*

*issues, you don't need to be direct or personal, you go around in a way that shouldn't show that you are pointing a finger at the boss*'. Participants HR2.U1 and SM3.U2 also agreed to this indirect way of expressing negative issues to line managers as an act of respectful voicing. If subordinates could not be direct, another option was for them to express destructive issues in private. As one line manager (LM4.U2) noted, '*...acceptability of a negative issue is more likely in private than if you directly confront me in the presence of other employees*'. This was also the feeling of participant LM7.U2. In short, line managers expected subordinates to express destructive issues either indirectly or in private.

Respectful voicing was regarded by participants as being a duty on subordinates. Participant LM20.U1 noted that, '*...normally, I don't expect juniors to respect me but aren't they duty bound to ensure that they speak to me in a way that demonstrates that I am their boss? To give you an example, I wouldn't go to the director and shout or personally attack if I want something*'. Similarly, one line manager (LM17.U1) regarded not voicing respectably as being tantamount to undermining authority while another line manager (LM24.U1) regarded it as being an act of insubordination. To sum up, in sensitising voice mechanisms, line managers discouraged overly critical voices through denying them opportunities and restricting voice channels. Instead, line managers felt that subordinates were duty bound to voice respectfully through not being rude as well as expressing destructive issues indirectly and in private.

### **9.2.3. Defending management stand while denying ear to subordinate voice**

In stage 3 of voice facilitation, line managers were also expected to be the torchbearer of the voice mechanisms as discussed in chapter 8. In this role, line managers were expected to inspire subordinates to voice through the management-led structures and create an open voice environment where employees could fruitfully contribute their ideas. However, line managers were found defending management stand and denying ear to subordinates' issues. The first way was through listening as a formality. As one line manager (LM3.U2) noted, '*...what I find it ideal is to just say that we have heard and we will respond later*'. Another line manager also explained that '*...I still listen, they talk, and you would advise say, I will investigate this, you find a small answer to give...*' (LM14.U1). These line managers suggest that they pretended and acted as if they had heard the issues and that they were going to provide a solution (also, LM10.U2; LM17.U1.). The idea was to give an impression that subordinates were being

listened to which they regarded as an important step in managing employee voice. As participant LM3.U2 puts it, '*...It just sometimes feels better to be reassured that you have heard the concerns. Telling them that we have heard, and we will be looking into your issues, that makes them become happy*'. Another participant (LM14.U1) also added that, '*...it gives them the impression that you are considerate to their concerns, it looks as if you have half solved their problems...*'. Line managers, thus, only gave false impression that they were listening to subordinates' issues, yet they were only listening as a formality which they believed was going to make subordinates happy and have the feeling that their voices were being considered in decision making.

Apart from listening as a formality, line managers had to also defend senior managers' direction(s) which were obtained from the debriefing sessions. Participant LM3.U2 noted that, '*...we sometimes see that the issue being raised is really valid but when you look at the feeling of management you just remain without action*'. In other words, they couldn't pay attention to what subordinates were saying because of their preconceived ideas about what senior managers wanted. For example, one line manager (LM6.U2) illustrated that when subordinate's issues being raised were going against management stand, they would say, '*...yah you are very right but, as for management they have taken this position to address the issue you are raising so let's wait and see*'. Such defensive approaches based on management's stand were also agreed by two other line managers (LM13.U2; LM1.U2). As a matter of fact, one line manager (LM2.U2) acknowledged that in this defence of management's stand, his subordinates could label him as being, '*... bought by management to always side with them*'. Such labels also resonated with line managers' belief that they were part of management. The HR manager for utility 1 (HR2.U1) mentioned that, '*...being sectional heads, they are also regarded as part of management hence they have to preserve the stand from management and not be if they are going against the same decisions made by management for which they are regarded as being part of...*'. This was also agreed by participant SM2.U2. Furthermore, line managers defended management's stand because they believed that it informed final decisions (LM6.U2; LM16.U1; LM4.U2). To sum up, in subordinates' interface, line managers appeared to listen as formality and defend management's instructions. These approaches had implications on how eventually line managers rendered an eye to subordinate's issues as discussed below.

In rendering ear, line managers were ignoring subordinate issues. Participant SM3.U2 illustrated that, '*... [line managers sometimes look as if they are not interested in*

*[subordinates'] personal issues, they say, 'go and sort out your personal issues, don't bring them to the office'.* This issue of disregarding personal issues was also further illustrated by participant SM2.U2 who cited a case of one line manager who had issues with his subordinates as explained below,

*'...when I chatted with a few employees what the issues were, what I established was that they were minor minor issues but issues which were dear to employees, he doesn't greet us even if we meet in the corridor, he doesn't ask if somebody was in the hospital, he doesn't ask how for example a child of an employee is feeling in the hospital, so they said the manager was very much inhuman, so we have had to sit down with this zone manager telling him that he is very good on technical aspects of his job but then it's a challenge for him to handle these people related issues which look small but they are so important to the employees, they were saying he was not opening up'*

In other words, line managers could not pay attention to subordinates' personal issues which they regarded as minor yet meant a lot to those subordinates. The only time Line managers paid attention to individual employee issues was when those issues came into conflict or directly affected the work which those line managers were doing (LM3.U2). But even with that, because Line managers were not open to listen to employees, they still ended up ignoring very good promotive ideas such as those relating to performance improvement (SM1.U2). This was also agreed by another senior manager (SM5.U1) who highlighted that,

*'...Sometimes it's the getting the right information on how we can improve as a board, it can be a big challenge, you ask and are told zone managers don't know how to interact with the lower level to obtain those unique ideas which I see employees having, so you are forced to get first-hand information from the lower level'*

Participant SM4.U1 also cited his experience of the townhall meetings in which he observed that subordinates had brilliant ideas, but they could not raise them to their immediate supervisors because Line managers were, '*...process owners who dictated things to juniors'* instead of listening to those promotive ideas.

Though line managers considered lack of eye to employee issues as emerging from the need to defend senior managers' directions, senior managers had a different explanation. They felt that this lack of eye to subordinate issues emerged from lack of ability to connect or interact well

with subordinates (SM4.U1). As participant SM2.U1 explained, ‘...of course, there are challenges where other managers lack the ability to connect with employees and allow that they express the issues. This was also agreed by participant SM1.U2 who explained that ignoring personal and promotive issues was due to, ‘...lack the requisite skills’ to render an eye to subordinate issues. To sum up, instead of being a torchbearer in grievance procedure, line managers were found listening as a formality and ignoring subordinates’ issues as a way of defending management stand.

#### **9.2.4. Managerial discretion as a binding practice in addressing personalistic issues**

In stage 4 of voice facilitation, line managers were expected to undertake two main conduit roles discussed in chapter 8 namely, handling subordinates’ welfare or resource related issues as well as ensuring policy compliance. However, in handling subordinates’ issues, line managers were found applying discretion. Managerial discretion was defined by participant LM9.U2 as, *[making] a decision that is contrary to what is stipulated in the conditions of service or other policies but because you are given the liberty to do so by corporate management team because it is in the best interest of the organisation or may be to assist an employee*. This managerial discretion was particularly encouraged and applied on welfare and other personalist issues (LM8.U2). This is because of how sensitive these issues became (LM18.U1). For example, a clause on support during funerals in the conditions of service for utility 2 (COS.U2) provided that, *in the event of death of an employee, a spouse or biological children of the employee, the Board shall Provide, according to grade or seniority, coffin, transport, food for the bereaved family and condolence cash*. This and other clauses in this policy did not provide for support towards death of an extended relative except for biological parents where only a coffin was allowed. However, in the application of this clause, participant LM8.U2 suggested that,

*‘...what guides sometimes are circumstances, and circumstances will differ for example you will find an employee has lost a cousin, but burial will be [within this city], this employee is also [in this city], sometimes you close your eyes and say get a pick up and give them fuel, just assist them. But also, when an employee is in grief and is asking for that kind of support, it’s difficult to say no’*

This illustrates how policies were relaxed to accommodate support toward welfare issues such as bereavement. This participant highlighted that relaxation of policies was because it was difficult to say no for support towards bereavement. Another line manager (LM4.U2) also noted that this difficulty lied in how culturally funeral issues were regarded as sensitive as support was not provided even if the deceased are not covered in the policy for support. If not supported on these issues, actually, line managers could be labelled as inconsiderate or inhuman (Ibid).

Apart from funeral-related issues, policy relaxation was also found on issues relating to sickness and maternity. A line manager in utility 1 (LM18.U1) illustrated the following,

*'I will give you another example, there is a law that stipulates that a female employee should be entitled to three months maternity leave. But sometimes you find that an employee comes asking for additional three months without any clear support of the request let alone delivery complications as required in the policy. But you just give a go ahead and approve the leave, if you say no, the pressure you can receive from all angles will be enormous, they will say you are being harsh, so it becomes tricky'.*

A similar scenario was found for sick leave. In both utilities 1 and 2, policies if employees were entitled to a maximum of 6 months sick leave for chronic illnesses, with the first 3 months subjected to full pay and the other 3 months subjected to half pay. However, one line manager (LM18.U2) for utility 1 noted that, *'...when someone is sick, here we give them some days off for observation, when you are medically not fit, you are still paid normally even after 6 months and sometimes you are given an option to change your job to another which is less demanding or indeed you can discharge'*. In utility 2, as well, one line manager (LM9.U2) commented that,

*'...I can tell you that I have an employee here who has not been working for, I would say, one year and 8 months now. I know the conditions say they should retire on medical grounds but sometimes you have to put yourself in their shoes, it's difficult, also how they will look at you, recommending someone to retire yet someone is in pain'*.

On would not that line managers relaxed policy application on maternity and sickness because they regarded these as sensitive just like the funeral issues. Senior managers also encouraged

line managers in application of discretion on welfare issues (SM2.U2). A senior manager in utility 1 (SM5.U1) illustrated that,

*'I usually tell my subordinates that these are human beings they have to do their work but you also have to accommodate, for example, if somebody says I can't do A because I am sick, give them time off, also if they say I have to attend a funeral of a neighbour and you are saying you can't go but finish the work first, you are creating the conflict there, bring a situation where you reconcile the two, work has to be done, but if somebody has to attend to issues like funeral, let them go'*

Senior managers, thus, encouraged that line managers should be humanistic or relax in the way of handling employees' welfare-related issues.

Apart from relaxing on welfare issues, line managers also appeared to apply humanistic approach in handling other personal employee issues. Sometimes line managers appeared to be empathetic to subordinates' issues. For example, participant LM13.U2 illustrated the following; '*employees would come to me and say I want a pick up to go and pick up my harvest from the farm, while I know that it is not allowed to use Board's resources for personal issues, I also understand that it would be hard for them to hire a vehicle, so you just try to bend a few things and help them*'. The rules, thus, on resource support were not being followed because of the humanistic approach. Similarly, another line manager (LM9.U2) illustrated that, '*...for example, an employee doesn't have borrowing power to borrow a loan from the Board, we still recommend for the loan to be granted considering may be a critical situation the employee is facing*'. To bring this into perspective, conditions of service for utility 2 (COS.U2) provided that, '*in granting the loan, the Board shall consider the employee's borrowing power in terms of his remuneration and probable terminal benefits other than pension benefits*'. From what participant LM9.U2 is saying, therefore, it means this policy provision was being relaxed because of just being considerate to the employee's circumstances. All this boils down to what one senior manager (SM5.U1) expected line managers to be doing, '*[adopting] a humanistic approach [by considering] that it's you who has a father critically ill and admitted in the hospital and require an emergency loan to pay for hospital bills*'. The CEO of utility 2 (SM1.U2) also emphasised a similar approach on being, '*...empathetic to employee conditions which [were] difficult [to handle]*'. In short, line managers were relaxing policies and adopting a humanistic approach in addressing what were regarded as difficult personal issues and this was found to be supported by senior managers.

Line managers also appeared to relax policies on the untouchables. The untouchables are employees who had connections or relations with the senior managers or other outside influential stakeholders such as politicians (LM4.U2). This category of employees appeared to be the most difficult and sensitive to handle and their issues had to be addressed as a priority which included line managers relaxing policies in handling those issues. As one line manager (LM12.U2) noted,

*'We have employees ... who came here because of some relatives. [They] are the most difficult when it comes to handling their issues, because they...believe that if you don't help them they will go somewhere else to their relatives who happen maybe to be bosses. So, they will push you to help them even if they know policies don't allow'*

In handling such employees, line managers had to relax policies and handle them in different ways from other employees with no such connections (LM13.U2; LM19.U1; LM16.U1; LM4.U1). If this policy relaxation was not done, line managers could be reported to senior managers and risk being punished as these untouchables had direct contact with senior managers (LM1.U2; LM4.U2). Not only did line managers fear being reported and punished but they also relaxed policies on the untouchables, '*...for the sake of that big person who is connected to this employee, to receive some bit of favour*' (LM13.U2). In short, line managers relaxed policies on untouchables for fear of negative consequences and to gain favours from senior managers.

Policy Relaxation in addressing welfare-related issues, personalistic issues and issues relating to the untouchables, however, created inconsistencies in policy application. As noted by participant LM9.U2, using discretion in applying policies on employee issues seemed fair at the material time but when the same treatment was not given to another employee who felt had similar circumstances, that employee labelled the line manager as not being consistent in applying the policies. This was also agreed by another line manager (LM1.U2) who suggested that, '*...the one that is hot even now is the one to do with favouritism in the way that many employees feel that other employees are more [of the organisation] than others*' (LM1.U2). Participant LM6.U2, LM20.U1, LM10.U2 and LM9.U2 also agreed to this favouritism, subordinates' growing discontentment and other employees' feeling of not being part of the organisation. With these employees' perceptions of inconsistencies, participant LM9.U2

suggested that '*...the solution normally is to explain...that sometimes when you see this, it's not necessarily a policy, we have just weighed a situation and say we can help*'. This was also agreed by another line manager (LM3.U2) who explained that, '*...the tool that me I normally employ is to clarify, so I will engage the employee and explain why there were exceptions in how we handled certain issues*'. In other words, line managers were trying to make subordinates accept managerial discretion as a binding practice. To sum up, in enforcing voice policy compliance and handling subordinates' resource-related issues, line managers were applying discretion through relaxing polices on sensitive welfare issues and applying a humanistic approach in handling subordinates' personal issues. In other words, they had to come up with their own ways to adapt to the context within which they were implementing voice mechanisms. These adaptability responsibilities contrast the conduit responsibilities discussed in section 8.3.3.

### **9.3. Quality of the voice mechanisms implemented**

Line managers' practice of adaptability responsibilities discussed in the previous section appeared not to support the quality in the implementation of the management-led voice mechanisms. This is because these implementation approaches appeared to be conflicting and misaligned with employees' voice intentions which were aimed at advancing remedial interests. Subordinates regarded employee voice as a tool for escaping from poor working conditions and advancing personal interests as discussed below. With these intentions, this section argues that the adaptability roles could not inspire these subordinates towards voicing through the management-led voice mechanisms as demonstrated by the inefficacy of those mechanisms and subordinates' voicing through employee-led and collective voice structures. This discussion is, as per Appendix 10, supported by four third order theoretical aggregations namely, employee voice as a tool for escaping from poor working conditions, employee voice as a tool for advancing personal interests, inefficacy of voice mechanisms as a formal voice mechanism, employees' own ways; informal voice mechanism.

#### **9.3.1. Employee voice as a tool for escaping from poor working conditions**

Participants interpreted that employees' first voice intention was to articulate their dissatisfaction with the difficult working conditions. These difficult working conditions included doing excessive amount of work, challenges in compensation, and welfare problems. In terms of expressing discontent with the amount of work given, one line manager (LM18.U1) commented that, '*employees look at employee voice as a way of may be judging the conditions*

*they are exposed to, sometimes looking at the nature of work they are told to do as being beyond their capacity or beyond what they agreed to do*'. This understanding was also shared by other participants (also, SM3.U2; LM24; SM5.U1), suggesting that employees regarded employee voice as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the amount of work that is given to them.

Complaints about the amount of work given can further be illustrated through the overtime issue which was cited by most participants (LM18.U1, LM22.U1; SM4.U1; SM3.U2; SM2.U2; LM2.U2) from both utilities. The Staff service regulations (SSR) for utility 1 (SSR.U1) defined overtime as, '*[payments] to...employees who work more than the hours laid down per week where in the interest of the Board such employees are required to work outside the normal working hours*'. The overtime issue in utility 2 related to a group of full-time junior employees, working through rotating shifts (night or day) (SM3.U2). These employees expected to work four days or four nights, with a maximum of 40 hours a week, and had 3 days of rest (Ibid). However, due to excessive work, these employees were forced to work more than 40 hours without rest (LM2.U2). Besides complaining about amount of work, employees were also fighting that all overtime hours should be paid within the same month they are accrued (SM3.U2; HR1.U2). In fact, in utility 1, an HR rule was, '*...introduced requiring that any employee [would] not claim for more than 36 hours of overtime in one month*' (LM18.U1). This rule was put in place, as the HR director (SM4.U1) explained, '*...following continuous and excessive overtime claims from employees which was distorting and making the payroll too big as if [they had] one thousand employees*'. In both utilities, the issue of overtime involved subordinates voicing in destructive, and not respectful, ways which involved shouting at their immediate supervisors hence attracting senior managers' intervention (LM17.U1; LM22.U1). The issue of overtime illustrates line managers' dissatisfaction with not only amount of work but also how overtime hours were supposed to be compensated.

Apart from the overtime issue, participants also suggested that other compensation-related issues which employees were discontent about related to payment of salaries and other allowances. Other employees wanted double allowances for the same work. For example, '*...if they [were] assigned to go and do the work outside of their duty station, much as they [were] entitled to a night allowance, they also [insisted] that they should be paid along with overtime allowance...*' (LM22.U1). Night allowance was captured in SSR.U1 as, 'subsistence/travel allowance' defined as an allowance paid, '*...when proceeding on duty out of station, and staying at least overnight*'. Being paid both night and overtime allowances meant duplication of allowances for the same work. Similarly, employees working through rotating shifts had

also problems understanding that they needed to be paid either duty allowance or overtime allowance (SM2.U2; LM2.U2; LM4.U2). The conditions of service (COS) for Utility 2 (COS.U2) defined duty allowance as an allowance that is paid, '*where the duties of a particular post require an employee to work unusual, intermittent, excess or irregular hours, causing his working day in such post to bear little resemblance to a normal working day*' while an overtime allowance as the one paid, '*for hours worked in excess of the normal hours to all eligible employees*' (*Ibid*). Therefore, being paid both allowances, as well, meant that it was a duplication. However, employees wanted to be paid both allowances, '*for their commitment in working during the night when everyone else was sleeping.*' (LM2.U2). As a matter of fact, these duplication claims '*...[became] hot and not easy for line managers to make employees understand...*' (HR2.U1). One line manager (LM15.U1) illustrated this with the case of one of his subordinates who had gone and returned from a field trip and raised a claim for both overtime and subsistence allowances, when this manager was trying to make the employee understand, he, '*...rudely told [the line manager], 'this is bullshit' and then he tore all the papers for claiming overtime in [the manager's] presence, threw them on [the manager's] desk and he went out*'. In simple terms, employees regarded voicing, including in destructive ways, as a way of trying to resolve that they should be paid duplicate allowances.

Other compensation-related issues which employees were discontent about related to delays in the payment of subsistence allowances and salaries. Subsistence allowances were supposed to be paid in advance in accordance with the number of nights an employee stayed outside the duty station (COS.U2; SSR.U1). Employees, however, '*... complained that when they [travelled], they [could] hardly receive their allowances on time...most people [could] go on work trips without money and when they [got] back it [took] some time for them to receive their money...*' (LM8.U2). Other participants (LM2.U2; LM10.U2; LM4.U2; LM13.U1) also agreed about delays in not only subsistence allowances but also delays in the payment of salaries. Participant LM11.U2 illustrated that, '*...in times when allowances or salaries are not paid on time, you do not expect good responses from employees...they become very angry in the way they talk to you*'. In other words, subordinates engaged in destructive voice as a way of escaping from delays in payment of salaries or allowances.

Apart from delays in the payment of salaries and allowances, employees were also found to use voice as a way of addressing low salaries. When one senior manager (SM2.U2) was asked about what he thought employee voice was, his response was, '*what comes to my mind [is that] employees have generally that feeling that they are weaker, their voice is not heard,*

*downtrodden, employers are exploiting them, management is exploiting them, they have more work with less pay, things like those*’ (SM2.U2). This participant, in other words, interpreted that employees had the feeling that they were, as another line manager (LM18.U1) had put it, ‘...*being victimised [and] not being well compensated in terms salary*’. The ‘*salaries [were viewed as] not [being] a reflection of the cost of living*’ (LM8.U2). It was explained that employees had the feeling that what they were receiving was not commensurate to the work they were doing and to the inflationary and other economic demands (LM14.U1; SM2.U2). This issue of low salaries was found to, ‘...*top the agenda*’ in most meetings which top managers were periodically having with either employees or their representatives, all, ‘...*wanting a bigger salary increment that [they gave] them*’ (SM5.U1, also LM16.U1). These employees were found to use words and ways that were not pleasing to line managers in expressing discontent with low salaries (LM3.U2; SM3.U2). Thus, employees could engage in destructive voice as a way of addressing low salaries.

Besides using voice to address workload and compensation challenges as discussed above, employees also regarded employee voice as tool for addressing welfare challenges, in utility 1, it was found that there was an organisational-initiated medical scheme in which different levels of hospitals were identified and earmarked for different levels of employees to go to when they fell sick (HR2.U1; SM4.U1). This meant different employees were limited to hospitals depending on their grade (*Ibid*). For example, the top managers would be allowed to, ‘...*go and access medical services to very advanced, big and expensive hospitals...as compared to junior employees*’ (HR2.U1). In some cases, employees at different grades would be allowed to go to the same hospital but allowed to attend different levels of services as either outpatient or inpatient (HR3.U1). Line managers (for example, LM21.U1; LM15.U1; LM27.U1) suggested that employees expressed discontent with what they felt as segregation in this arrangement. They felt that they needed to be treated like everyone else in accessing hospitals (LM21.U1). In the same utility 1, it was also found that employees were also complaining that they needed to have more dependants on the medical scheme from the three they could include (HR2.U1)

In utility 2, in terms of welfare challenges, employees were largely asking to be provided with transport to the hospital when sick whereas the recommended practice was that transport should only be provided in serious illnesses (LM13.U2; LM2.U2). Employees were very emotive and asking for this because of inconsistencies that came with discretion as discussed in section 8.2.4 in which other employees were being helped with transport (LM4.U2). Beyond seeking to

address issues of transport for accessing health services, participants (LM4.U2; LM2.U2; LM12.U2; SM3.U2) in utility 2 also highlighted that employees complained about delays in the provision of personal protective equipment such as safety shoes, reflectors, helmets, work suits and goggles. The HR director (SM2.U2) also acknowledged that, '*...it is a challenge, sometimes you also receive requests for PPEs from sections, you initiate processing but to have the requisition paid it becomes a challenge, it all goes back to the issue I told you about, challenges in cash collection*'. In short, in terms of welfare issues, employees used destructive voice to address issues of differential treatment in the medical scheme, lack of provision of transport to the hospital and delays in provision of PPEs.

### **9.3.2. Employee voice as a tool for advancing personal interests**

Participants also suggested that employees regarded employee voice as a tool for advancing their own personal interests. Participants suggested that employees regarded employee voice as a way of seeking, '*...cushioning from management and from the organisation*' to address personal hardships which they were facing in the economy (LM9.U2). To achieve these personal interests, employees adopted two main approaches, disguising promotive voice to address personal hardships and using prohibitive voice to address personal issues. In disguising promotive voice, participant LM6.U2 noted that, '*...there [was] a group of employees...who would normally want to defend whatever [the line manager] could say...so that tomorrow, they [could] get a favour (both laughs)*'. In other words, they would appear as if they were intending to express promotive ideas, yet their intention was to find a way of finding a solution from those line managers to the personal hardships they were facing (LM21.U2; LM6.U2). Some of the solutions they were looking for included having their emergency loan requests and unpaid subsistence allowances fast tracked in payment (SM2.U2; LM6.U2). As illustrated by participant LM13.U2, '*...you wonder that someone was offering very good ideas in the meeting only to realise the following morning or even the same day he is knocking on your office with a voucher [saying] boss would you please assist me with this emergency loan?* (Ibid). Another line manager (LM7.U2) also added that employees disguised promotive voice to, '*[benefit] something from [the line manager], they will say that this one can recommend for my training, so let me praise him in whatever I can so that tomorrow I can be a beneficiary*'. Apart from trainings, an HR manager for Utility 2 (HR2.U1) also mentioned that there is another group of employees who does that because they have completed their self-initiated trainings and are now looking for promotion or grade change. The challenge, however, was that in expressing this

disguised promotive voice, employees did not care about using the grievance procedure. They were, instead, using any ways that would enable their advancement of personal interests such as, '*playing bosses*' or jumping line managers to senior managers (SM5.U1).

When employees could not get the cushioning from the organisation through expressing disguised promotive voice, it was found that they resorted to prohibitive voice. For using prohibitive voice to advance personal interests, participants called such employees different names like, '*the frustrated*' (LM1.U2), '*the disgruntled*' (LM4.U2) or '*the characters*' (LM5.U2). As these names suggest, such employees were viewed as, '*...just [wanting] to cause problems whereby any issue that comes they would want to speak up in a rude manner*' (LM4.U2). The frustrated employees, thus, tried to express their anger after foreseeing failure to advance their personal interests in ways that resulted in personal attack on the line managers (LM1.U2; LM4.U2). The frustrated employees were also viewed by participants as those who perceived negative feedback to their requests as deliberate and being tantamount to sabotage. As the finance manager in utility 1 observed, '*...it becomes a source of conflict, you will find that they will go to our bosses up there and twist the story saying, I needed to do this assignment it needed money but the finance guy simply said we can't support because we don't have money, it will be like sabotage*' (LM15.U1). In some cases, it was found that employees could wait for senior managers to organise meetings in their duty stations to report their immediate supervisors for sabotaging and failing to support them in their personal requests (LM5.U2; LM3.U2). Or they could go on wider employee forums and express their discontent with how managers failed to handle their issues. For example, one line manager illustrated that,

*'...it was a funeral issue, one of the workers' husband passed, this lady was in (location omitted for anonymous) and funeral was in (location omitted for anonymous) the deceased was in (location omitted for anonymous) and you know with the fuel crisis we couldn't release the vehicle from (location omitted for anonymous) to go for burial in (location omitted for anonymous), so they used their means of transport and back, when they came back she started making noise on the WhatsApp groups that we denied her transport when transport was there and that we side-lined her because she was a junior employee and all that, so I called her and explained how the situation was at the time, that we didn't have fuel in the filling stations and the little fuel in the car was for operations'*

As one would note, this employee had to go on wider employees' forum, rather than direct to the immediate supervisor, to express discontent with what the employee regarded as line manager's failure to assist on her personal issue. This use of prohibitive voice to express failure to address personal interests was also widely regarded as a, '*...safety valve that [prevented] employees from experiencing again or in future the mistreatment [they had] experienced or [made] them obtain answers quickly*' (LM20.U1. also, LM3.U2). In other words, speaking negatively was viewed as a way of ensuring personal interests were addressed faster and if they were not addressed, to prevent future reoccurrence. To sum up, participants suggested that employees regarded employee voice as a tool for advancing personal interests such as obtaining financial assistance, trainings and promotions. To advance these interests, employees had to express disguised promotive voice without caring to use the grievance procedure and prohibitive voice.

### **9.3.3. Inefficacy of the grievance procedure as a formal voice mechanism**

The management-led voice mechanisms, as discussed in chapter 8, were structured to support promotive voice ideals. However, employees' voice intentions discussed in sections 9.2.1 and 9.2.2 suggests that employees regarded employee voice as a tool for advancing their remedial interests such as escaping from poor working conditions and addressing personal hardships. Also, line managers' ways of implementing voice mechanisms needed to reconcile employees' remedial interests with management' promotive ideals for employees to express their issues through the management-led voice structure. However, as discussed in section 9.1, line managers' adaptability responsibilities appeared to shut employees' expression of remedial voices. This scenario created inefficacy of the of the instituted voice mechanisms as discussed below.

Much as many avenues were found to be in place for employees to use in voicing such as meetings, WhatsApp, and the written means, participants suggested that only a few employees showed interest in utilising these formal platforms to raise their issues to their immediate supervisors. Most employees were found to; '*...not open up...*' (LM4.U2), '*...feel not comfortable*' (SM5.U1); be afraid (LM27.U1; SM5.U1; LM3.U2; LM18.U1); or '*...lack trust*' (HR2.U1) in utilising these platforms for voicing their issues to immediate supervisors. One senior manager summarised this as being a culture where, '*...employees who speak up are the same ones...while a majority [did not] raise issues for fear of the things [participants] did not*

*know*' (SM1.U2). One HR manager suggested that '*...[employees] are afraid to [raise issues] as they feel that may be sometimes, I may say things which somebody may take them negatively*' (HR2.U1). Other interview respondents (for example, LM3.U2; LM18.U1) felt that subordinates feared to speak through the recommended voice platforms for fear that their voices may make them face other disciplinary consequences. In simple terms, subordinates were afraid to express their remedial voice interests through the management-led voice mechanisms. This is further illustrated below in terms of the efficacy of the specific formal voice channels.

In meetings, it was found that only a few employees could raise issues while a majority could not (LM5.U2; LM7.U2; LM18.U1; LM17.U1). One line manager commented that, '*...when I call for sectional meetings, most employees do not want to speak up, but I sense that this employee may be grappling with this issue and that employee may be grappling with that issue*' (LM4.U2). This was also agreed in a response from participant LM17.U1. In the end, meetings became a platform used for '*instructing [employees] what they [had] to do*' (LM1.U2). This appeared to, '*...[start] from when [immediate supervisors called] for agendas of the sectional meetings...employees [could] not provide issues to be discussed in the meetings, and even during AOBs, they [would] normally not say anything tangible*' (LM13.U2). As a result, these meetings were, '*...dominated with issues suggested by [sectional heads]*' (LM24.U1). In other words, instead of becoming a bottom-up voice channels, meetings became top-down voice avenues.

Most employees could also not express issues through WhatsApp. It was found that when an issue was posted on sectional WhatsApp groups for employees to comment or make suggestions, except for a few, most employees could not respond which left immediate supervisors, '*...not even sure whether [subordinates] had read the message posted*' (LM3.U2). Similarly, another participant felt that '*...WhatsApp [was] slow and [he did not] expect to receive immediate responses from employees*' (LM6.U2). In other words, only a few employees were actively using WhatsApp to raise issues with most employees not responding to issues or raising issues which they had (LM7.U2; LM26.U1; LM17.U1). Most participants (for example, LM18.U1; LM20.U1; LM5.U2; LM7.U2) also concurred that many employees were not utilising WhatsApp to speak the issues they had to their immediate supervisors. Just like meetings, hence, '*...WhatsApp just [acted] as an informational forum but not necessarily that which employees [could] really use it for speaking up the issues they had*' (LM5.U2). Three

other line managers (LM20.U1; LM8.U2; LM11; U2) also supported that they looked at WhatsApp as a tool for telling what their subordinates need to do.

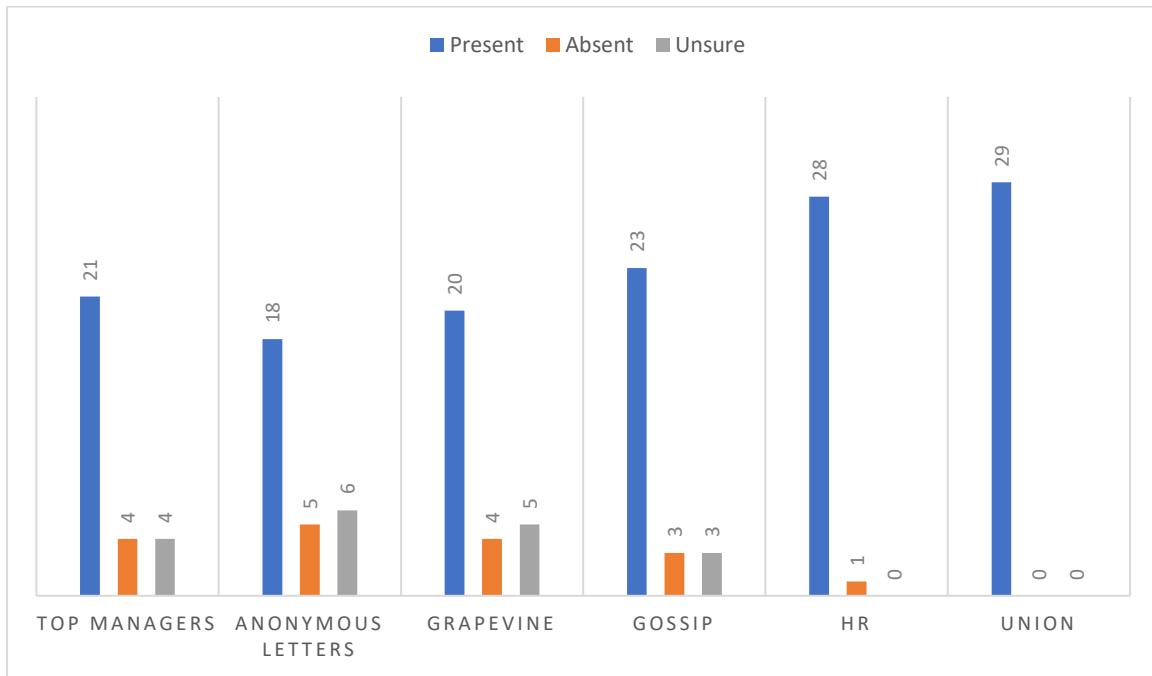
There were also challenges in the utilisation of the written means. In terms of institutional emails, difficulties were noted in terms of the ineffectiveness of institutional emails (LM2.U2; SM3.U2; LM3.U2) and lack of junior employees' access to these emails for use in voicing issues to immediate supervisors (LM11.U2; SM4.U1; LM16.U1). However, for subordinates who had access to institutional emails, it was found that, they could not actively utilise them for raising issues to immediate supervisors (LM8.U2; LM9.U2). As participant LM21.U1 observed, '*...you would send an email today but only hear from [subordinates] in three weeks.* Similarly, in the case of memos, employees were also trying to avoid using them (LM20.U1). Participant LM4.U2 also agreed that '*...employees don't want to be seen that its them who have spoken, so they will try to avoid ways such as writing memos.* In other words, subordinates did not want to express their issues through written means namely institutional emails and memos.

The discussion above suggests that employees did not want to take their issues through the formal voice channels which were instituted as they were not regarding them as legitimate channels through which they would have their issues addressed. Many employees could also not trust or attach importance to raising issues through channels such as meetings and WhatsApp for fear of the negative consequences of their voices. Eventually, there was a lower extent of voice exchange in the formal management-led voice channels and these platforms were utilised for top-down communication. The next sections discuss ways which subordinates preferred in voicing their issues.

#### **9.3.4. Employees' own voice ways; emergence of the alternative informal voice mechanism**

In voicing, participants felt that employees preferred to, '*...go their own voice ways*' (LM6.U2). The voice avenues which employees in voicing are presented in figure below and included, anonymous letters, grapevine, top managers, HR and union. These are also presented in figure 9 below based on questionnaire responses.

**Figure 9: Employees' preferred voice avenues**



The first way that was found related to employees using anonymous letters. Employees were said to use voice avenues which they deemed as anonymous (LM22.U1). As participant SM1.U2 explained it, '*...they would rather talk in the dark than use the platforms provided to them*'. They preferred speaking in the dark because they were afraid of being known as being the ones raising those issues (LM18.U1; LM7.U2; LM4.U2). Using anonymous letters exemplifies these anonymous means. In the questionnaire responses, 18 of the 29 participants indicated anonymous letters as a voice avenue as shown in figure 9 above. Through anonymous letters, it was found that employees could use them when they wanted to express being unfairly or badly treated by their immediate supervisors. As one participant (LM8.U2) noted, '*...[Employees used] anonymous letters especially for issues concerning their boss...because they [knew] they [would not] be known the fact that they [were using] anonymous letters*'. A senior manager in utility 1, SM5.U1, also acknowledged receiving these letters by explaining that, '*...you would sometimes find a note slotted under your door and they are talking about how a particular manager mistreated them*'. In some cases, employees could write anonymous letters to express how they were unfairly treated by their immediate supervisors compared to other employees or how they were not provided working resources such as airtime, fuel, and petty cash (LM13.U2; LM22.U1).

The use of anonymous letters was not preferred by both line managers and senior managers (LM18.U1; LM22.U1; LM7.U2). This is because they posed difficulties in handling the mentioned issues starting from, '*...[tracing] who the person could be and why the issues were raised*' (LM18.U1) and the specific people being referred to in anonymous letters (SM5.U1). Participant HR3.U1 agreed that, '*...it is difficult to take seriously the issues that come through anonymous letters because identity is sealed, but why not revealing your identity if the issues you are saying are true? Or indeed going to your supervisor? We want to encourage responsible reporting*'. An HR director for utility 2 (SM2.U2) further concurred that,

*'...we see these unidentified letters pointing to important issues but as a first step we really want to know who is saying that, so we task internal audit to undertake investigations first, otherwise these letters are not something I strongly encourage, if you have an issue, the best is to take them through normal channel'*

The usage of anonymous letters, thus, was being discouraged for presenting difficulties in resolving the mentioned issues, necessitating voice through the grievance procedure. It is important also to note that employees were utilising anonymous letters when they wanted to express issues aimed at improving working conditions such as mistreatment by immediate supervisors, not receiving work resources and unfair distribution of opportunities.

Grapevine (or gossip) is another voice avenue which employees utilised. In figure 9 above, 20 questerview respondents indicated grapevine as being present while 23 respondents indicated gossip as being present in organisations as voice avenue. Though some participants (for example, LM16.U1; LM8.U2) appeared to use the names grapevine and gossip interchangeably, largely, grapevine came out as an overarching voice avenue that involved employees gossiping and spreading rumours starting from close friends or peers. As one participant (LM4.U2) responded when asked about what avenues employees used to express issues, '*for me, the first thing that moves faster is the rumours, you see most of the issues are speculations, you find that a group of people are together and they start gossiping, so yah I would say grapevine as being the most preferred by employees*'. Another participant (LM15.U1) also highlighted that, '*...this is an organisation that is big with 600 plus employees so grapevine would also come into the equation where you find them gossiping among themselves...*'. These responses and those from other participants (LM5.U2; LM22.U1) appeared to justify employees as expressing issues through spreading rumours or gossiping.

Employees were viewed as usually gossiping to their close friends or peers. One line manager (LM13.U2) cited the case in which his subordinates were expressing feelings of favouritism and work challenges to their friends and peers without coming to him directly as required in the grievance procedure. Another participant (LM1.U2) also responded as follows to the question of where employees first took their issues,

*'To be honest with you, you will be surprised that their first contact is not even their immediate supervisor, when they have an issue, they normally go first to their closest friends. Sometimes, the issue or issues just die at friend level...but where they discuss and find that the issue ought to go to their supervisor, that's when they [take issues to the immediate supervisor]. So, the first [point of contact] is their circle'.*

In a response to a similar question, participant LM20.U1 also explained that '*...I think people like discussing issues among themselves*'. Participants, thus, suggested that employees created a 'circle of friends' which they used to first discuss the issues which they had before '*...[deciding] whether they [should] take their issues up to their supervisors or other authorities or not*' (LM11.U2). If the issue was minor, they could sort it out among themselves but if it was bigger, they could cross it to their immediate supervisors (LM14.U1). The fact that the peer-to-peer discussions sifted out what issues could be taken up, '*...few issues ended up reaching immediate supervisors*' (LM16.U1). It, therefore, meant that management or immediate supervisors should, '*become interested in the gossip because that is where [they could] obtain a general and true feeling of employees on issues...*' (SM1.U2). This made most participants (for example, LM15.U1; LM5.U2; LM13.U2) not to encourage voicing through grapevine. This is because it was viewed as causing, '*...unfounded voicing*' (HR3.U1) and bringing, '*...chaos [and contrasting] the way of raising grievances through the grievance procedure*' (LM16.U1). This chaos related to the fact that, instead of grapevine issues reaching immediate supervisors, they usually found themselves to senior managers (LM8.U2; LM19.U1 and LM5.U2).

Unlike grapevine where employees were not intentionally aiming their voices to top managers, participants also felt that employees were in some cases directly voicing to senior managers. As participant LM22.U1 observed, '*...normally, their first contact is supposed to be a direct supervisor, but others just go straight to the top hierarchy*'. Many other line managers

(LM18.U1; LM7.U2; SM5.U1) agreed that employees were bypassing in voicing to senior managers. This voicing to senior managers was supported by the open-door policy which, though unwritten, mandated, ‘...*employees [to] walk directly to the CEO to raise issues that they [had] ...*’ (LM19.U1). Not only to the CEO, an employee, through this open-door policy, could also reach out to any member of top management to raise any issue(s) (SM4.U1; HR1.U2; SM3.U2). The issues they took to senior managers included personal challenges or challenges with working conditions as discussed in sections 8.3.2 and 8.3.1, respectively. In terms of personal challenges, for example, participant SM3.U2 explained that employees would voice issues of personal financial challenges such as requiring their loan requests to be fast tracked in payment. participant LM11.U2 also illustrated cases where employees would voice issues relating to challenges with working hours or how they have been compensated. Not all cases involved employees visiting top managers’ offices to raise their issues, in some cases, it was found that employees could email top managers (LM9.U2; LM14.U1) or ‘...*[calling them] to raise...issues*’ (LM5.U2).

Besides personal visitations, emails, or phone calls, it was also found that employees could also voice directly to top managers through meetings between top managers and employees which were being conducted. The meetings between top managers and employees did not have a specific frequency but occurred when top managers felt the need to visit employees (LM18.U1; LM24.U1; LM2.U1). These meetings sometimes took place, ‘...*may be because there [was] a delay in the payment of salaries*’ (LM3.U2) or ‘...*because of a project that [was] nearing implementation phase which [was] going to affect the work of workers*’ (HR2.U1). An example of such meetings in utility 2 was the ‘*pakachere meetings*’ in which, ‘*when periodically there [were] some burning issues, management [called] employees for a meeting under a kachere (baobab) tree*’ (LM2.U2). The ‘*pakachere meetings*’ were taking place at the head office as a starting point but top managers eventually were, ‘...*completing the cycle*’ in conducting similar meetings in all the other duty stations (Ibid). In utility 1, when there were pertinent issues, top managers-employees’ meetings started with ‘*car park meetings*’ which were being held at the head office car park followed by a series of similar meetings in all the duty stations (LM19.U1). In such meetings, employees could take advantage to raise their personal or work-related challenges which they had not even raised to their immediate supervisors, and which were better placed to be handled by those line managers (LM5.U2; LM3.U2; LM3.U2; SM2.U2; HR3.U1; HR1.U2; LM9.U2). The challenge of having issues bypassed to senior managers was that it portrayed line managers as failing to do their work (LM16.U1; LM5.U2), led into

surface-level decisions made without the input of immediate supervisors (HR3.U1; LM9.U2), and institutionalised lack of trust in immediate supervisors as a first point of contact in employees' voicing (SM3.U2).

Participants also felt that employees were taking issues to HR. 28 questionnaire respondents indicated HR as a voice avenue in figure 9 above. Line managers complained that subordinates had the tendency of taking issues to HR yet they were the ones who were supposed to be the first point of contact as required in the grievance procedure (LM1.U2; LM6.U2; LM2.U2) participant LM6.U2, for example, illustrated a case of a subordinate who had a personal issue and took it direct to HR as elaborated below,

*'...there was an issue with [an employee] who...[committed a crime] and she was arrested by the police, and released on bail, then I had thought, what might HR say on this issue?, someone has been arrested by police and is not coming to work, from what I thought, I thought there might have been some procedures somewhere, I called HR....but then [the employee] had already informed HR of the details of her issue yet I did not have clear information...HR was already working on the issue...'*

What one would note is that this employee had to first go to HR with his personal police issue without first letting the immediate supervisor know. Participant LM22.U1 also gave an example of another employee who took the workplace injury compensation issue to HR before first informing the immediate supervisor who had to endorse the compensation forms. There were many other issues which were taken to HR which included, requests for grade change and work resources (LM6.U2; LM8.U2), personal health issues (LM3.U2) as well as requests for allowances such as overtime, subsistence and duty (SM2.U2; LM8.U2; LM4.U2; HR2.U1). To express these and other issues to HR, employees used different channels such as personal visitations, writing memos and speaking during HR-employees meetings that were being conducted (HR2.U1; HR1.U2; SM2.U2).

The last avenue which participants felt employees were using to express their issues was the union route. Both utility organisations had strong unionised contexts which prompted one line manager (LM24.U1) to comment that '*...what comes first to my mind [when I hear employee voice] is union, a unionised workforce*'. To support the strong presence of the union route, as

shown in figure 9 above, all the 29 questionnaire respondents indicated that the union route was present as a channel of employee voice. However, union route was defined by HR policies to be used when employees, as a collective, wanted to raise issues to management and not in the case of individual employee issues or grievances. The conditions of service (COS.U2) for utility 2 provided the following on union route,

*'Where the grievance is of a general nature involving almost all the employees, the matter shall be taken up by the workers union which shall approach the Head of Human Resources stating clearly in writing the nature of the grievance and the proposed solution in line with the Labour Relations Act, 1996'.*

In utility 1, as well, the HR director (SM4.U1) explained that, '*...employees can also go to union but on things that affect employees as a whole*'. In other words, union route was required to be used for expressing general issues affecting '*employees as a whole*' (Ibid). In practice, however, employees could also utilise the union route for issues that were employee specific. It was found that, '*most employees, ...[were] not free enough to speak to their supervisors, so they would rather use the union*' (LM4.U2). Another line manager (LM20.U1) also concurred that, '*...because of...fear [employees] prefer[red] to speak up through the union*' (LM20.U1). This issue of employees being afraid to speak through their supervisors and, instead, going through the union was endorsed by many other participants (LM21.U1; LM18.U1; LM22.U1; LM2.U2). Employees could raise to union personal and work-related challenges such as change requests (LM20.U1) and non-payment of subsistence allowances (SM4.U1). They could voice these issues to union through many ways such as union-employees meetings that were taking place (LM17.U1), union executive leaders (LM26.U1; HR3.U1; LM21.U1; HR1.U2) and shop stewards in the lower or zonal level union structures (LM5.U2; LM14.U1; SM2.U2). In short, employees could voice personal and work-related challenges to union because they were avoiding immediate supervisors.

#### **9.4. Chapter summary**

This chapter presented findings which show that line managers' actual implementation of the voice mechanisms can be understood through four cyclical stages, namely debriefing sessions, reviewing workplans, subordinates' interface and addressing subordinates' issues. Through these stages, the chapter argues that line managers did not adhere to the conduit responsibilities

discussed in Chapter 8. Instead, line managers took on a role as engineers of adaptability. For example, in enforcing voice policy compliance and handling subordinates' resource-related issues, line managers applied discretion through relaxing polices on sensitive welfare issues and applying a humanistic approach in handling subordinate personal issues. Similarly, in sensitising subordinates on the voice mechanisms, line managers had to emphasise voicing respectfully. In their role as a torchbearer of the management-led voice mechanisms, they also had to defend management instructions. The practice of these adaptability responsibilities, however, appeared to be conflicting and misaligned to subordinates' remedial voice intentions of escaping from poor working conditions and advancing personal interests. The adaptability responsibilities, in the end, could not inspire subordinates towards attaching the importance and legitimacy towards voicing through the established management-led voice structures. Therefore, there was a lower extent of voice exchange in the management-led formal voice mechanisms. Employees, instead, voiced through their own employee-led and collective voice channels which included, anonymous letters, grapevine, senior managers, HR and union. The next chapter discusses the contextual influences shaping line managers' practice of adaptability responsibilities.

## **CHAPTER 10: FINDINGS: CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES SHAPING LINE MANAGERS' IMPLEMENTATION OF VOICE-RELATED HRM PRACTICES**

### **10.1. Introduction**

This chapter, in line with RQ3, presents findings on the contextual influences influencing line managers' adaptability responsibilities towards the quality of the management-led voice mechanisms as explained in Chapter 9. The chapter presents findings that line managers' practice of the adaptability roles and failure to drive subordinates towards voicing through management-led voice structures can be attributed to organisational, public sectoral and Malawi national contextual influences. The interplay of these multi-layered contextual influences is shown to lead to line managers who could not adhere to conduit responsibilities, who practiced adaptability responsibilities, and failed to inspire subordinates towards voicing through management-led voice mechanisms. The findings in this chapter are based on the data structure in Appendix 11.

### **10.2. Organisational support**

This section explains organisational constraints which shaped line managers' implementation of the grievance procedure. Focus is on line managers' AMO context of line managers' adaptability roles discussed in Chapter 8. This discussion, as per Appendix 11, is supported by six third order theoretical aggregations namely limited HR guidance to line managers' voice facilitation responsibilities, resource constraints in line managers' voice facilitation, lacking voice facilitation training for line managers, Achievement of organisational goals as incentive for voice facilitation, line managers not empowered to facilitate voice and limited policy support for voice facilitation. These are elaborated below.

#### **10.2.1. Limited HR guidance to line managers' voice facilitation responsibilities**

Interview responses suggested that there was limited HR guidance to line managers in terms of handling employee voice issues. To start with, participants suggested that there was laxity in the way HR guided line managers on employee issues. In some cases, it was found that there was delayed feedback to issues. As one line manager (LM6.U2) noted,

*'...sometimes we don't feel like we are supported because you keep on pushing for the same thing over and over again but you don't get the support that you need, there are some issues*

*from employees, you promise those employees that I will engage HR, the next meeting I will engage, by the end of the day you feel like there is no that support from HR, it's like a pertinent issue that has to be handled but you are told we are waiting for this and that yet sometimes they are things which shouldn't take time to be addressed'*

Adding to the same issue, another line manager LM8.U2 whose subordinate was involved in a police case also complained that HR was not keeping him posted on the progress of his subordinate's issue. As he commented, '*...the other daunting thing is that I must ask the progress all the time, may be if there were those periodic updates because the issue concerns me and my section but sometimes, I usually just stay as I don't have to press for things if HR doesn't want to update me on the issue*'. In other words, HR was not giving feedback on how issues were being handled. Besides not giving feedback, other line managers (LM6.U2; LM4.U2) also complained that when they took issues to HR, there was tendency of trivialising and not addressing issues on time. Participant LM6.U2 cited an issue in which his subordinates were requesting for office internet (wi-fi) and HR responded that, '*...internet aaaah that's not important for your office*' yet the same internet was being provided to similar set of employees. Relating to the same issue of laxity, line managers felt that HR lacked taking responsibility in guiding on employee issues. For example, participant LM6.U2 suggested that, '*...you go with a complaint from an employee and somebody in HR says it's not me who is supposed to do this but find this one, [instead of them] channelling it to the right person*'. Similar comments relating to HR personnel lacking responsibility in providing guidance to line managers was made by participants, LM9.U2 and LM3.U2. In short, through delayed feedback, trivialising voice issues and lacking responsibility, HR demonstrated laxity in guiding line managers on employee issues which prevented line managers from being the torchbearer in the management-led voice mechanisms as well as handling subordinates' issues.

Apart from laxity in guiding line managers, HR expertise in both utilities was also being questioned in terms of providing implementation guidance to line managers. HR staff in utility 2 were assigned to specific functional areas where they had to concentrate such as health and safety, training, pension, and general administration HR1.U2. This allocation prevented them from knowing how other HR functional areas were undertaken such that it was usually difficult for them to properly guide line managers on issues which were mostly cutting across many areas (Ibid). One senior manager (SM3.U2) in utility 2 saw this knowledge gap in practice during HR personnel's handling of the overtime issue in which, '*...they [couldn't] convince*

*[the] juniors, gave up and simply proposed...an unsustainable way of...paying [juniors] 28 days, then carry[ing] forward the 3 days, which created even more problems and employees were not convinced and had to take the issue further up to [senior managers]’.* In other words, due to lack of knowledge, HR could not ably support line managers to be able to inspire subordinates in addressing the issues they were raising. This HR- knowledge gap was also noted in utility 1. For example, one line manager (LM17.U1) doubted the competency of HR in terms of the support provided in addressing employee punctuality issues. This participant questioned the efficacy of a personalised punctuality procedure that was put in place of asking employees to write their names in a notebook which was more prone to manipulation than a technology-based clock in system. Another line manager (LM21.U1) gave an example of times he saw HR executing employee redeployments without seeking consent of the concerned employees or immediate supervisors as was required in the staff service regulations. The staff service regulations (SSR.U1) if redeployments could only be done at the discretion of management, in consideration to the employees’ redeployment request and his/her area of specialisation. Participant LM21.U1 suggested that knowledge of this policy clause was not being demonstrated by HR which was misallocating employees and not seeking their consent or that of their supervisor. Participant LM22.U1 also gave an instance in which HR was entertaining that employees’ work accident compensation complaints should not first be taken through line managers. In short, line managers felt that HR was lacking the expertise to be able to guide line managers in handling employee issues.

Line managers also complained about lacking support relating in performance appraisal for them to handle voice through performance management. For example, in utility 2, it was found that performance appraisal forms were being untimely provided to the line managers and without explaining how to conduct performance appraisal (LM5.U2; LM10.U2; LM4.U2). Participant LM8.U2 explained this by commenting that, ‘*...they will just knock on your door, and they will say, you are supposed to appraise employees by such and such a date, here are the forms that you need to use, without properly explaining how we need to do it*’. Similarly, participant LM4.U2 agreed that, ‘*...somehow, we lack knowledge on the technical aspects of like assessing those targets, in HR they have I think some forms with different elements there which they only bring to us during appraisals, how I wish those things were properly explained and discussed with us*’.

In other words, HR was not timely providing appraisal forms and clarifying them to line managers for them to be able to undertake performance appraisal. It was also found that job descriptions for subordinates were either not clear or not provided to line

managers (LM5.U2; LM3.U2; LM13.U1; LM26.U1; LM19.U1). Besides unclear job descriptions, line managers were also not clearly informed on how to assess the voice behaviours of their subordinates. As participant LM12.U2 puts it, *'...not necessarily, because even our job descriptions, in terms of our targets it's not clear in terms of how we can monitor and see to it that juniors are following the grievance procedure when they have issues'*. Participant LM2.U2 also added that, *'...even when you look at performance management of employees does not even fall on our JDs, we only see like the behavioural traits assessment during appraisal...'*. In other words, in the job descriptions for line managers, HR was not seeing to it that voice facilitation responsibilities such as assessing subordinate voice behaviours were included and made clear. In short, there were shortfalls in HR's support to line managers in terms of handling voice through performance management.

Good HR support to line managers was, however, felt in welfare, disciplinary and staffing issues. When issues were welfare related most line managers (for example, LM1.U1; LM11.U2; LM3.U2; LM14.U1; LM26.U1) agreed that HR assisted quickly whether in terms of guidance on how to address them or the actual resources they needed to address the issues. Similarly, when the issue related to subordinates' misconduct or an act of indiscipline, some participants (for example, LM20.U1; LM13.U2) felt that HR normally gave quick feedback. Line managers also felt that when they needed more staff to address workload issues, HR was mostly supportive though it would take time in some cases. As participant LM7.U2 explained, *'...in terms of staffing levels, when employees are complaining of having too much work HR is supporting us to have more people who are qualified to support us to move forward, I would say they have been supporting us'*. Another line manager (LM4.U2), however, indicated that sometimes it took time to have additional human resources because of some processes that had to be followed. In utility 1 a similar case was found where line managers accepted being supported in this regard. Participant LM21.U1 highlighted that, *'...but in terms of provision of the required human resource I would say 100%...I think it's because they want good performance, so they always ensure we have the people we need'*. Two other Participants (LM23.U1; LM4.U2) also agreed that they could get more staff if they requested because HR knew that they could not do without employees that were required. In short, while good HR support was noted in both utilities in some issues such as welfare, discipline, and staffing issues, largely, line managers suggested that support was not adequate due to gaps in HR expertise, laxity and lacking appraisal support to enable line managers undertake voice facilitation responsibilities.

### 10.2.2. Resource constraints in line managers' voice facilitation

Line managers were found to have limited resources to handle subordinates' voice issues. Participant LM18.U1 explained that '*...with the bottlenecks we face in terms of resources we find that we can't really address their issues, so it's like their voice can't be heard because of that*' (LM18.U1). This was also concurred by participant LM13.U2 who highlighted that, '*...I don't have enough resources to be able to handle these HR issues, for example, when it comes to transportation for staff, I have to use transport which is meant for operational issues, eventually in the course of handling HR issues I find myself having operational issues suffering*' (LM13.U2). This issue of lacking resources, through having tight budgets, for handling voice issues was also mentioned by many other participants (for example, LM2.U2; LM4.U2; LM14.U1; LM20.U1; LM18.U1). With such tight budgets, line managers could not find room to accommodate resources for voice facilitation activities. For example, participant LM5.U2 highlighted that, '*...you find that you don't have fuel to visit juniors and even when you visit them, you find that people are expecting you to organise refreshments which you don't have*'. In simple terms, having limited resources and tight budget meant that line managers could not have the ability to address subordinates' issues or to undertake other voice facilitation activities such as holding meetings.

When line managers requested senior managers for duty-facilitation resources, they could mostly not receive the support they needed. As participant LM1.U2 pointed out, '*...We ask for small things like lunch allowances, but you don't give us*'. Similarly, subordinates were requesting transport means such as bicycles to be able to undertake tasks such as disconnections, but senior managers were not seeing this as a priority' (LM22.U1). Participant LM12.U2 also added that, '*...they don't give priority when it comes to working materials such as shoes, reflectors, goggles, uniforms or airtime, fuel for cars or bicycles to use while working*'. Many other participants (for example, LM10.U2; LM2.U2; LM6.U2; LM4.U2) also agreed that priority was lacking from senior managers in ensuring that the tasks which subordinates were doing should be accompanied by the corresponding resources to execute them. In other words, as participant LM6.U2 highlighted, they, '*...wanted to do more but resources were not provided*'. In some cases where these duty-facilitation resources were being provided, they were being provided untimely (LM11.U2; LM1.U2; LM3.U2). The lack of or

delay in provision for duty-facilitation resources was being attributed to lack of financial capacity (LM20.U1; LM21.U1; LM7.U2). As participant LM11.U2 puts it, '*...when we ask for support, they say that the Board is financially constrained*'. Senior managers (for example, SM2.U2; SM3.U2, SM5.U1), as well, seconded that they could not ensure line managers had resources for facilitating voice because of resource constraints the organisations were facing. As participant SM2.U2 puts it, '*...one would find that this is a valid argument and there is sense in the issues they are raising but again if you look at how the business is doing, you will find that it's not practical to provide the things they are requesting*'. All in all, line managers were being provided limited resources which may also have created inconsistencies in the way line managers handled resource-related issues as discussed in chapter 8.

### **10.2.3. Lacking voice facilitation training for LMs**

Voice facilitation trainings were also lacking to line managers. Most senior managers claimed that in terms of equipping line managers with skills on voice facilitation, they were conducting periodic meetings where they were reminding line managers on how to implement the grievance procedure (SM4.U1; SM5.U1. As participant SM3.U2 pointed out, '*...we do this in many ways. we encourage employees to connect with employees for them to be able to voice out the issues which they have*'. Similarly, participant SM2.U2 also concurred that, '*...in terms of supporting managers to create an environment where employees [would] raise issues. management encourages that through meetings with them*'. Some line managers (for example LM21.U1; LM22.U1; LM24.U1) agreed that these meetings were being conducted and they were oriented on how they were supposed to undertake voice facilitation. However, most line managers (for example, LM2.U2; LM4.U2; LM15.U1; LM17.U1; LM26.U1; LM4.U2; LM20.U1) were quick to point out that much as senior managers were conducting such meetings, these were departmental meetings which had a different focus on monitoring how they were discharging their operational-related responsibilities. As participant LM19.U1 explained,

*'...but as a manager in terms of dealing with employees, we are looking at the soft side of things and not that side, not much is said in such meetings, now it's just down to me as a person to say I should be able to have this kind of environment which can allow us to interact and get information'.*

In other words, the meetings which senior managers conducted with line managers did not focus on voice facilitation. As a matter of fact, other line managers in utility 2 highlighted that they were not given any formal induction or orientation by HR or senior managers on not only how they would manage subordinates but also on how they would facilitate voice (LM13.U1; LM4.U2). Participant LM3.U2, for example, commented that, '*...they don't tell us anything, we learn it on duty, no orientation*'. This was also supported by Participant LM5.U2 who commented that, '*...we were put into these managerial positions without first properly orienting us which would have been helping that we play a much more effective role*'. One would, thus, note that line managers were not oriented or inducted on voice facilitation.

Many participants (for example, LM12.U2; SM5.U1; LM5.U2; SM4.U1) called for the need for tailor-made trainings for line managers relating to people management. In these people management trainings, participant SM2.U2 suggested that focus should be on, '*..., basic, basic things, which employees are looking for, an ear which can listen to them if they have a problem...listening to...soft issues...there are issues which to employees' matter*'. Similarly, participant SM3.U2 also added that, '*...we need to train people in terms of how they manage these...you see people present things in rude manner, but can be corrected if they are trained, [telling them] you can present issues this way and not that way...*'. The idea is for line managers to understand their subordinates in terms of how they voice and find ways of how they can approach rendering an eye that listens to the issues which they have and want to express through refresher courses on HR (SM5.U1). In short, there was lack of people management related trainings to equip line managers with skills such as those on voice facilitation.

Two explanations were provided for lack of people management trainings. The first one related to financial resource constraints. Some participants (for example, LM2.U2; LM21.U1; LM15.U1; SM3.U2; HR2.U1) explained that the people management trainings were not provided because of resource constraints. Another strange reason that was found related to trivialising training for voice facilitation. As one senior manager (SM4.U1) explained, '*...Of course, its abit difficult to know if they are given support, at that level, because what we envisage is that by the time someone is a manager knows how to handle people, if you have policies, they know the policies, so they should be able to handle the people correctly*'. Similarly, a senior manager in utility 2 (SM2.U2) also agreed that '*...but like I said earlier on, there is traditional way, natural way in which we assume that everybody knows which may be wrong, there could be people who don't know*'. Another line manager (LM20.U1) also

supported that, '*...[HR] assume[s] [we] already know, we are supposed to have trainings.* One would note from these interview responses that senior managers and HR assumed that line managers already knew how to facilitate voice hence there was no need for people management trainings. Beyond senior managers and HR, even line managers themselves also appeared not to see the value of learning how to facilitate voice. For example, participant LM15.U1 commented that,

*'...but also its human nature, listening to what people are saying, you pay attention, somebody will come in my office, you greet, you listen to what they are saying, I don't think HR should come to you and say make sure that when people come into your office you greet them (both laughs), so these are the things that are sometimes just natural'*

Another line manager (LM20.U1) also agreed that, '*...but personally, these things are from my inborn character, how you treat people, is sometimes how you grow up, what you have learnt, so the policies are just there to guide us, they may not specifically guide how employees can speak up but they guide whatever we do*'. Similarly, participants LM8.U2 and SM3.U1 also supported that encouraging employees to come forward to express the issues they have would not require any special training as one need to learn naturally. The fact that senior managers, HR and line managers could not see the value of people management or voice facilitation trainings, it explains why line managers could not be trained in these areas. This lack of training, unfortunately, justifies why these line managers had gaps in voice facilitation through, for example, denying eye to voice issues as discussed in chapter 9.

#### **10.2.4. Achievement of organisational goals as incentive for voice facilitation**

Line managers appeared to also not be incentivised to implement the voice mechanisms. With resource constraints, participant LM4.U2 highlighted that they could not get the things which they aspired for them to manage employees well including facilitating voice. This was also agreed by participant LM23.U1 who explained that '*...normally the things that would really inspire me to manage my subordinates well, I don't get them in the way that I want*'. Most line managers complained about salaries being low. As participant LM3.U2 pointed out, '*...I think the issue of money, aaaah salary not being enough, you feel that what you are receiving is not tallying with the work you have*'. Similarly, participant LM16.U1 concurred that, '*...you find that what they pay you is not commensurate with what you are doing*'. Many other participants

(for example, LM18.U1; LM12.U2; LM26.U1; LM8.U2) complained that the low salary and other benefits they were being paid were not incentivising them to work well including in managing employees. Of course, other line managers (for example, LM22.U1; LM5.U2; LM2.U2; LM9.U2; LM6.U2; LM4.U2) mentioned job security as an incentive but only for joining the public sector and not for facilitating employee voice.

What came out clear was that most line managers drew their desire to implement the management-led voice mechanisms from the need to contribute towards achievement of organisational goals because it offered personal rewards to them. One line manager (LM22.U1) explained that, '*...I just want to create a conducive environment where I can deliver on the objectives of my position because when you are delivering on your targets, you are on the right-hand side of management when it comes to opportunities*'. Participant LM13.U2 also agreed that, '*...you need to play your cards smartly but then you cannot be going to ask for trainings if the work they gave you is not being done*'. Participant LM6.U2 also concurred that achieving targets was key to obtaining opportunities such as promotions. With such opportunities, some line managers wanted to always achieve performance targets. As participant LM17.U1 highlighted, '*...for me it is always my desire to produce quality work, I believe that anything I do I do it to the best of my ability and knowledge*'. Similarly, participant LM4.U2 also added that, '*I am obsessed with completing whatever I have been given to complete, so that's the first thing, I don't want to be a failure, I want to do my best*'. In simple terms, line managers were driven to achieve performance targets because it was personally rewarding.

The motivation to achieve organisational goals for obtaining rewards is what inspired most line managers to play a role in voice facilitation. When most line managers (for example, LM10.U2; LM21.U1; LM2.U2; LM22.U1) were asked on their role on facilitating employee voice, they responded that they were motivated to undertake it because it enabled them to achieve performance targets which they were assigned to do. For example, one participant (LM10.U2) illustrated that, '*...in terms of real motivation for promoting this issue of voicing, we do this task as a matter of meeting the targets we are given*'. Participant LM2.U2 also agreed that '*I think it's just that responsibility that we are forced to do to work on our performance responsibilities*'. Voice facilitation was viewed as important to achievement of performance targets for two main reasons. First, it enabled that subordinates should perform better. From interviews, participant LM19.U1 also explained that '*...the first thing that drives me is their performance. I know that listening to the issues raised by employees, motivates them and they*

*end up performing better*'. Similarly, participant LM26.U1 also concurred that, '*...I look at the impact it will have on motivation of those employees. So, I see that allowing employees to speak up when they have issues increases their motivation hence that motivates me to support those employees to have opportunities for voice*'. Subordinates' motivation to work better was viewed as coming from the positive work feeling which employees developed because of listening and addressing their issues. Participant LM27.U1 highlighted that, '*...the idea in doing this is because it enables them to have a positive attitude towards the work that they do*' (also, LM26.U1; LM25.U1; HR3.U1). With this positive feeling, line managers felt that subordinates were better placed to perform better in the tasks they were given (LM3.U2; LM5.U2). In other words, line managers felt that supporting subordinates to voice helped them to perform better hence achieving performance goals which was rewarding to them. However, if facilitating voice was driven by the desire to elicit personal rewards, it also means that if rewards were not elicited then voice would not be facilitated which may explain line managers' laxity in voice facilitation as discussed in section 9.1.

#### **10.2.5. Line managers not empowered to facilitate voice**

Participants also felt that they were not empowered in implementing the voice mechanisms. To start with, line managers did not appear to have the autonomy to handle subordinate issues with the influence of senior managers. This can be illustrated by employees' direct line to senior managers in voicing as demonstrated in section 9.2.4. Participant LM5.U2 also illustrated that,

*'...I think here we have entertained mediocrity for so long time, very long time, [senior managers] have I should say overestimated, or over ranked them, whatever [subordinates] take to them, they have entertained, because of that [those subordinates] think they are doing the right things, yet that is not correct'.*

This was also agreed by participant LM22.U1 who commented that '*...but then Management appear to support what they do, they don't come in to defend us against their approach to voice*'. Because senior managers were accommodating subordinate voices, subordinates took advantage of it to report ways in which line managers were addressing subordinate issues. As participant LM16.U1 argued, '*...if I am to act or handle an issue, they report me and then bosses are also tolerating and believing that*'. Similarly, participant LM5.U2 also agreed of being reported to his director on ways of handling subordinate issues. Because they were being

reported, some line managers (for example, LM16.U1; LM19.U1; LM5.U2) suggested that they were afraid to handle issues as they did not want to become victims if they handled the issues in a wrong way. As participant LM16.U1 illustrated, '*...a lot of people are becoming victims, victims because of baseless things, it may be a case where maybe you are handling an issue in a way you feel it's right according to rules, but someone may go there, report you and without being asked, you find you are being punished silently*'. With these fears, thus, line managers had their control for addressing subordinate issues taken away.

Beyond senior managers tolerating subordinates' issues, line managers also lacked autonomy in addressing their subordinates' issues because they were being side-lined by either HR or senior managers in the making of decisions. As participant LM13.U2 highlighted, '*...Of course, autonomy is a challenge because most of the decisions are centred at head office, If I am to give percentage of autonomy, it's a big challenge*'. Subordinates' decisions such as those on training could be made without the involvement of the line managers. Participant LM1.U2, for example, illustrated that line managers would just be told by either senior managers or HR that employee X would be attending a training without understanding why the said employee was selected for training. Similarly, participant LM17.U1 highlighted that, '*...the basis of selecting that this one [must] go for this training is not mostly clear. we do submit the needs, but half the time they are not used*'. Participant LM2.U2 also concurred that,

*'...sometimes actually they will just come to us and say we have appointed this one or that one to go to Mpemba for training then we start running up and down to facilitate that they are released for training, we have even submitted at times a list of employees to be trained to HR but in return you find that they are telling us different people who they want should be trained'*

Participant LM16.U1 also gave a similar example relating to line managers' submitted training needs not forming the basis of selecting who should be trained contrary to the training procedure (PPS.U1). Besides training issues, Participant LM11.U2 also gave an example of one of his subordinates who was redeployed to another section without his knowledge of the issues or reasons that necessitated the redeployment. Similarly, participant LM9.U2 illustrated in the comment below how he was side-lined in handling the subordinate's grade change request.

*'...I will give you a case of [employee X], [employee x] went for masters studies in UK she came back, wanted a change in grade, she informed me that she reported the issue to HR, it took time for her issue to be resolved, she stopped coming to work, but I didn't know how to handle the issue because it was between HR and [employee X]..I didn't know how long it was going to be resolved'*

In all these illustrations, one would note that senior managers and HR appeared to push line managers aside in addressing their subordinates' issues such as on training, redeployment, and grade change. By being side-lined from addressing their subordinates' issues, line managers lacked control over handling their subordinates' issues. As participant LM1.U2 commented, *'...you will discover that what you are experiencing as a manager is that you are not in control of your staff'*. This was also agreed by participants, LM16.U1, LM9.U2 and LM5.U2. As a matter of fact, even other senior managers (SM2.U2; SM5.U1) did call for empowerment of line managers to be able to handle their subordinates' issues. In simple terms, line managers were not being empowered to address their subordinates' issues. This may also explain why line managers were not being active to listen or address subordinate issues but only defended management stand as discussed in section 9.13.

#### **10.2.6. Limited policy support for voice facilitation**

Policies existed in both public utilities supporting the voice mechanisms as discussed in chapter 8. Besides the existence of policies, evidence was also found that these policies were being circulated by HR to line managers to be able to use them in implementing the voice mechanisms. As participant HR2.U1 commented,

*'We do play a role because as HR we make available the policies to the line managers to make them understand what they are and how they can implement them. For the code of conduct, for example, we print the booklets which are distributed to employees and their supervisors'.*

This was also supported by participant HR3.U1 who highlighted that voice policies were being circulated to line managers. A few line managers (LM22.U1; LM21.U1; LM24.U1) confirmed receiving and having access to the voice policies. *and we also have this code of conduct, at least these guide us on what we need to do...*'. Regardless of this limited evidence for the

existence and circulation of policies to line managers as well as acknowledgement by a few line managers on this, most participants (for example, LM15.U1; LM3.U2; LM9.U2; LM13.U2) did not seem to have clear knowledge of these policies. In terms of having unclear voice policy knowledge, participant LM2.U2 mentioned,

*'...not really, so in terms of making employees to bring forward their issues, I wouldn't say that its black and white, but I think it's just that responsibility that we have as we are working on our responsibilities, we automatically find ourselves encouraging them to speak up when they have issues and not bypassing us. I think I wouldn't say that its black and white'*

Similarly, participant LM11.U2 concurred that, '*...I know that there are conditions of service...but I think it doesn't focus on how we can guide employees in speaking up*'. In other words, these line managers and others (LM6.U2; LM5.U2) felt that policies were not clear on sensitising subordinates relating to voicing through the grievance procedure. Other line managers also mentioned that voice policies were not clear on how to create an open voice environment or inspiring subordinates to voice (LM15.U1; LM8.U2; LM7.U2). As participant LM5.U2 further illustrated, '*...we don't have a guide in terms of how the message is supposed to be sent, how the feedback is supposed to be given, those issues are not in black and white*'. Similarly, another line manager (LM3.U2) highlighted that, '*...we do not have specific arrangements for facilitating employee voice*'.

Because of this lack of awareness of the voice policies, other participants called on HR to do much more than just circulating the policies to also raising awareness of these policies. As participant LM22.U1 noted, '*...so I think HR should also be doing one on one, rather than just giving us these policies because others don't know*'. Similarly, participant LM4.U2 commented that, '*...as I am up here I need to know these things fully may be if we are given like in each office this these policies, they also need to come to say this policy says this because yes, it is the policy but do people know that that's what the policy say?*'. Other senior managers suggested drafting and clarifying guidelines specifically for handling voice issues. As participant SM3.U2 explained,

*'...may be this is where we are missing out, I don't think we have something that is specifically written down for these issues. may be its an effort worth pursuing, may be coming up with a*

*document which outlines the processes things like if you would want to raise issues, directly with your supervisor. this is the way, may be its worth creating or documenting such steps'.*

This was also agreed by participant SM4.U2 who highlighted that, '*...honestly, I don't think there is a very clear formal procedure on how employees can raise their issues or how to guide them. We ned to create that*'. What these participants are suggesting, therefore, is that policies were unclear in terms of guiding line managers to undertake the intended grievance procedure implementation roles discussed in chapter 7. Perhaps, this would also explain why most line managers, in performing adaptability roles discussed in chapter 9, were relaxing policies in addressing voice issues.

### **10.3. Public sector influences**

The public sector's influence on line managers' grievance procedure implementation can be understood through the bureaucratic structures of the grievance procedure and emphasis on public service over commercial goals. This, in line with the data structure in Appendix 11, is discussed with the support of two third order theoretical aggregation, namely, bureaucratic constraints of the grievance procedure and public service over commercial goals.

#### **10.3.1. Bureaucratic constraints of the grievance procedure**

Most participants felt that the voice channels such as the grievance procedure had bureaucratic constraints which made its implementation difficult by line managers. Participants talked about rigidity or bureaucracy of decision-making structures within the grievance procedure (LM13.U2; SM5.U1; LM8.U2). Within the grievance procedure, participant LM1.U2 highlighted that, '*...the channel of communication is just too long for issues to reach the people who would really address issues which employees raise*'. Participant LM6.U2 called these, '*the red tapes*'. Participant LM12.U2 also added that, '*...you see, voicing out begins from the bottom, when we look at the hierarchy, starting from the messenger who is the most to be afraid, for him to voice it means the issue is indeed the issue, the voice from messenger to manager takes time to get there*'. These red tapes made not only difficult for subordinates to take issues to their immediate supervisors but even to get response (LM19.U1) or to have the issue addressed when it got to the line manager (LM2.U2). This is because, '*...an issue [had] to go through several stages before being approved or...resolved*' (LM13.U2). Subordinates' issues taken to

line managers had to be addressed through going through several authorities and structures such as senior managers, management meetings or area-specific management committees (LM2.U2; SM2.U2). Beyond these internal structures, other issues had also to be decided by other actors in the central government beyond the public utility organisations. As one senior manager (SM5.U1) wondered,

*'...the challenge I have seen in the public service is that the governance structures are a bit different from the private sector, because from the [public] corporate governance, what you expect is that the ultimate responsibility should be with the board of directors...which...[represents] the shareholder, but for the public service, the way it is in Malawi, you will find that the shareholders have a lot of control, to the extent that...the Board can give approval but that is not final, there are some offices again who need to approve, may be the offices of the comptroller of statutory corporations...or some individuals in the line ministry [of the public utility organisations interviewed], so in terms of governance, I find it a bit strange'*

It must be stressed that it was not often that handling employee issues had to involve the Board or the line ministry. However, as suggested by participant SM3.U2, the involvement of multiple actors, who included Line managers, HR, senior managers and others at the Board and ministry level, in deciding on employee issues led to delays in addressing those issues or giving feedback to the concerned employees. In short, the red tapes and multiple actors within and outside the public utility organisations made line managers' decision making on subordinates' issues to be slow. This could help explain the limited HR guidance to line managers' voice facilitation responsibilities discussed in section 10.1.1 which, *inter alia*, involved delayed feedback to LMs. Besides that, the bureaucratic constraints of the grievance procedure would also explain why subordinates may have been avoiding taking issues to immediate supervisors as issues would take time to be addressed unlike senior managers or HR to whom they preferred taking their issues.

### **10.3.2. Public service over commercial goals**

Another aspect of the public sector context relates to emphasis of the public service over commercial goals. Participants felt that senior managers had a strong desire to maintain

relations with central government while sacrificing business orientation. As participant LM1.U2 highlighted, '*...When I came here, however, I found that business as usual [or relaxing] attitude*'. This was also agreed by participant LM5.U2 who understood public utilities as lacking the entrepreneurial attitude and having a, '*...setup that [didn't] look at the simple, simple things that [could] sustain the operations of the institution*'. In comparing with the private sector, many participants (for example, LM8.U2; LM2.U2; SM3.U2; LM20.U1; LM15.U1; SM4.U1) concurred that public utilities were not profit-driven though they were legally expected to be operating as a commercial entity. The set-up of having central government as the key stakeholder was cited as being a major factor for this. As participant LM5.U2 highlighted, '*...but also this is because stakeholders are different, in public its largely government, government doesn't put much emphasis on penalising loses*'. This was also agreed by participant SM4.U1 who explained that, '*...we don't have profit making sense because profit making is not measured in money but in-service delivery*'. In other words, between the commercial and service provision goals, the latter appeared to take prominence. Other participants (LM7.U2; SM3.U2) also cited cases where government as shareholder demanded that public utilities should be delivering certain services to the public for free. In general terms, public utilities were, '*...so much regulated that [they had] limits to which [they would] achieve profits or grow to avoid stretching the public in paying high for the [utility service]*' (LM8.U2). The consumers, as well, had expectations that government would ensure that public utilities were reducing the price of the utility service or providing them for free (LM2.U2). All this, exerted pressure on public utilities to provide high quality utility service to the public affordably, cheaply, or freely, yet, in a way that was not making business sense. This would explain the financial side of the public utilities' resource constraints discussed in section 10.1.2.

#### **10.4. Malawi national context; cultural & materialistic influence**

This section discusses how the Malawi cultural context shaped line managers' implementation of the voice mechanisms. The discussion, in line with the data structure in Appendix 11, is structured around the cultural and materialistic dimensions of the Malawi national context. This is supported by the five third order theoretical aggregations that are discussed below namely, line managers as breadwinner to all subordinates' voice issues, culture of too much respect as an obstruction to voice facilitation, relaxed work environment as obstruction to voice facilitation, prioritising self-gratification over duty-facilitation resources as well as the desire

to maintain relations with central government while sacrificing business orientation.

#### **10.4.1. Line managers as breadwinner for all subordinates' voice issues**

The first aspect of the cultural influence relates to the role which participants felt that line managers took as a breadwinner to all subordinates' voice issues. As participant LM5.U2 highlighted, '*...you know here in Africa for you to be a boss it means you need to take the role like that of a breadwinner which our fathers used to take in the old family set-ups, so you must support your subordinates...in both their work and personal issues*'. This was also agreed by a senior manager in utility 2 (SM2.U2) who added that, '*...I think as Africans we take the employer to be our mother, or father, we take our managers to be our mothers, our fathers, so juniors would want almost every problem to go to the employer*'. As fathers and mothers (or breadwinners), these line managers had to act as a final decision-making authority to the many personal or work-related issues. As participant LM22.U1 noted, '*...when they look at the boss, they feel that he is the final decision-making authority, they look at me as someone who can provide everything including administrative issues, but that's just their mindset*'. In other words, the relationship between line managers and their subordinates was viewed as existing in a family-like set up where line managers were like fathers or mothers who had to provide for all needs of the subordinates including work and personalistic issues (also, LM6.U2).

This breadwinner role which line managers undertook was found to be rooted in the cultural background within which the participants grew up. When asked to describe their background and how they grew up, most of them highlighted the importance of extended relatives, co-existence and caring for others. Participant LM15.U1 highlighted that growing up, the father had to put his family first, even if it meant denying himself certain things, to ensure that children had food, good education, and other necessities. Many other participants (for example, LM2.U2; SM2.U2; LM16.U1; LM18.U1; LM20.U1; LM6.U2; LM3.U2) talked about their parents making most of the effort to ensure that the family and children were well taken care of. Most participants (LM17; U1; LM3.U2; LM9.U2; LM4.U2; LM21.U1; LM13.U2) also highlighted that their parents had to take care of large extended families comprising extended relatives such as aunts, cousins and uncles. The belief was that, '*...we were all one in a big family*'. In such family set-ups, many values were being taught such as depending on each other (LM3.U2) being accommodative or co-existing (LM9.U2; LM18.U1; LM6.U2) and caring for

others (LM20.U1; LM21.U1; SM2.U2).

The spirit of togetherness which was being illustrated through the extended family practice also reflected when a child lost parent. Extended relatives could take up the breadwinner role on the orphaned children as was the case with participants LM4.U2; LM15.U2 and LM21.U1. In other cases where parents could not accord their children with opportunities such as education may be because of staying in rural settings or because of financial inability, they had to ask relatives who were better placed in terms of location or financial capability to support their children. Participants LM6.U2, LM5.U2 and SM2.U were examples of such children who had to leave their parents' homes in rural settings to be supported by their uncles or aunts in search for better educational opportunities. This practice could be understood as a practice aligned with the poorer societies. However, from the cultural lens based on the extended family concept, it could be said that what was key was not only the spirit of togetherness or co-existence but also provision or caring for the needs of others who were in disadvantaged position. This is the principle which not only explain the LMs' humanistic approach discussed in section 9.1.4 but also acts as a foundation for their breadwinner role in the workplace which is further elaborated below.

Taking the breadwinner role to the workplace, line managers had to hunt for financial resources to address subordinates' work-related issues. As participant LM5.U2 observed, '*...most of [subordinates'] needs require[d] monetary resources*'. For example, in describing a typical day, participant LM22.U1 noted that, '*...In the morning mostly, we handle fuel issues, ensuring that operational vehicles and motorcycles have been given fuel and other requirements*'. Similarly, participant LM12.U2 also observed that, when, in a typical day, '*...he [found] that materials were few [to subordinates], [he] had to push for many resources and materials to address [utility supply challenges] they were facing*'. Another participant (LM13.U2) also added that, '*...In a normal day, I would be handling requests from different employees in the zone, looking for materials, I don't have enough resources to be able to handle these HR issues, for example, when it comes to transportation for staff issues*'. Many other line managers (for example, (LM17.U1; LM23.U1; LM20.U1; LM5.U2), in describing their typical days, talked about receiving issues to do with subordinates requesting for work-related resources and they had hunt or negotiate for these resources from different departments. These line managers had to widely think about who to negotiate with for resources as participant LM9.U2 observed, '*...you know sometimes its small things that delay things, it may be a third party that is delaying*

*the deliverables, you must understand what's going on, you have to know who to push*'. In other words, in the breadwinner role, line managers had to hunt and negotiate for financial resources to address the work-related issues which subordinates raised.

Besides work-related issues, line managers had also to hunt for financial resources to address subordinates' personal issues. As participant LM14.U1 observed, '*...they also come with their own issues...we still try to push through one or two things, if they are critical, we always negotiate with other departments to say please assist on this one, we can't do without, so it's a give and take scenario*'. Another participant (LM15.U1) also recalled that, '*...employees write a memo may be on an issue they may have faced, they come to me when they see that the issue is supposed to be sorted by me and if it requires authorisation, we push...*'. Most of the personal issues which subordinates took to their line managers were welfare based which required that line managers apply humanistic approach as also discussed in section 8.2.4 of chapter 8. line managers' breadwinner role, therefore, transcended from just addressing employees' work-related issues to '*...looking at their day to day livelihoods or conditions they may have found themselves in*' (LM4.U2) which required financial support from the organisation.

If employees' personal issues could not be addressed, however, subordinates could not value line managers. As participant LM5.U2 observed, '*...if you can't assist them...[with]their needs which require resources, they won't see you as their boss since you can't address their issues, so that's the main challenge*'. Beyond not valuing line managers as bosses, subordinates also could look at line managers as being 'inhuman' if their issues were not addressed. As participant LM6.U2 explained, '*...if my subordinate says my Aunt is sick, I need an emergency advance loan, we normally don't hesitate to support because if you don't assist you are labelled as inhuman or a manager who does not regard the welfare of subordinates*'. A senior manager in utility 2 (SM2.U2) also added that, '*...when you try to clarify a position aligned to policy, others may think you are being personal, may be in our context we say being, 'inhuman'*'. The same feeling about subordinates was expressed by participant LM4.U2. However, line managers' failure to address such needs requiring financial resources was inevitable in the organisational context with resource constraints as discussed in section 10.1.2. This would explain why with this breadwinner role which shaped line managers' managerial discretion role in section 9.1.4, line managers could not inspire subordinates to voice through the grievance procedure because of the inconsistencies that were created.

#### **10.4.2. Culture of too much respect as an obstruction to voice facilitation**

The second aspect of the cultural influence relates to what participants regarded as the culture of too much respect which was found in the public utilities. This culture was learnt from the society and childhood. Being disciplined was regarded as an important value which participants had to adhere to when growing up. As participant LM18.U1 highlighted, '*... we grew up in a very strict environment, any diversions attracted very serious consequences, he didn't entertain abscondment without any meaningful reason*'. This participant highlights that he was made to strictly follow rules which were set in the family such as not absconding from school. Participant LM13.U2 also talked about strictly adhering to the time for returning home from child play. Furthermore, participant LM11.U2 added that, '*...In the house, as kids we grew up with such roles as always taking food to the grown-ups when it is prepared in the kitchen and taking away dishes after the elders have finished eating*', Beyond just adhering to routine rules, other participants also highlighted about some behavioural expectations that were placed on them. For example, participant LM19.U1 illustrated that, '*...I was raised in a normal setting in which we had parents who could instil discipline, even when I started drinking as a teenager, we were three, me, my brother and sister, there was a bit of war when I got home*'. Similarly, participant LM10.U2 highlighted that, '*...so things like drinking, smoking or indulging in courtships were not tolerated in early teenage*'. Other participants (for example, LM7.U2; LM4.U2; SM2.U2; LM15.U1; LM17.U1) highlighted many other expected behaviours such as kneeling when giving or receiving something to or from an elder, not calling elders by first name, not talking back to an elder. By setting the rules and expected behaviours, the founding or guiding principle was that children must respect elders and listen to what they are saying (LM21.U1; LM25.U1). This principle also appeared to be reflected in the workplace of both public utilities as discussed below.

Relating to the cultural principle discussed above, the culture in the public utilities was described by participants as being the one in which junior employees had too much respect for those in senior positions. One senior manager (SM5.U1) highlighted that, '*...we have a culture where there is too much respect for those in higher positions here*'. This senior manager illustrated further in the comment below,

*'It's not bad per se, but sometimes when there is too much respect, people are not free to open up, I will give you an example, to illustrate this, if you have a funeral here and a sectional head*

*or someone senior is going there, believe me, he will travel alone, nobody will want to travel with him, his car has space for more people, but they will bundle themselves in some small car, yet you want people to be a bit flexible, if I pick two or three people here in the car, going to [the funeral], chances are higher that along the way we will be chatting and people will now be sort of relieved, loosen up, talk about themselves, you know then you begin to understand them better in terms of their problems because it's now like you are removing the official and you are creating an unofficial environment.'*

The act of managers not travelling in the same car with subordinates symbolises the distance which existed between those elders and their juniors because of too much respect. With this distance, this participant highlights that subordinates were less likely to open and express the issues which they had.

Within the same culture of too much respect for elders, negative voice was regarded as a sign of disrespect. One senior manager for utility 2 (SM3.U2) commented that,

*'...we should bear in mind of our culture in Malawi where we have so much respect for our leaders and that negatively impacts our activeness in speaking out the issues that matter. When an employee is airing views, other employees with the same cultural mentality, starts to fear that what he/she is doing is not the right thing. It is looked at as a sign of disrespect to the authorities especially if they are negative issues being raised'.*

In other words, because of the culture of too much respect for elders, negative voicing attracted displeasure from colleagues and was regarded as a sign of being disrespectful to those in higher positions where that negative voice was targeted (also, LM7.U2). Participant LM6.U2 also added that, *'...here when you speak in such a way they will even look at you and say aaah why did he even have to go that far in speaking up because we look at management as our leaders'*. One would note, therefore, that when an employee in a lower position, for example in the presence of others, expressed negative voice to a senior in a higher position, his/her colleagues expressed dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction appeared to be the result of having too much respect for seniors.

Beyond negative voice being disliked by colleagues, it was also found that what those in senior positions spoke became a final decision. As a senior manager in utility 2 (SM2.U2) illustrated,

*'...there is that African thinking that if an elder has spoken , there is a deep feeling of not wanting to challenge, and an elder here includes a manager, for example this morning we were discussing something , we are preparing official commissioning of [utility service] project, there is a team working on that, so management had made a number of adjustments, so in the meeting, the CEO asked to say, 'these are just the suggestions, you are free to agree or disagree', nobody said anything possibly a good 3 to 5 minutes passed, then I said may be because he has used disagree, but we can make suggestions to say here we can do better, we are not necessarily disagreeing with management, people laughed but very few people really gave contrary views or offered any alternative suggestions, it's an element that is there in the offices, that as Africans, if an elderly person has spoken, we don't want to go against, even if it's not the best option, you normally want to go along'*

This senior manager gives an illustration supporting that what management or senior managers decide becomes the final decision and employees do not become willing to offer alternative or contrary suggestions. The same participant (SM2.U2) also gave an example of boardroom meetings which involved top management and the board of directors in which management rarely wanted to go against board's suggestions. In other words, this participant appeared to suggest that the culture of too much respect for elders was reflected at all levels of the public utilities such that what those in senior positions said became the guiding rule. This culture of too much respect for elders enables one to understand why line managers were reinforcing respectful voice and discouraging destructive voice as discussed in section 9.1.2 and why the same line managers were regarding senior managers' directions as a golden rule as discussed in section 9.1.3.

#### **10.4.3. Relaxed work environment as obstruction to voice facilitation**

The last aspect of the cultural influence relates to the relaxed work environment which was regarded by participants as existing in the Malawi public utilities. Most participants described working in the public utilities as involving laxity in goal orientation. When they were asked how they compared working in the public sector with other sectors such as private, most participants described the public sector work life using words such as '*passive*' (LM5.U2; LM15.U1), '*leisez-faire*' (SM3.U2; LM20.U1; LM5.U2), and '*relaxed*' (LM2.U2; LM4.U2;

LM20.U1). All these words pointed towards actors in the public sector as lacking focus on achieving the set goals. As participant LM22.U1 highlighted, '*...in the private, everyone is busy working so hard to achieve the goals that have been set, but here there is laissez faire attitude*'. '*The environment*', according to participant LM14.U1, '*[was] a bit free with employees having more room to do what they wanted*'. As participant LM16.U1 noted, '*...we have so many good things like performance targets...but then the culture that is in the public sector, there is a lot of laxity to achieve those targets*'. Many other participants (for example, LM20.U1; LM9.U2; LM1.U2) also alluded to this laxity in the achievement of performance targets. With this laxity, managers had to, '*...push employees to do the assigned work*' (SM5.U1) because subordinates were passive (LM5.U2; LM15.U1). In terms of line managers' facilitation of employee voice, which is the focus of this section, the voice platforms such as WhatsApp were very passive and line managers had to go an extra mile to encourage subordinates to express their issues (LM1.U2; LM5.U2). Beyond being passive in using voice platforms, subordinates also demonstrated passivity through not being punctual in reporting for work or frequently sneaking out from work (LM16.U1; HR2.U1; LM1.U2) as well as not timely doing the assigned work (LM16.U1; LM4.U2). They could also not take ownership or care in the usage of resources. As participant LM19.U1 observed,

*'...the other thing is that there is that spirit of saying don't do that these things are not yours after all, like someone is destroying chemicals and you are saying colleagues let's take care of these things they are expensive, and you will hear them saying that but does the money come from your pocket? (both laughs)'*

This laxity among employees meant that managers at all levels needed to exercise strict supervision for those employees to perform their duties or to voice.

However, instead of exercising strict supervision on subordinates, managers appeared to relax in supervising employees. For example, participants SM5.U1 and LM11.U2 pointed out that in the public sector, managers would accept explanations from subordinates relating to failure to achieve performance targets. As participant LM11.U2 highlighted, '*in public you find that from what I have observed there are times where employees can say this I have not done, and we understand to say, let's do it tomorrow*'. Furthermore, participants HR2.U1 and SM4.U1 also illustrated that managers could allow, without taking decisive action, subordinates to report late for work or do personal things during work time. In other words, as participant

SM4.U2 explained, '*... [there was] a challenge...in which [line managers] were running away from the responsibility of managing their employees, they [wanted] somebody else to manage their employees for them*'. In short, a relaxed rather than strict supervision of subordinates was found in public utilities in which managers could not take full responsibility for managing their subordinates. This also meant that passive employees would not be pushed towards utilising recommended voice platforms. Perhaps, this relaxed approach also explains why line managers listened to subordinates as a formality as discussed in section 9.1.3. and discretionary applied policies as discussed in section 9.2.4, aspects which were not driving subordinates towards voicing through the management-led voice mechanisms.

#### **10.4.4. Prioritising self-gratification over duty-facilitation resources**

Aside from the cultural influence, in materialistic terms, participants felt that senior managers were prioritising self-gratification over their role in providing line managers with duty-facilitation resources. The resource constraints which line managers faced in voice facilitation as discussed in section 10.1.2. were regarded as emerging from not only the '*financial side of things*' in which the organisations faced limited resources but also the '*...philosophical side [of things]*' (LM8.U2). In the philosophical side of things, this participant explained that senior managers were negligent and lacked proper prioritisation of where to spend resources with preference to areas where they knew they would elicit some personal financial benefit. Participant LM1.U2 also agreed as per the comment below,

*'...Its always a challenge, like now customers are not paying and we suggested to implement different...programs, we tried to use our own expertise instead of external agencies to come up with fliers, jingles etc. that would have at least encouraged customers out there to come and pay, you do that, it's a brilliant idea, its only supported for one month and afterwards, you are told no, we can't keep doing this it's very expensive But then you look at an expenditure for that its about 2 million yet people go out there on trips to the lake spending way over 5 million on not so important issues'*

In other words, senior managers appeared to prioritise spending resources on areas which they felt they would elicit some financial gain such as travel where they would receive allowances (also, LM3.U2; LM12.U2). Prioritisation of senior managers on projects was also viewed by other line managers as achieving no good to the public utilities other than offering personal

financial gains to those senior managers (LM24.U1; LM18.U1; LM6.U2). As participant LM5.U2 commented, '*...sometimes I believe, just my view, there are some up there here who gain some rewards from undertaking such projects which I don't see their value*'. Even in cases where public utilities could not have the financial capacity to secure loans for projects, senior managers, '*...[used] certain tactics to obtain the loans because of what personally these projects meant to them*' (LM5.U2). Participant LM16.U1 also questioned the lack of value for money in the procurement of materials suspecting that it could be that others personally benefited. This participant highlighted that, '*...even here problems are issues of procurement, issues of procurement here are not value for money, bosses not being concerned, but then we are losing a lot of money, something which we can buy for MK 2,000.00 we find buying it with MK200,000.00*'. The lack of value for money in procurement was also agreed by participants LM3.U2 and LM7.U2. In simple terms, these illustrations suggest that priority in expenditure was given to areas where personal gain would be extracted at the expense of providing duty or voice facilitation resources to line managers. This mentality of senior managers would explain limited resources to line managers as discussed in section 10.1.2.

## **10.5. Chapter summary**

This chapter presents findings which show that line managers' practice of the adaptability roles and failure to drive subordinates towards voicing through management-led voice structures is shaped by organisational, public sectoral and Malawi national contextual influences. In the immediate organisational context, the findings showed that line managers lacked adequate HR support, resources, and training for voice facilitation. These factors not only obstructed line managers from robotically performing the conduit roles discussed in Chapter 8 but also drove them towards practicing adaptability roles such as managerial discretion, denying an eye to subordinates' issues, and discouraging destructive voice. In terms of motivation, line managers were driven to facilitate voice to elicit personal rewards without which they were likely to practice adaptability roles such as laxity in voice facilitation. Relating to the organisational opportunities, line managers were not empowered which made them defend management instructions instead of rendering eye to subordinates' issues. They were also provided with limited policy support which explains why they were relaxing policies in addressing voice issues. Thus, the immediate organisational context shaped line managers' practice of adaptability roles discussed in Chapter 9 and failure to adhere to the conduit responsibilities discussed in Chapter 8.

Beyond the organisational context, the findings showed that line managers' practice of adaptability roles can be attributed to the public sector context. The bureaucratic constraints and multiple actors were found as inherent in the grievance procedure which slowed line managers handling of voice issues and created delays in HR's guidance and feedback to line managers. In the end, line managers could not inspire subordinates towards taking issues through the grievance procedure. In the same public sector organisation, prioritisation of public service over commercial goals also translated into resource constraints for line managers' voice facilitation which meant that they could not properly practice the conduit roles hence resorting to adaptability responsibilities. Finally, the findings showed that adaptability roles were shaped by national cultural factors such as line managers' breadwinner role, the culture of respect and the relaxed work environment. National materialistic features of senior managers were associated with whether line managers received adequate resources and voice facilitation training to aid their voice-related roles.

## **CHAPTER 11: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **11.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings of the study and implications for theory and practice. First, the main study findings are presented before moving to an interpretation of these findings according to the research questions. The discussion then presents the thesis' theoretical contributions, in particular, regarding HRM implementation and voice in the African public sector. The chapter concludes with a consideration of methodological contributions, practical implications, study limitations and suggested areas for future research.

### **11.2. Summary of findings**

As discussed in Chapter 6, the main aim of this study was to explore the factors which influence line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within a organisational and national context – the African public sector. To realise this broader aim, Chapter 6 presented three main research questions for the study relating to the adoption and quality of voice-related HR practices in public sector organisations (RQ1), line managers' role in the implementation of voice-related HR practices (RQ2) and contextual influences shaping line managers' implementation role (RQ3). The sections below summarise the findings for each of these three research questions.

The first thesis' research question relates to exploring the nature of voice-related HR practices that are adopted in the public sector organisations and the perceived aims for implementation. As discussed in Chapter 6, this research question focused on exploring two main aspects - the degree to which intended voice mechanisms in public sector organisations are either management-led or employee-led (RQ1(a)) as well as the formal role allocated to line managers as conduits of the intended practice (RQ1(b)). Chapter 8 presented findings relating to RQ1. In terms of the intended voice mechanisms in the two Malawi public utility organisations, the study found that decisions on the adoption of voice practices are shaped by two managerial and promotive motives: ensuring the realisation of organisational goals and ensuring the safeguard of employees' right to participate in workplace governance. These motives were found as necessitating the adoption of individualised and management-led voice related mechanisms in which employees in both case organisations were expected to channel their issues through their immediate supervisors using voice channels that included grievance procedures, meetings (one on one and sectional), WhatsApp, phone call and written means (institutional emails and

memos). In terms of implementation, line managers were emphasised as primary implementers of the voice mechanisms undertaking roles that included enforcing policy adherence, torchbearer in voice mechanisms, handling voice through performance management, selling voice mechanisms to subordinates and accommodating destructive voicers. While line managers were emphasised as primary implementers of the voice mechanisms, senior managers and HR were also intentionally positioned to play important roles as enablers of positive voice culture and custodians of implementation, respectively. Senior managers were expected to set the tone for employee voice culture, create a conducive workable environment for voice to thrive and lead voice facilitation. HR was expected to act as policy custodian, provider of implementation guidance to line managers and coordinator of voice implementation.

The second thesis' research question related to the actual implementation and quality of the voice related HRM practices. As discussed in Chapter 6, this research question focused on exploring three main aspects - the actual line managers' roles in implementing voice-related HR practices in public sector organisations (RQ2(a)), the extent to which the implemented voice-related HR practices allow employees voice opportunities (RQ2(b)), and the extent to which the actual line managers' roles contribute towards the implementation of high-quality voice-related HR practices (RQ2(c)). In terms of the actual line managers' implementation roles, Chapter 9 highlighted that the interviews in both case organisations revealed that line managers were not adhering to their conduit or delegated responsibilities (presented in Chapter 8, section 8.3.3). Instead, line managers played the role as engineers of adaptability. For example, in enforcing voice policy compliance and handling subordinates' resource-related issues, line managers applied discretion through relaxing polices on sensitive welfare issues and applying a humanistic approach in handling subordinate personal issues. Similarly, in sensitising subordinates on the voice mechanisms, line managers had to emphasise voicing respectfully. In their role as a torchbearer of the management-led voice mechanisms, they also had to defend management instructions. The practice of these adaptability responsibilities, however, appeared to be conflicting and misaligned to subordinates' remedial voice intentions of escaping from poor working conditions and advancing personal interests. With these remedial voice intentions, interviews in both case organisations suggested that employees preferred voicing through their own, employee-led and collective, voice channels which included, anonymous letters, the grapevine, senior managers, HR and the union. In other words, there was a lower extent of voice exchange in the intended individualised and management-led

voice mechanisms. The line managers' practice of adaptability, in this case, did little to inspire subordinates or legitimise voicing through the established management-led voice structures.

The last thesis' research question related to contextual influences shaping line managers' implementation of the voice-related HR practices. As discussed in Chapter 6, this research question focused on exploring how line managers' implementation of voice-related HR practices is shaped by organisational support (RQ3(a)), structural issues of the public sector (RQ3(b)) and wider national political and cultural values (RQ3(c)). The findings presented in Chapter 10 found that line managers' 'adaptability role' in both case organisations was shaped by multiple levels of context at organisational, public sectoral and national levels. At organisational level, through applying the AMO model for line managers, the study found, through interviews in both case organisations, that line managers' failure to adhere to conduit implementation responsibilities and practice of adaptability roles was shaped by limited HR guidance, resource constraints, lack of voice facilitation training, lack of incentives (except for eliciting personal rewards) and lack of empowerment. Beyond the immediate organisational context, the study also highlighted of structural features of the Malawi public utility sector in terms of the bureaucratic nature of the grievance procedure (see section 10.3.1), priority of public service over commercial goals (section 10.3.2), a multiplicity of actors through the involvement of senior managers (see section 9.2.3), and humanistic managerial approaches (see section 9.2.4). At the national level, the study found that line managers' 'adaptability role' was, in both case organisations, shaped by cultural factors, including a relaxed work environment, a culture of too much respect and the breadwinner role- as well as materialistic factors which included senior managers' prioritisation of self-gratification over duty facilitation resources.

### **11.3. Contextualising the adoption and implementation of nature of voice-related HR practices**

Relating to the first research question, the findings highlight the nature of voice related HRM practices that are adopted in public sector organisations and the formal roles that are allocated to line managers for implementation. The findings from both case organisations suggest that what drives the adoption of voice-related practices in the public sector organisations are two motives: realisation of organisational goals and the safeguard of employees' right to participate in workplace governance. The motive of adopting voice practices for the realisation of organisational goals reflects a unitary or promotive voice intent (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014)

which suggests that voice practices can only drive business success if they are introduced on management terms (Gennard & Judge 2005; Kaufman 2020). The motive of safeguarding employees' rights aligns with a democratic governance ethos (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Davidov 2014; Bryson et al. 2014; Klerck 2016; Patmore 2020), suggesting the workplace as an important arena for employees (as citizens) to participate in the governance of modern democracies. These two motives, realisation of organisational goals and safeguarding employees' rights, however, while addressed in the interviews as equals, oppose each other in a specific tension, with drivers of the adoption of the management-led voice mechanisms reflecting broader contextual framing. As suggested by many scholars (Freeman & Medoff, 1985; Batt et al. 2002; Wilkinson et al. 2020; Syed, 2020), management-led voice mechanisms in the public sector are embedded within a wider institutional, political, cultural and historical feature of the public administrative systems or, in this case, the Malawi national and public utilities sector context. The Malawi's historical and colonial features, such as authority consolidation and coercive control of rural masses were based on a specific form of patrimonialism, as discussed in Chapter 5, and would help explain the restrictions and barriers to management-led voice mechanisms that are reported in the findings. Senior and line managers in both organisations justified limiting voicing to management-led channels as preventing employees to abuse individual rights to speak up to the detriment of the realisation of goals of a public servicing organisation. The thesis contributes to debates on integrating the postcolonial context into understanding or, making visible contradictions stemming from a colonial past into research often contextualised in Western, or a historic HRM framework (Javawardena 2023). In the case of the Malawi public utilities sector, it is pertinent to reflect beyond the unitary and democratic motives in explaining voice limitation to management-controlled means.

In terms of the formal roles delegated to line managers in implementing the constituted management-led voice mechanisms, interviews in both case organisations revealed that line managers were expected to act as 'conduits' and avoid discretionary behaviours in implementing voice related HRM practices (Floyd & Wooldrid 1992; Harney & Yi Lee 2022). In these conduit roles, line managers were expected to undertake five main responsibilities, namely, enforcing voice policy compliance, sensitising subordinates on voice mechanisms, being a torchbearer in implementing voice mechanisms, handling voice through performance management and handling subordinates' resource-related issues. The conduit roles depict the core of the devolution of HR thesis (Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020) in

which line managers must adhere to the formal norms instructed by HR in implementing HRM practices. Practicing conduit roles – or implementing exactly the voice mechanisms as intended (Townsend & Mowbray 2020) - demands the availability of adequate organisational support in terms of aspects such as training and other required resources (Van Mierlo et al. 2018). These may not always be available in the resource constrained organisational settings such as those in the developing country contexts (Prouska & Psychogios 2018; Kougiannou 2023). While the rule-based and bureaucratic structures may make the public sector receptive to the practice of conduit responsibilities (Knies et al. 2018), the existence of multiple influences and stakeholders may raise doubt as to whether the conduit role would thrive in the public sector (Moore & Fung 2012; Alford et al. 2017). The thesis, in line with RQ1, contributes to a deeper understanding of voice-related HRM practices and line managers' implementation roles by embedding these in the wider national and public sector context of the organisations within which they are introduced.

#### **11.4.Understanding Line managers' role in enhancing employee voice quality**

In terms of the second research question related to understanding how line managers went beyond formal roles, findings in both case organisations revealed line managers as 'engineers of adaptability'. Line managers did not adhere to the devolved conduit roles. Instead, through the four stages of voice facilitation presented in Chapter 9, line managers adapted these conduit roles to suit the context within which they were executing those roles. As engineers of adaptability (Floyd & Wooldrid 1992; Harney & Jordan 2008; Harney & Yi Lee 2022), thus, line managers had to introduce their own interventions or find leeway to execute the conduit roles and to secure informal cooperation not only from employees but also from senior managers. For example, in enforcing voice policy compliance and handling subordinates' resource-related issues, they had to apply discretion through relaxing polices on sensitive welfare issues and applying a humanistic approach in handling subordinate personal issues. Similarly, in sensitising subordinates on the voice mechanisms, they had to emphasise voicing respectfully. In their role as a torchbearer of the voice mechanisms, they also had to defend management instructions. The study findings, in this case, suggest that through the four stages of implementing voice-related HRM mechanisms (see Chapter 9), line managers acted as engineers of adaptability rather than conduits (Floyd & Wooldrid 1992; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020), playing a translating role (Harney & Yi Lee 2022; Nishii & Paluch 2018) or repurposing the voice practices (Mowbray et al. 2022). The typology of line

managers' implementation role as engineers of adaptability contradicts the line managers' HRM implementation role (Nagel 1961; Lopreato & Alston 1970). This is because while the mainstream HRM implementation literature (Floyd & Wooldrid 1992; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Suhail et al 2024; Hewett et al 2024) strongly expects line managers to conform to the conduit roles, research data offers the typology of implementation roles which suggests that the real world exists in parallel to this expectation. Data from both case organisations suggest that, line managers must satisfy other demands outside supporting employee voice within the implementation context such as securing cooperation from employees and senior managers.

Satisfying the needs of senior managers was the strongest demand on line managers. In fact, the findings in both case organisations support the influential role of senior managers in the primary implementation of voice related HRM practices beyond just enabling the positive voice culture (see Chapter 8). In stage one of voice facilitation, for example, senior managers determined what issues line managers needed to address. What senior managers said in the debriefing sessions also influenced what line managers had to do in the rest of the stages of voice facilitation. For example, workplans had to reflect what senior managers suggested besides line managers' own plans. Similarly, in subordinates' interface, line managers had to defend whatever was said in the debriefing sessions while denying eye to subordinates' issues. Furthermore, in stage 4 of addressing subordinates' issues, line managers lacked empowerment such that most issues had to be addressed during debriefing sessions where senior managers gave instructions on how to address them. This role of senior managers in the line managers' four stages of voice facilitation offers proof that senior managers were not only mere enablers of positive voice culture or evaluators of the HRM implementation process as suggested by the HRM implementation literature (for example, Schein 1986; Guest & Bos-Nehles 2013). Instead, senior managers joined line managers as primary actors in implementing voice mechanisms. This, again, contradicts the HRM implementation model where line managers are portrayed as sole and primary HRM implementers (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Suhail et al 2024; Hewett et al, 2024).

The discussion above, in line with RQ2(a), suggests that to understand the implementation roles of line managers (for example, Wright & Nishii 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018; Alang et al. 2020), there is a need to engage with the stages of voice facilitation which represent what those line managers do beyond their formal roles. Moreover, line managers' practice of

informal roles-adaptability- centred on satisfying other demands such as those of senior managers, who are also portrayed as primary implementers of voice mechanisms.

With the practice of adaptability roles by line managers and involvement of senior managers, the implemented management-led voice mechanisms could not, in line with RQ(b), contribute towards employee voice quality. While shared interests and goals were assumed in the constitution of the management-led voice mechanisms by management (Nechanska et al. 2020), implementation of these mechanisms were challenged by employees' two remedial or pluralist-based voice motives; escaping from poor working conditions and advancing personal interests. Voice literature (for example, Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Johnstone, 2024) suggests that remedial voice intentions may not always be expressed in good ways but may be expressed in ways that may sometimes be deemed prohibitive or uncomfortable to line managers or management. Perhaps this explains why in line with other voice studies (for example, Khilji & Wang 2006; Wright & Nishii 2013; Mowbray et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2023), management-led voice mechanisms were not utilised by employees as intended. Instead, employees appeared to take issues to their own employee-led and collective voice channels such as unions, senior managers, HR, anonymous letters and the grapevine. As suggested by other public sector voice studies (for example, Kochan et al. 2019 & O'Shea & Murphy 2020), public utility organisations were found to have a 'voice gap' since the management-led voice mechanisms which were intended for keeping track and addressing voice issues were not being utilised.

In line with RQ2(c), line managers appeared to do less to address the voice gap through the practice of adaptability. The voice gap was, therefore, being exacerbated by what Kehoe and Han (2020) call, 'individual line manager factors. For example, the managerial discretion left subordinates discontent with inconsistencies which came with policy application. Many line managers also defended senior management rather than listening to subordinates' issues. Reinforcement of respectful voice, as well, meant that voices that were regarded as destructive (Maynes & Podsakoff 2014) were disregarded, with overly critical voicers punished through denying them opportunities such as field trips or training, or restricting them from voicing through management-controlled WhatsApp groups. This illustrates that line managers' adaptability roles and the corresponding involvement of senior managers, worked against voice quality (O'Shea & Murphy 2020; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). Instead, such line managers' behaviours led to greater inefficiency of management-led voice mechanisms in which subordinates were discouraged from voicing through the management-led channels as discussed in Chapter 9.

This voice gap exacerbated by what Kehoe and Han (2020) call, ‘individual line manager factors’, also prompts important questions relating to the pessimistic view of HRM devolution on whether voice mechanisms can be implemented with quality when responsibilities are devolved to line managers given the demands they have to satisfy (Hutchinson 1995; Cunningham & Hyman 1999; Townsend & Mowbray 2020). The tendency within organizational psychology literature (Ashford et al. 2009; Fast et al. 2014; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020) is to psychologise line managers’ implementation behaviours such as those on adaptability roles as found in the current research. OB scholars (Leat 2007;17; Morrison 2011; Nechanska et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2023) have focused on interpreting line manager behaviours such as relating to practicing adaptability in terms of how they create psychological safety climate for employees’ decision to voice through management-led voice mechanisms. In other words, the tendency within organizational psychology literature (Ashford et al. 2009; Fast et al. 2014; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020) is to psychologise line managers’ implementation behaviours. As some scholars (Bryson et al. 2006; Boselie 2010; Nechanska et al. 2020; & Gruman and Saks 2020) argue, if line managers’ individual behaviours do not translate the voice mechanism into offering efficacy, accessibility, and guarantee that voice issues will be addressed, as demonstrated through the practice of adaptability roles, rarely do employees choose to voice through such a mechanism.

While the thesis confirms that line managers’ implementation behaviours, through the practice of adaptability roles, may have driven subordinates away from voicing through the management-led mechanisms, the thesis disagrees that these line managers’ behaviours can be explained purely by psychological factors such as self-image and personality traits (LePine and Van Dyne 2001; Fast et al. 2014; Bysted & Hansen 2015). Thus, in line with some scholars (Wilkinson et al. 2020; Syed, 2020; Allen, 2020), the thesis argues that doing so would be narrowing not only the complexity of the employee voice construct or the nature of the employment relationship that exists in organisations but also the broader and multi-layered-organisational, public sector and national- context within which line managers undertake these roles.

One explanation has already been provided above; that line managers were undertaking their voice-related roles with the conflicting involvement of senior managers who also greatly influenced line managers’ implementation behaviours as engineers of adaptability. This is just one of the many issues which the findings in Chapter 10 highlight as existing in the line managers’ immediate organisational context. These issues in the organisational context along

with other issues in the public sector and Malawi national context constitute the multi-layered context which is considered next in the next section as shaping line managers' implementation behaviours.

### **11.5. Multi-level contextual influences shaping line managers' adaptability responsibilities**

The findings in both case organisations demonstrated that line managers' practice of adaptability roles was shaped by multi-layered levels of context in terms of the immediate organisational context, public sector context and the wider Malawi national context. In terms of the immediate organisational context and while applying the AMO model on line managers-RQ3(a) and RQ3(b) (Rasheed et al. 2017; Fu et al. 2017; Dastmalchian et al. 2019; Harley 2020), findings showed that line managers' ability to fulfil their conduit roles (see section 10.2) was limited by insufficient HR guidance, limited support in performance appraisal, limited resources for voice facilitation and lack of voice facilitation training. In other words, HR gave limited 'allocative facilities' to line managers for undertaking conduit roles hence creating discrepancies in the degree of devolution of implementation responsibilities (Op de Beeck et al. 2016; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). Limited HR support may, thus, explain line managers' implementation behaviours such as application of discretion, denying ear to subordinate voice and punishing overly critical voicers. In terms of motivation, line managers appeared not to be incentivised to facilitate voice except in a few cases where they were motivated by the materialistic interests (Joseph 1987; Diamond 1989; Newbury 2003) that came with voice facilitation such as gaining personal rewards like promotions.

Relating to opportunity, data shows that policies appeared to be unclear to line managers such that they appeared to lack policy knowledge. Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) suggests that clear and valuable policies and procedures become key for line managers to perform HRM roles such as those relating to facilitating voice. The unclear policies and limited policy knowledge may explain why line managers may have been relaxing policies instead of enforcing adherence to those policies in addressing voice issues. Relating to the same opportunity, data also shows that line managers were not empowered to execute conduit roles as there was a direct line from subordinates to senior managers and line managers were not given the autonomy to handle subordinate voice. That is why they could, for example, just listen as a formality or defend management positions as they had to fight the micro-dynamics of inclusion and conflict with

senior managers (Westley 1990; Harley 2020) to practice the grievance procedure. As a matter of fact, data shows that senior managers' expectations acted as a strong demand which line manager had to satisfy as discussed in section 11.4.

Beyond the immediate organisational context, findings also suggest that line managers' practice of adaptability roles was shaped by the wider public sector and Malawi national context. To analyse the public sector and national context of an African country like Malawi, William and Yecalo-Tecle (2020) suggests integrating structural, cultural and material features. Starting with the structural features, these represent the public sector context. Chapter 3 highlighted that the public sector operating context presents features such as bureaucracy, resource constraints, paternalistic style of management or human philosophy and the multiplicity of actors which uniquely shape how line managers would implement the voice related HR practices, different from the private sector. In the research data, first, bureaucratic constraints within the grievance procedure appeared to act as obstacles for line managers to practice the grievance procedure through conduit roles. Many scholars (Corby & White 1999; Kersley et al., 2006; Knies et al. 2018) have highlighted how public sector bureaucratic structures make it difficult for line managers to facilitate voice because of delays in addressing and obtaining issues from subordinates. As discussed in chapter 3, the presence of the rigid routines and complex problem-solving processes in the public sector does not transmit motivation to employees to voice through the formalized voice mechanisms (Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Mowbray et al, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2024). This was confirmed in the present study where interviews from both case organisations revealed that the highly structured nature of the 'non-unionised grievance procedure' (Lewin 2020) was found as a challenge that meant it took a long time for individual employees to get to immediate supervisors with their grievances. By nature, the non-union grievance procedures are expected to be bureaucratic as they mirror the multi-step procedures contained in the traditional unionised grievance procedures (Walker and Hamilton,2011; Lewin 2020). Chapter 5 also discussed how employees' lack of trust in the legitimacy and importance of voicing through the grievance procedure in the Malawi public sector context make employees fail to take grievances through this avenue. This explains why individual employees could not voice through the bureaucratic grievance procedure described in Chapter 9 and make it difficult for line managers to drive employees to voice through this avenue.

Line managers had to also deal with a multiplicity of actors which included senior managers in

addressing subordinates' issues. These multiple actors and influences in the public utilities are interpreted by other studies as not only making it difficult for line managers to adhere to the conduit roles (Moore and Fung 2012; Alford et al. 2017) but also adhere to the rules and structures in undertaking these delegated roles (Alford et al. 2017). As Noordegraaf (2015) argues, line managers had a dilemma of either going by what senior managers demanded from the debriefing sessions or what the HRM policies demanded in addressing voice issues. This was not the only dilemma line managers faced because they also had to respond to other demands of the public sector which included applying the paternalistic style of management (Farnham & Horton, 1996; Knies et al., 2022) in addressing voice issues. In the end, the public sector context presented structural features which drove line managers into the adaptability roles which could not contribute towards quality implementation of the voice related mechanisms.

The cultural and materialistic arguments depict the national contextual influences. Chapter 2 highlighted that voice related HRM practices and the way they are implemented ought to be understood as a reflection to the national institutional and cultural pressures (Kwon & Farndale 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020; McKearney et al. 2023). This is also the theme advanced in chapter 4 in which there is a role which African cultural values and materialistic interests play in how line managers facilitate employee voice. In terms of the role of national culture, chapter 4 highlighted that in the African society there are shared norms, values or expectations which are likely to make line managers behave in ways not supportive of enhancing employee voice. In the present study, data shows that there was a relaxed work environment in which employees were found to be passive and not self-driven to utilise formal voice channels. Line managers also applied relaxed supervision which could not drive subordinates towards voicing through the management-led voice mechanisms. This corresponds to the 'catching up thesis' in the African management literature in Chapter 4 which upholds the philosophy that public workers in developing countries like Africa are passive and indifferent to organisational performance such that they are always in constant need of supervision (Abudu 1986; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). The relaxed supervisory approach, thus, drove line managers into implementation behaviours such as listening as a formality or relaxing policy application which could not help in quality implementation of the management-led voice mechanisms.

In the same cultural argument, line managers in the study were found to undertake the breadwinner role which had roots in the values of Malawi national context such as togetherness,

co-existence, and care which were found. These values relate to the communalistic values which most studies (for example, Otité 1978; Nzelibe 1986; Kamoche 1997; Mabovula 2011; Laurent 1986) have regarded as characterising African society in the cultural uniqueness thesis. In this breadwinner role, line managers had to hunt or negotiate for subordinates' work-related or personal resources and apply a humanistic approach in handling issues without which they were not valued as bosses. Line managers' voice facilitation behaviours such as applying humanistic approach emerging from the breadwinner role meant diverting from voice policies in line with the catching up thesis in the name of caring for subordinates (Montgomery 1987; Kuada 2006). Another challenge with living up to this breadwinner role was resource constraints found in the present study and confirmed for many similar financially vulnerable organisational settings such as those of the public utilities as discussed in chapter 6 (also, Prouska & Psychogios 2018). This would mean line managers failing on their caring or resource provision role, making subordinates to not value them as bosses hence voicing outside the management-led voice mechanisms.

In cultural terms, lastly, the culture of 'too much respect' was found which was rooted in Malawi societal values on the guiding principle that children or juniors must respect and listen to parents or elders. These values and principles on which the culture of too much respect was founded are like the traditional values which many studies (e.g., Nzelibe 1986; Pitcher et al. 2009; Kamoche 1997) have regarded as characterising the African society. This culture led line managers into implementation behaviours such as reinforcing respectful voice and discouraging destructive voice as well as regarding senior managers' direction as a golden rule. This reflects arguments by scholars within the African cultural uniqueness thesis which suggests that African values shape managerial behaviours which are authoritarian such that line managers become feared by employees (Kuada 2006; Abudu 1986; O'Flynn 2007). The culture of too much respect, therefore, drove line managers into negative implementation behaviours not conducive for quality implementation of management-led voice mechanisms.

However, the culture of too much respect and the consequent employees' fear to voice was somehow neutralised by a system of patronage or, '*prebendal system*' (Joseph 1987; Diamond 1989; Newbury 2003; Pitcher et al. 2009) which was found in public utilities. For example, section 9.3.4 highlights that employees could bypass to senior managers to achieve their materialistic interests if they felt that their immediate supervisors or Line managers could not support them addressing those voice issues. Similarly, section 10.4.4 discusses how senior

managers prioritised self-gratification over provision of duty facilitation resources. The same could be said about the discussion in section 10.4.1 relating to line managers in a breadwinner role in which employees brought to line managers broader personal issues to line managers for support beyond what could feasibly be accommodated by the organisations. These materialistic motives cement the idea advanced in chapter 5 that the Malawi national context reflects an African country which has a hybrid system founded on a postcolonial, neoliberal and cultural context. In this system, some employees could freely speak to line managers or even directly to senior managers in reciprocal exchange for advancing their personal interests such as trainings, trips or grade change. This also reflects the catching up thesis principle highlighted in chapter 4 that public sector actors in Africa are usually preoccupied with achieving personal gain or dealing with their personal problems at the neglect of organisational goals (Montgomery 1987; Kuada 2006). The challenge, however, was that in this patronage system in which employees had direct voice line to senior managers, line managers were left without motivation to implement voice mechanisms with quality because they felt not being empowered. Even if, in some cases, line managers claimed that extraction of personal gains motivated them into quality implementation, no strong evidence was found to support that there was voice quality in the presence of this lack of empowerment. Materialistically, therefore, the patronage system influenced senior managers into being co-implementers with line managers of the management-led voice mechanisms which could not lead into voice quality.

Another aspect of the materialistic nature of the Malawi national context relates to senior managers' need to safeguard personal interests. Senior managers' prioritisation of self-gratification over their duty to facilitate line managers' access to resources demonstrates materialistic orientation of public sector actors in the African context. In maintaining relations with central government for personal gain, senior managers also made expenditures which sacrificed business goals and deprived line managers of resources for voice facilitation in line with the catching up thesis (Montgomery 1987; Kuada 2006; William & Yecalo-Tecle 2020). These examples illustrate that senior managers' materialistic interests acted as constraints to line managers' accessibility to voice facilitation trainings and resources for practicing grievance procedure. It is, therefore, of no surprise that chapter 6 highlights that the Malawi public utility organisations are 'under financial duress' (World Bank, 2021), pointing to the resource constraints discussed in section 10.1.2. (Ibid.)

This section, thus, joins other integrative studies (for example, Nechanska et al. 2020;5; Huang

et al. 2023;2) in illustrating how the interplay of multiple layers of context shapes how HRM implementation can facilitate employee voice. The argument is that line managers' practice of adaptability roles and the involvement in implementation of senior managers can be attributed to the interplay of factors in the organisational, public sector and Malawi national cultural and institutional context.

## **11.6.Theoretical contributions**

This thesis contributes in several ways to building theory within the employee voice and human resource management literatures. The thesis contributes to the understanding of the nature of employee voice mechanisms and HRM implementation in non-western contexts, and specifically the African public sector context. Three main areas of contribution are summarised, in turn, below: expanding understanding of employee voice mechanisms in the public sector context through considering institutional and non-western contexts, HRM implementation in the public sector and HRM implementation in a non-western context.

### **11.6.1. Employee voice mechanisms in a non-western public sector context**

The thesis extends understanding of the nature and quality of voice mechanisms in the non-western public sector. Chapter 3 highlighted that there is conflicting evidence on the nature and efficacy of the voice mechanisms that exist in the public sector organisations. On the one hand, some studies (Brown 2004; Gennard & Judge 2005; Kersley et al., 2006; Knies and Leisink 2018; Knies et al., 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2024) suggest that with the existence of the formalised, routine and bureaucratic structures, the public sector context is suitable for collective voice mechanisms and that these are also the mechanisms that are adopted given that individualised voice mechanisms are regarded as being more suitable to the flexible structures of the private sector. On the other hand, other studies (Beaumont 1995; Winchester & Bach, 1999, Farnham 2002; Kersley et al., 2006; Dundon & Gollan 2007; Kochan et al. 2019; Avgar et al. 2020) suggest that employee-led or indirect voice forms are in decline in most public sector organisations, with a shift towards management-led voice forms. These scholars mostly cite the emergence of NPM reforms which led to the infiltration of the private sector ideals into the public sector decline of collective voice practices. There is also another group of scholars (Kalleberg et al., 2006; Hall et al. 2010; Bennet, 2010; Barnes & Macmillan 2015; Huang et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2024) who argue from the mutual gains agenda that employee voice opportunities are adopted in public sector organizations through both employer-initiated or

employee-initiated voice mechanisms.

With respect to the above conflicting literature, the thesis extends understanding that in the non-western public sector organisations, employee voice mechanisms are adopted on management terms and not on employee terms. While the adoption of management-led voice mechanisms contrasts the bureaucratic features of the public sector context, it aligns, as discussed in section 11.3, with the institutional, cultural and postcolonial features of the non-western national context such as authority consolidation and patrimonialism. These contextual features, as discussed in section 11.4, not only drove the adoption of voice mechanisms but also employees' decision to utilise them. In fact, the thesis argues that with non-western contextual features such as human philosophy, risk avoidance and rule-obsession, employees could not utilise the adopted management-led voice mechanisms to voice their issues. As suggested by other scholars (see, Satterstrom et al.,2021; Jing et al.,2023; Jung et al.,2024), employees were driven to build a strong and collective vertical voice that can easily be acted upon by those in higher positions to have their remedial motives attained. Hence, they were utilising the collective and employee-led voice mechanisms instead. The thesis, in short, contributes to the literature on the nature and quality of voice mechanisms in a non-western public sector context by showing that the adoption of management-led voice mechanisms and the decisions by employees to utilise them are shaped by institutional and cultural postcolonial features of the non-western national context

### **11.6.2. Implementation of voice-related HRM practices in the public sector**

Chapter 3 highlighted that the public sector context presents features which have not traditionally allowed the involvement of line managers in HRM implementation except when NPM reforms were introduced. Despite challenges with the acceptability of the role of line managers in HRM implementation, little research has been undertaken on how the role of line managers in voice facilitation thrives in such centralised, bureaucratic, and rule-based structures of the public sector. More evidence on the role of line managers in employee voice facilitation is drawn from the private sector (Bennet, 2010; Brunetto & Beattie, 2019; Kim & Cho, 2024). The thesis, therefore, makes an important theoretical contribution relating to the role of line managers in implementing voice-related HRM practices in the public sector. This contribution can be understood in two ways namely, the role of line managers in voice

facilitation and the role of senior managers in voice facilitation. These are discussed below.

### **11.6.2.1. The role of line managers in voice facilitation**

The HRM implementation literature discussed in Chapter 2 places line managers at the centre of implementing HRM practices including those relating to voice. The devolution of HR thesis, also discussed in Chapter 2, suggests that in implementing HRM practices, line managers need to adhere to the norms or responsibilities which HR give them. In other words, they need to be guided by the values and priorities set by HR and the organisation in implementation. These delegated responsibilities were summed into roles of line managers as ‘conduits’ which emphasise compliance and consistency and turn line managers into ‘robotic conformists’ of voice-related HR practices (Harney & Yi Lee 2022;21). However, Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013;82) argues that sometimes line managers may ignore these conduit responsibilities and follow their own ways based on what they consider as important depending on the practices they are implementing. In this case, either line managers become ‘engineers of adaptability’ or translators of the introduced voice-related HR practices. To this discussion, the thesis provides evidence of line managers being engineers of adaptability and not as mere conduits or translators of voice-related HR practices. Line managers were, thus, adapting the devolved conduit roles to suit not only the demands from other actors such as senior managers but also the public sector and Malawian cultural context of the organisations within which they were working. Some scholars (for example, Wright & Nishii 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018; Alang et al. 2020; 567) call for a clear account of what line managers do in HRM implementation. Based on this idea, the thesis highlights the adaptability role which line managers practice instead of the conduit role (Floyd and Wooldrid 1992; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020) or translating role (Harney and Yi Lee 2022; Nishii & Paluch 2018). The thesis, however, does acknowledge that this emerges from the multi-layered levels of context as will be discussed in section 11.6.3.

### **11.6.2.2. The role of senior managers in voice facilitation**

HRM implementation literature (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Suhail et al 2024; Hewett et al, 2024) places line managers at the centre of HRM implementation as the primary implementers. Senior managers, in this set up, are regarded as either evaluator of how line managers implement HRM practices or enablers

of positive voice culture (Schein 1986; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). To this literature on the role of senior managers in HRM implementation, the thesis demonstrates that senior managers play an integral role in implementing the voice-related HRM practices. For example, in the first stage of voice facilitation (debriefing sessions) established by the findings, senior managers appeared to have a very strong influence on how line managers could undertake their roles in the other three stages of voice facilitation (Chapter 9). Senior managers also appeared to take up an influential role as enablers of positive voice culture (Chapter 8). Through these findings, the thesis challenges the HRM implementation literature which limit senior managers to either evaluators of HRM implementation or enablers of positive voice culture, arguing that senior managers can be regarded, as well, as primary implementers of voice-related HRM practices. However, the thesis does acknowledge that this could be a contextual issue in HRM implementation which is another area of contribution elaborated in section 11.6.3.

### **11.6.3. Multi-level contextual approach to HRM implementation**

When HRM practices including those on employee voice are not implemented as intended, the blame has often been individualised towards a specific role: line managers (William and Yecalo-Tecle 2020). The OB literature on employee voice has mostly offered individualistic and psychologised interpretations of line managers' behaviours in implementing the HR practices such as those on employee voice (Leat 2007; Morrison 2011; Nechanska et al. 2020). As discussed in the first Chapter of this thesis, this narrows down the influence of the organisational, sectoral and national contextual features on line managers' HRM implementation responsibilities (Nechanska et al. 2020). Chapter 2 further highlights that many scholars (see Nechanska et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2023) have suggested that to understand employee voice facilitation, there is need to consider the wider multi-layered contextual features within which that facilitation takes place. This is where the uniqueness of the thesis lies, in deepening the theorisation of the HRM implementation process through attaching the multiple levels of context in the explanation. The thesis does this through illustrating how multiple layers of the context-organisational, public sector and national context- can collectively influence line managers' implementation of the voice related HRM practices. In the immediate organisational context, the thesis (see section 10.2), while applying the AMO model on line managers, illustrates how line managers' lack of adequate HR support, resources, voice facilitation trainings, incentives, empowerment and policy support shaped the practice of

adaptability roles. At the wider public sector and national level, the thesis (see section 11.5) also discusses how the structural, cultural and material features shaped line managers' practice of adaptability roles. In this way, the thesis diverts from psychologising the interpretation of line managers' behaviours in voice facilitation as has been the case in the mainstream employee voice literature (see Chapter 2).

The unique contribution of the thesis, therefore, is to integrate these three layers of context - organisational, public sector and national - and illustrate how they shape line managers' implementation of the voice-related HR practices. Against the background of western-based literature on how national context influences line managers' HRM implementation, another value of the thesis is to integrate different features of a non-western national context and illustrate how they can uniquely shape line manager implementation of voice-related HR practices different from the western context (Wilkinson et al. 2020; McKearney et al. 2023). The thesis, in this way, contributes towards challenging HRM's universality of context arguments through suggesting consideration of a multi-level national context within which HRM practices are adopted and implemented.

### **11.7.Empirical contribution to understanding employee voice in non-Western contexts**

The first level of the thesis' empirical contribution relates to the step-by-step processes or stages which line managers go through in the implementation of HRM practices. HRM implementation literature (Garner 2013; Van Mierlo et al. 2018; Townsend & Mowbray 2020) largely places line managers at the centre of the implementation process of HRM practices through what is characterised as a devolution process. Emphasis has largely been on the antecedents (constraints or enablers) of line managers' implementation of the HRM practices through line managers' desire, capacity and opportunities, often with reference to the Ability, Motivation, Opportunity (AMO) model (Mowbray et al., 2021). HRM implementation literature (for example, Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Hewett, 2024) also focuses on the role of different actors such as HR, line managers, senior managers and employees in HRM implementation. As discussed in section 2.3.3. HRM implementation Literature has further looked at the general roles which line managers undertake in implementing HR practices such as conduit, translator and adaptability roles. Much as the above and many other HRM implementation areas have been given attention, very little, if any, studies have given attention

to the step-by-step processes or stages which line managers go through in the implementation of HRM practices. Even the HRM implementation framework in Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) study does not zoom into the details of what line managers do in the third stage of HRM implementation which is claimed as the stage at which line managers' actual implementation takes place. In this stage, the framework merely provides an account of the decisions which line managers undertake in implementation. The thesis, therefore, offers a unique contribution by uncovering the step-by-step process which line managers go through in implementing HRM practices relating to employee voice. Section 9.2.1 illustrated the four stages of voice facilitation - debriefing sessions, reviewing workplans, subordinates' interface and addressing subordinates' issues - which give a detailed account of what line managers do when facilitating employee voice. These stages of voice facilitation not only contribute to the new understanding of the step-by-step process of how line managers implement HRM practices but also the stages within which employee voice is facilitated in public sector organisations.

Another level of empirical contribution of the thesis relates to the impact of non-Westernised administrative experiences impact on dimensions that are used in mainly Western centric approaches. Universal approaches and generalising assumptions in HRM research have largely been made based on models developed and tested in mostly western contexts (Yanguas & Bukenya 2015; Bennett 2020). A good example is the roles of actors in voice facilitation as discussed in sections 11.4 and 11.6.2. Applying models based on western contexts reveals that line managers are the sole primary implementers of the voice related HRM practices (see, Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Chillas & Marks 2020; Townsend & Mowbray 2020; Suhail et al 2024; Hewett et al, 2024). Even though the current study was derived partially from similar western-centric models, the findings suggest that senior managers join line managers as being the primary implementers of the voice-related HRM practices. Section 11.5, for example, suggests that senior managers were turned into primary implementers of voice related HRM practices because of two factors namely, cultural values such as the culture of too much respect which influenced line managers' regard for senior managers' direction as a golden rule as well as materialistic reasons which included the postcolonial patronage system in which employees had a direct line to senior managers and demotivated line managers from voice facilitation. It was also discussed in section 11.5 that the adaptability roles of line managers were driven by the cultural and materialistic factors.

## **11.8.Methodological contribution**

Apart from illustrating the influence of non-Westernised administrative experiences, another thesis' contribution relates to the use of multiple sources of data. Research on the broader HRM implementation has largely been dominated by functionalist methodological approaches (Brewster 1999; Wijesinghe 2011; Bonache & Festing 2020). While this functionalist HRM voice research has played an important role in examining deductive research areas such as on employees' perceptions of voice (for example, Kochan et al. 2019), it may be limited to pick up on what Wåhlin-Jacobsen (2020;33-34) regards as '*the finer details*' relating to how line managers, who happen to be at the center of implementation, '*respond to voice in practice*'. By using the multiple sources of data (i.e., interviews, the questerview responses, and organisational documents), the thesis provides the finer details of HRM implementation by line managers. In fact, the application of the 'questerview' method is unique and rare to HRM research. It proved key to understanding the intending channels of voice and roles of line managers as discussed in sections 8.2.3 and 8.3, respectively. The thesis also attempted to include all the key managerial stakeholders that are involved in HRM implementation and HRM devolution processes, namely, line managers, senior managers and HR. This approach is synonymous to a multiple constituency approach (Tsui,1990) which is good for obtaining multiple perspectives from key stakeholders involved in actual processes, such as HRM implementation, who can then provide a clear account of how that process is undertaken.

## **11.9. Study limitations and areas for future research**

This thesis discusses the factors which influence line managers' role in facilitating high quality voice-related HRM practices within an organisational and national context – the African public sector. The thesis employs a multi-level conceptualisation of how employee voice is offered through management-led HRM practices, and included layers of context (i.e., the immediate organisational context, public sector context and the wider national context) in explaining line managers' implementation behaviours demonstrated through the practice of the adaptability roles. The use of the Malawi public sector context was a unique empirical contribution which informed this multi-layered contextualisation of voice-related HRM practice and the findings have relevance for other African and non-western contexts.

The thesis focused on how management-led voice practices are implemented by line managers. Data was obtained from managerial staff who included line managers, senior managers and HR. Much as this thesis has demonstrated how complex the employee voice construct and

employment relationship in organisations are, researching employee voice from a unitary or managerial perspective in terms of relying on the perceptions of managerial staff as has been the case in the current study is limited in producing a deep understanding of the construct of employee voice and the employment relationship. In fact, the bigger limitation lies in ignoring insights from the critical literature that would have been drawn from wider sources than simply HRM and used in the framing and understanding of employee voice and how line managers support it in the public sector organisations. In terms of resource and time limitation, however, the unitary framing was a reasonable approach that has led into important contributions in terms of the nature and quality of voice related HRM practices in the public sector organisations, creating an account of line managers' HRM implementation roles and contributing a multi-level context for explaining line managers' behaviours in HRM implementation. For future studies, however, it would be interesting to integrate managerial approaches with pluralist perspectives through incorporating employees' perspectives in the research's methodological constructions. Many studies (Guest & Peccei, 1994; Gibb, 2001; Guest & Bos- Nehles, 2013) suggest the value of incorporating an employee's perspective since they are the most affected by HRM practices such as those relating to voice. Incorporating an employee's perspective would also have merit in understanding how remedial voice (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Pohler et al., 2020) which has been largely ignored in the mainstream HRM research can be managed and incorporated into organisational decision-making processes. Using the HRM attributions theory, many scholars (for example, Nishii et al. 2008; Hewett et al. 2018;87, Beijer et al. 2019:5, Alfes et al. 2020;6-7) also suggest that employees would normally make different attributions from those of managers regarding the goals of the HRM practices and how they are implemented. All this would suggest value in adding an employee perspective in understanding line managers' role in implementing voice practices in organisations.

Lastly, much as the thesis offers a novel contribution for understanding voice implementation practices in a non-western context, a public sector context and using a multi-level contextual approach to HRM implementation, the study is limited in terms of generalizability (Kumar 2014; Baxter & Jack 2008). Just like any other interpretive research, as also discussed in Chapter 7, the study does not allow the findings to be generalised to other contexts; rather, the aim was to look in detail at voice-related HRM implementation. The challenge, as discussed in Chapter 6, is further compounded by the fact that African countries are very disintegrated such that they may not always uniformly share similar attributes. However, the findings may still be relevant to country contexts or public sector organisations that share most of the attributes to

the cases used in this study. The findings may also be relevant to the organisations of the same size to the ones used in the study. The findings may further be relevant as a benchmark to future studies which are invited to develop further knowledge on the HRM implementation theory in a non-western context using a multi-level contextual framework. Utilising another African national context would add more weight to what the current study has done in isolating the national cultural and materialistic features of an African country and illustrating how they influence how line managers undertake HRM implementation. Isolating national features of other African countries would also have merit for hybrid management approaches (Kuada 2006) to understand the cross-national interaction of African cultural values and beliefs with those of other continents like Europe and Asia in shaping managerial approaches.

### **11.10. Implications for management practice**

The study demonstrates how HRM implementation is undertaken in financially constrained or vulnerable organisational settings (Prouska & Psychogios 2018). Such settings mean that managers do not have access to adequate resources not only to implement ideas which their subordinates have raised but also to undertake activities for allowing employees to speak (Alford et al. 2017). This was confirmed in the present study where with limited organisational resources, it was a challenge for line managers to be given resources or training to be able to implement the constituted voice mechanisms with quality as desired. This demanded greater level of prioritisation to ensure that line managers were given allocative facilities including resources and people management trainings. The materialistic orientation of actors in a developing and less affluent country organisational contexts like Malawi, therefore, creates unique conditions for HRM implementation, different from the relatively resource richer western contexts. If and how the other cultural features such as the respect, the breadwinner role and application of humanistic approach are impacting negatively on voice and in the management of employees would need further in-depth studies. But the study indicates that managing employees and implementing HRM in developing countries that are resource constraint and hence must prioritise to some extent materialistic values involves playing a difficult balance between resource constraints, on the one hand, and the materialistic as well as cultural values, on the other hand.

By defining the unique cultural, materialistic, and structural conditions for managing employees and implementing HRM in a non-western public sector context, the thesis also

contributes to the understanding of management approaches which multinational organisations adopt in developing countries sharing these cultural and materialistic values. This is what is advanced in, for example, the emerging hybrid African management approach (Kuada 2006). This approach emphasises the effect of cross-national interaction of African cultural values and beliefs with those of other continents like Europe and Asia in shaping managerial approaches (Kuada 2006). The drawback with this approach, however, is that it does not clearly define African cultural values and beliefs and how these reflect on managerial approaches, let alone how they sit with broader economic constraints.

The study also offers lessons that inform training for both line managers and senior managers. The thesis highlights that one challenge which makes line managers fail to practice conduit roles and, instead, perform adaptability roles, is lack of voice facilitation training. Among other things, line managers were not trained on people management which was found as a factor in denying an ear to subordinates' voice issues or just defending management instructions. This necessitates training related to management of employees to equip these line managers with skills on how they can not only manage their subordinates (Boice & Kleiner 1997) but also practice non-defensive listening and creating an environment where even overly critical voicers can express their issues (Detert & Burris, 2007). This training would also be suited for senior managers whose involvement in implementing voice mechanisms and influence on line managers appeared to contribute towards line managers' practice of adaptability responsibilities. This training can involve a mixture of both external and in-house blended learning programmes (Boice & Kleiner 1997; CIPD, 2012). The idea is to ensure that primary actors in the implementation of voice-related HRM practices are equipped with adequate skills for undertaking implementation. With employee voice being a multi-faceted construct, as discussed in Chapter 2, perhaps such management training would bear fruitful results if employees were also trained in areas such as communication skill building to address self-efficacy perceptions (Detert & Burris, 2007). This would not only create an environment in which line managers and senior managers create an open environment for employee voice but also enable employees to utilise this open environment to express any areas of concern.

### **11.11. Conclusion**

In the advent of western-centric and unitarized knowledge on HRM implementation and employee voice, the thesis, importantly, uses a non-western context - the African public sector - to illustrate the factors that shape line managers' implementation of voice-related HRM

practices. The thesis advances the understanding of the nature of voice mechanisms and HRM implementation in a non-western context through the adoption of a multi-level contextual approach. The thesis adds to methodological approaches in HRM research through applying a multi-layered conceptual framework, using multiple data sources and multiple stakeholders in HRM implementation. The thesis also contributes empirically through offering unique insights for managing employees in a non-western organisational context, offering lessons that could inform training for line managers and senior managers.

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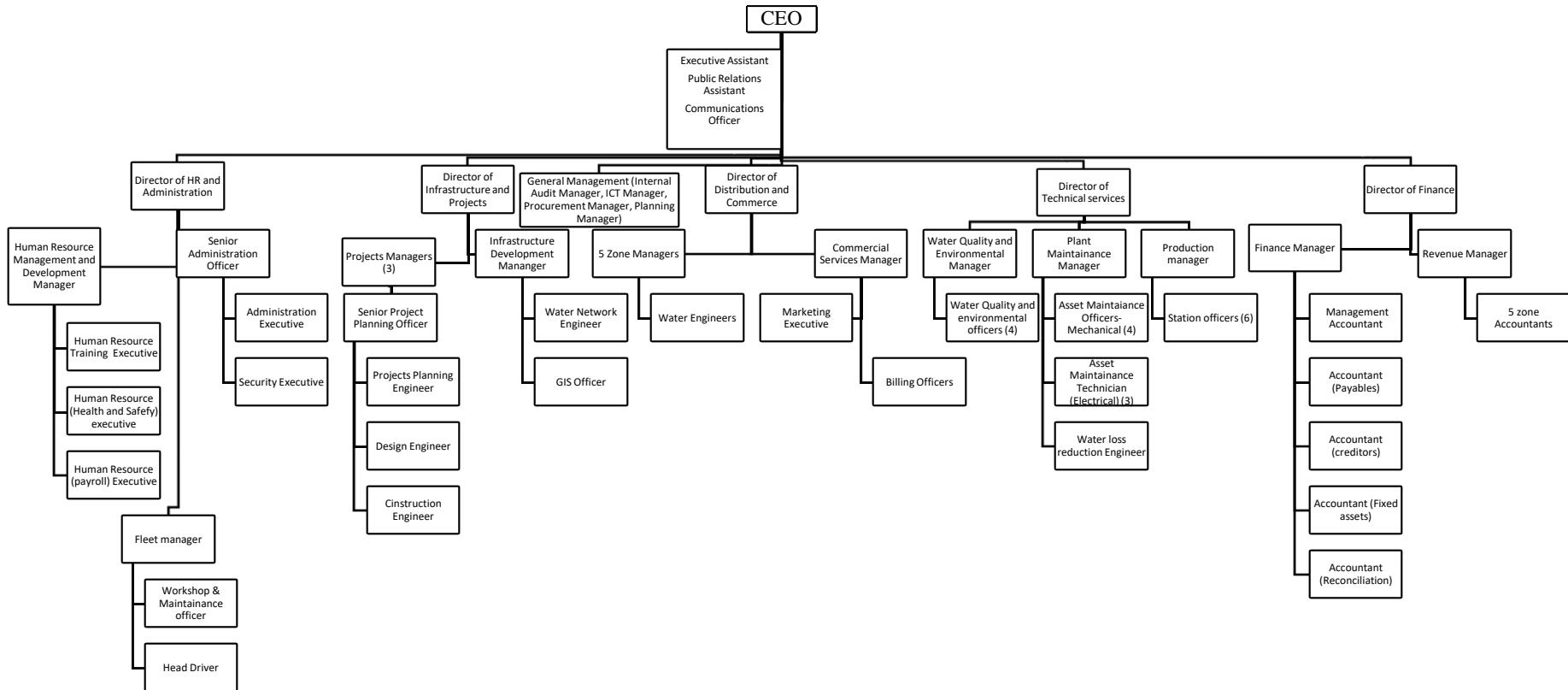
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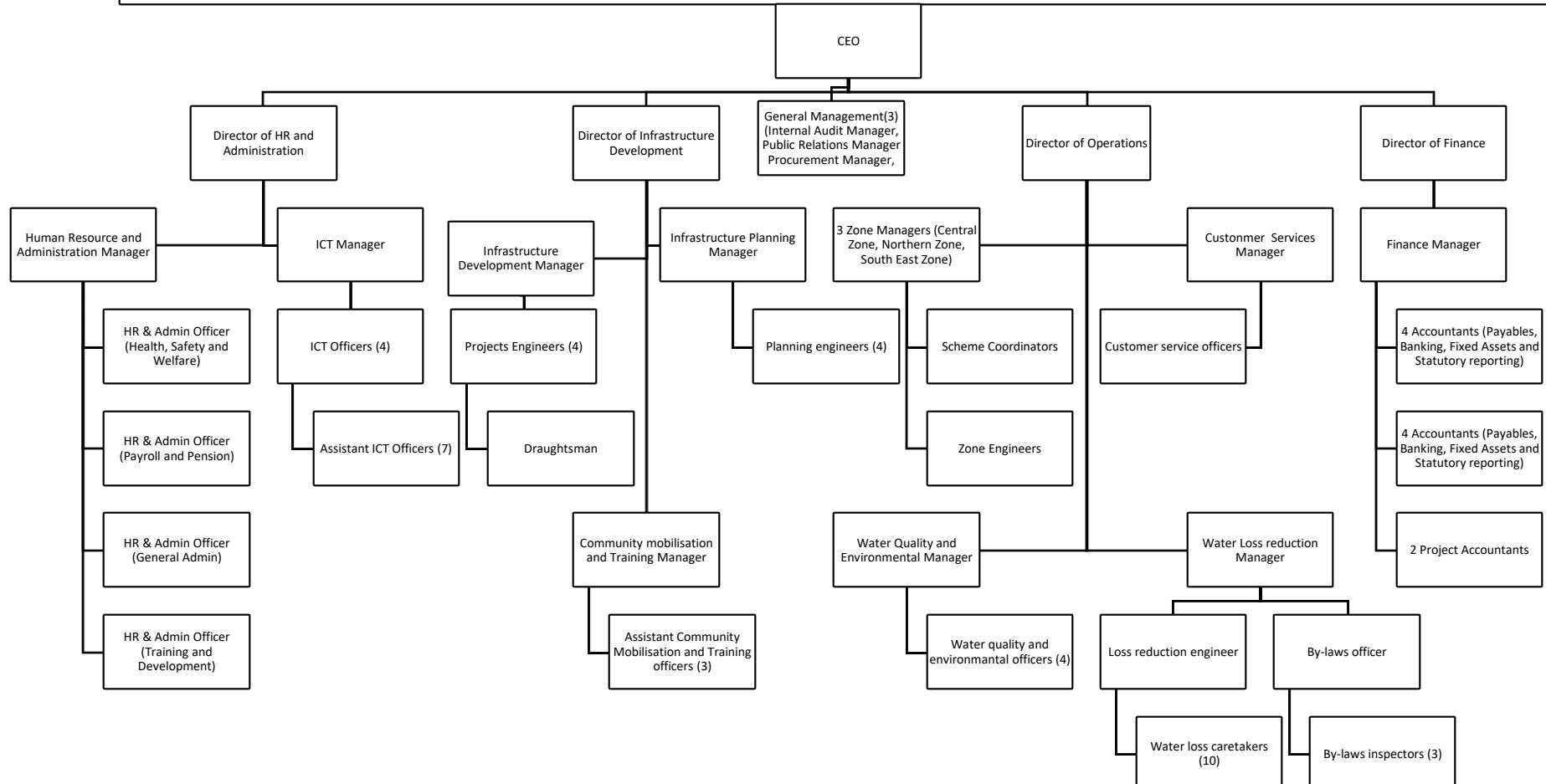
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## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX 1a: ORGANISATION STRUCTURE OF UTILITY 1**



## APPENDIX 1b: ORGANISATION STRUCTURE OF UTILITY 2



## **Appendix 1 Showing interview guide for first phase exploratory interviews**

### **QUESTIONS FOR TOP MANAGERS**

#### **Policies and Mechanisms for employee voice**

1. Does the organisation have any formal or informal policy (or policies) on employee voice? If yes, what are these policies and how do they contribute to the policy stance on employee voice?
2. What has motivated the organisation to put in place these policies on employee voice?
3. What would you regard as the main aims of the policy stance on employee voice in this organisation?
4. What influence do you think the central government, or its actors have on the design and implementation of these policies?
5. What ways has the organisation put in place through which employees can have a say on organisational processes or issues? What policies support these ways of voice?
6. What are some of the organisational issues where employees are encouraged to have a say on?
7. Does the organisation have preference towards certain ways of employee voice over others? If yes, what are the preferred ways and why are those mechanisms preferred over others?
8. In general, how effective do you think these policies and forms of voice have been at ensuring that employees have voice at work?

#### **Support towards section heads in actualising voice policies**

1. What role section heads play in ensuring that policies on voice are effectively implemented to ensure that there are voice opportunities for employees?
2. What role do section heads play in ensuring that employees utilise the mechanisms of voice that exist to have a say in the decision-making processes?
3. In what ways do you create a good environment for section heads to be able to support the opportunities for employee voice?
4. In what ways do you equip section heads with the ability to be able to support the opportunities for employee voice?
5. In general, in what ways would you say these section heads have been able to effectively implement the voice policies and ensure that employees utilise the voice forms that exist?

## **QUESTIONS TO HR MANAGERS**

### **Policies and Mechanisms for employee voice**

1. Does the organisation have any formal or informal policy (or policies) on employee voice? If yes, what are these policies and how do they contribute to the policy stance on employee voice?
2. What ways has the organisation put in place through which employees can have a say on organisational processes or issues?
3. What are some of the organisational issues where employees are encouraged to have a say?
4. Does the organisation have preference towards certain ways of employee voice over others? If yes, what are the preferred mechanisms and why are those ways preferred over others?
5. Do the employees appear to prefer other ways of voice over others? If yes, what are the forms of mechanisms which employees mostly utilise?
6. How do you ensure that employees are aware of the organisational ways for voice and ensure that they are utilising them?
7. In general, how effective do you think these ways of voice have been at ensuring that employees have voice at work?

### **Actualisation of voice policies**

1. What role do you play in ensuring that policies on voice are effectively implemented to ensure that there are voice opportunities for employees?
2. What role do you play to ensure that employees utilise the ways of voice that exist to have a say in the decision-making processes?
3. In what ways do you think the organisation equips you with the adequate knowledge on the existing policies and forms of voice and adequate skills to be able to implement these policies on voice and support employees' utilisation of the different forms of voice?
4. In what ways do you think the organisational management has supported or not supported you in your efforts aimed at incorporating employee voice in the decision-making processes?
5. In what ways are you able to either support or inhibit the utilisation of employees of the different forms of voice to ensure that they have voice at work?
6. What motivates you to support the voice opportunities for employees?

7. What motivates you to inhibit the voice opportunities for employees?

## **QUESTIONS TO LINE MANAGERS**

### **Policies and Mechanisms for employee voice**

1. Are you aware of any policies that exist in the organisation on employee voice? If yes, what are these policies and what are their aims in ensuring that employees have a say in the decision-making processes of the organisation?
2. Are you aware of the mechanisms which the organisation has put in place through which employees can have a say on organisational processes or issues? If yes, what are these ways and how do they help employees to be able to express their views on organisational issues?
3. What are some of the organisational issues where employees are encouraged to have a say?
4. Does the organisation or its leaders have preference towards certain ways of employee voice over others? If yes, what are the preferred mechanisms and why are those ways preferred over others?
5. Do the employees appear to prefer other ways of voice over others? If yes, what are the forms of ways which employees mostly utilise?
6. Do you play any role in ensuring that your subordinates are aware of the organisational ways for voice and ensure that they are utilising them? If yes, in what ways would you say you have been successful in this role?

### **Actualisation of voice policies**

1. What role do you play in ensuring that policies on voice are effectively implemented to ensure that there are voice opportunities for employees?
2. What role do you play to ensure that employees utilise the ways of voice that exist to have a say in the decision-making processes?
3. In what ways do you think the organisation equips you with the adequate knowledge on the existing policies and forms of voice and adequate skills to be able to implement these policies on voice and support employees' utilisation of the different forms of voice?
4. In what ways do you think the organisational management has supported or not supported you in your efforts aimed at incorporating employee voice in the decision-making processes?

5. In what ways have you been able to either support or inhibit the utilisation of employees of the different forms of voice to ensure that they have voice at work?
6. What motivates you to support the voice opportunities for employees?
7. What motivates you to inhibit the voice opportunities for employees?

## **Appendix 2 Second phase exploratory interviews topic guide**

### **1. QUESTIONS FOR SENIOR MANAGERS**

#### **Background/Introduction**

- How long have you worked as a senior manager? How long in the public sector?
- Have you worked outside the public sector before? If yes, where? And in what capacity?  
*(Just in case they have another sector to compare in structure to public)*
- Was there a specific reason for you to work in this job? (*Structural features of the public sector e.g. political influence, resource availability & bureaucracy?*)
- Some people say that people choose to work in the public sector for a specific reason. What do you think? (*Could I get the materialistic aspects of the public sector, gains from their position, their willingness to protect them*)

#### **Employee voice in public sector**

##### **Employee voice**

- What is employee voice to you? (*How do they conceptualise voice, translate and sum up what they say and then focus on voice channels/mechanisms?*)

##### **Voice Mechanisms/channels and their usage by employees**

- How does the organisation ensure that employees speak up when they have issues/concerns? Any changes in the past one year? (*Exploring the intended voice mechanisms/channels*)
- When employees have an issue they want to raise, who do they first contact? What do you think about these contacts (*influence of Individual Vs collective (e.g unions) voice channels*)
- What kind of issues have you seen employees raising in the past one year? Where do they raise them? (*Understanding the efficacy of the intended voice channels*)

##### **Processes**

- Tell me the process that is followed to address the issues that employees raise starting from when they register the issue to their first contact (*Prompts: Differences in approaching different issues? Criteria for deciding how to approach different issues differently?*) (*Managing employee voice and effect of African public sector structural factors e.g. resource availability, political influence, wisdom of seniors, individual vs group voice/Individual vs collective voice?*)

### **Expectations and managing differences in employee voicing.**

- Are there differences among employees in terms of speaking up when they have issues? If yes, what do you think are the causes of these differences? How do you manage these differences? (***Does HR expect different employees to voice differently?***)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received positive feedback? If yes, if yes, what was (were) the issue (s)? What did your subordinates suggest? What was your reaction? (supportive voice? - expressing support for procedure, verbal defence; constructive voice? Suggesting improvements, proposing new ideas?)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received negative feedback? If yes, what was (were) the issue (s)? How did you manage the situation? (defensive voice? -vocally opposing changes even if necessary; destructive voice? Bad-mouthing the organisation's policies or objectives, making overly critical comments)

### **To sum up:**

- Who do you think should have the ultimate responsibility for managing employee voice in your organisation? Why do you think so? (***Who do they trust to manage voice?***)

### **Policy framework for employee voice**

- In the interview last year, you mentioned policies such as communication policy and Open-door policy as constituting the policy framework for employee voice in this organisation. Have there been any policy changes in the past one year on employee voice? If yes what are the changes? (***Understanding intended HRM policy on voice***)
- Can you tell me what the policies say about employee voice? Any changes in the past one year? (Prompts: policy guide on; methods for speaking up? procedures for addressing employee voices?) (***Understanding intended HRM policy on voice***)
- Who do the policies charge with the responsibility for managing employee voice? (Involvement of line managers?) Do those charged with the responsibility understand the policy? If yes, any examples? If not, why is that so? Do they embrace the responsibility? If yes, how do they do that? If not, why is that so? (***Exploring the quality of intended HRM policy on voice***)
- Do trade unions play a role in supporting employee voice? Are there any policies?

### **Line managers' involvement in managing employee voice.**

- What does the work of section heads involve? How much relates to managing employees? How much relates to managing employee voice? (*Line manager role in HRM duties and voice roles*)

### **Process**

- Can you tell me a recent instance where your section heads informed you of issues raised by employees? What were the issues about? How did they tell you they obtained the issues from employees? When you received the issues, how have you addressed them? What factors influenced how you addressed them? What is your opinion about how line managers obtain issues from employees and handle them? (*Explores how line managers execute their roles in promoting voice and how senior managers support them and how other public sector factors (e.g. Political influence/reliance on central gvt?) influence the process*)
- Are there rules and procedures that guide how section heads go about obtaining issues from employees and handling them? If yes, what are these rules? In what policy or policies? Are these rules helpful? What are your views about how sectional heads follow them? (*Effect of the design and quality of HRM policy on execution of LM's voice roles. Also, the effect of bureaucracy on how LM's execute their rules*)

### **Resources**

- To your knowledge, do you give support to section heads for managing employee voice? If yes, what kind of support do you provide to them? Any changes in the past one year? If not, what are the challenges? (*prompt: time, training, ownership, other incentives*)

## **2. QUESTIONS FOR HR MANAGERS**

### **Background/Introduction**

- How long have you worked as an HR manager? How long in the public sector?
- Have you worked outside the public sector before? If yes, where? And in what capacity?  
**(Just in case they have another sector to compare in structure to public)**
- Was there a specific reason for you to work in HR? **(Structural features of the public sector e.g. political influence, resource availability & bureaucracy?)**
- Some people say that people choose to work in the public sector for a specific reason. What do you think? **(Could I get the materialistic aspects of the public sector, gains from their position, their willingness to protect them)**

### **Employee voice in public sector**

#### **Employee voice**

- What is employee voice to you? **(How do they conceptualise voice, translate and sum up what they say and then focus on voice channels/mechanisms?)**

#### **Voice Mechanisms/channels and their usage by employees**

- What HR approaches do you have in place to ensure that employees speak up when they have issues/concerns? **(Exploring the intended voice mechanisms/channels)**
- When employees have an issue which they want to raise, who do they first contact? What do you think about these contacts **(influence of Individual Vs collective (e.g. unions) voice channels)**
- What kind of issues have you seen employees raising in the past one year? Where do they raise them? **(Understanding the efficacy of the intended voice channels)**

#### **Processes**

- If employees raise an issue, what would you do to address it? **(Prompts: Do you have an formal/ informal procedure? Differences in approaching different issues? Criteria for deciding how to approach different issues differently?) (Managing employee voice and effect of African public sector structural factors e.g resource availability, political influence, wisdom of seniors, individual vs group voice/Individual vs collective voice?)**

### **Expectations and managing differences in employee voicing.**

- Are there differences among employees in terms of speaking up when they have issues? If yes, what do you think are the causes of these differences? How do you manage these differences? (*Does HR expect different employees to voice differently?*)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received positive feedback? If yes, what was (were) the issue (s) about? What did your subordinates suggest? What was your reaction? (supportive voice? -expressing support for procedure, verbal defence; constructive voice? Suggesting improvements, proposing new ideas?)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received negative feedback? If yes, what was (were) the issue (s)? How did you manage the situation? (defensive voice? -vocally opposing changes even if necessary; destructive voice? Bad-mouthing the organisation's policies or objectives, making overly critical comments)

### **To sum up:**

- Who do you think should have the ultimate responsibility for managing employee voice in your organisation? Why do you think so? (*Who does HR trust to manage voice?*)

### **Policy framework for employee voice**

- In the interview last year, you mentioned policies such as communication policy and Open-door policy as constituting the policy framework for employee voice in this organisation. Have there been any policy changes in the past one year on employee voice? If yes what are the changes? (*Understanding intended HRM policy on voice*)
- Can you tell me what the policies say about employee voice? Any changes in the past one year? (Prompts: policy guide on; methods for speaking up? procedures for addressing employee voices?) (*Understanding intended HRM policy on voice*)
- Who do the policies charge with the responsibility for managing employee voice? (Involvement of line managers?) Do those charged with the responsibility understand the policy? If yes, any examples? If not, why is that so? Do they embrace the responsibility? If yes, how do they do that? If not, why is that so? (*Exploring the quality of intended HRM policy on voice*)
- Do trade unions play a role in supporting employee voice? Are there any policies?

## **Line managers' involvement in managing employee voice**

- What does the work of section heads involve? How much relates to managing employees? How much relates to managing employee voice? (*Prompts: Are there responsibilities relating to managing employee voice?*) (**Line managers in HRM and voice roles**)

### **Process**

- Can you tell me a recent instance where your section heads informed you of issues raised by employees? What were the issues about? How did they tell you they obtained the issues from employees? When you received the issues, how have you addressed them? What factors influenced how you addressed them? What is your opinion about how line managers obtain issues from employees and handle them? (**Explores how line managers execute their roles in promoting voice and how HR support them and how other public sector factors (e.g. Political influence/reliance on central gvt?) influence the process**)
- Are there rules and procedures that guide how section heads go about obtaining issues from employees and handling them? If yes, what are these rules? In what policy or policies? Are these rules helpful? What are your views about how sectional heads follow them? (**Effect of the design and quality of HRM policy on execution of LM's voice roles. Also the effect of bureaucracy on how LM's execute their rules**)

### **Resources**

- To your knowledge, do you give support to section heads for managing employees? If yes, what kind of support do you provide to them? Any changes in the past one year? If not, what are the challenges? (*prompt: time, training, ownership, other incentives?*)

### **3. QUESTIONS FOR LINE MANAGERS**

#### **Background/Introduction**

- Tell me about yourself? (where and who they grew up with? Education level?, Family background, religious beliefs)
- How long have you worked in your current position? How long in this organisation? How long in the public sector?
- Have you worked outside the public sector before? If yes, where? And in what capacity? **(Just in case they have another sector to compare in structure to public)**
- Was there a specific reason for you to work in this job? **(Structural features of the public sector e.g. political influence, resource availability & bureaucracy?)**
- Some people say that people choose to work in the public sector for a specific reason. What do you think? **(Could I get the materialistic aspects of the public sector, gains from their position, their willingness to protect them)**

#### **Employee voice in public sector**

##### **Employee voice**

- What is employee voice to you? **(How do line managers conceptualise voice, translate and sum up what they say and then focus on voice channels/mechanisms?)**

##### **Voice Mechanisms/channels and their usage by employees**

- What do you do to ensure that your subordinates speak up when they have issues/concerns? Any changes to your approach(es) in the past one year? **(Exploring the actual voice mechanisms/channels)**
- When your subordinates have an issue they want to raise, who do you see them first contacting? **(Still on line managers' expectations of actual voice mechanisms/channels)**
- What kind of issues have you experienced your subordinates raising in the past one year? Where do they raise them? **(Understanding the efficacy of the intended voice mechanisms, differences in the influence of individual vs collective voice channels?)**

##### **Processes**

- Tell me the process that you normally follow to address issues that have been raised by your subordinates **(Prompts: Differences in approaching different issues? Criteria for deciding how to approach different issues differently?) (Getting into managing employee voice and effect of African public sector structural factors e.g resource**

*availability, political influence, wisdom of seniors, individual vs group voice/Individual vs collective voice?)*

### **Expectations and managing differences in voicing among employees.**

- Are there differences among employees in terms of speaking up when they have issues? If yes, what do you think are the causes of these differences? How do you manage these differences? (*Does HR expect different employees to voice differently?*)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received positive feedback? If yes, what was (were) the issue (s)? What did your subordinates suggest? What was your reaction? (**Prompts**; supportive voice?-expressing support for procedure, verbal defence; constructive voice? Suggesting improvements, proposing new ideas?)
- Would you recall an instance when you were communicating work procedure(s) or change(s) and you received negative feedback? If yes, what was (were) the issue (s)? How did your subordinates respond to the issue? Why do you think they responded in this way? How did you handle the situation? (**Prompts**; defensive voice?-vocally opposing changes even if necessary; destructive voice? Bad-mouthing the organisation's policies or objectives, making overly critical comments)

### **To sum up:**

- Who do you think should have the ultimate responsibility for facilitating employee voice in your organisation? Why do you think so? (*Who do line managers themselves think should facilitate voice?*)

### **Line manager understanding of HRM policy on employee voice**

- In the interview last year, you mentioned policies such as communication policy and Open-door policy as constituting the policy framework for employee voice in this organisation. Are you aware of any policy changes in the past one year on employee voice? If yes what are the changes? (*Understanding actual HRM policy on voice*)
- Can you tell me what the policies say about employee voice? Any changes in the past one year? (Prompts: policy guide on; methods for speaking up? procedures for addressing employee voices?) (*Understanding actual HRM policy on voice*)
- Who do the policies charge with the responsibility for managing employee voice? (Involvement of line managers?) Do those charged with the responsibility understand

the policy? If yes, any examples? If not, why is that so? Do they embrace the responsibility? If yes, how do they do that? If not, why is that so? (**If line managers know of their responsibility for voice in policy and if they embrace it**)

- How would you describe your relation to trade unions? Are there any policies?

### **Line managers' involvement in HRM and employee voice**

#### **What line managers do in HRM and voice**

- What goals are you currently seeking to achieve in your section? Any changes in the past one year (**To understand their pressure of work/workload**)
- Are you aware of what HR expects you to do in terms of managing employees? If no, why? If yes, what are you expected to do? How do these expectations balance with your other responsibilities as line managers?
- In the previous interview, you highlighted that your role in promoting employee voice involves, among others, promoting the usage and raising awareness of existing voice policies through ways such as peer to peer education, appraisal meetings, formal and informal meetings and investigation of compliance to voice policies. Have there been changes in terms of what you do to ensure that your subordinates speak up in the past one year?

#### **Process**

- If I followed you through a typical day as a section head, what would I see you doing? Any changes in the past one year (**Probes: how much of what they do relates to managing employees? How much relates to managing employee voice? Any challenges?) (To understand their pressure of work/workload, how many people they deal with, their involvement in HRM and voice work**)
- Are there rules and procedures that guide how your subordinates can speak up and how you can handle their issues? If yes, what are these rules? In what policy or policies? Are they helpful to your efforts of ensuring that your subordinates speak up? (**Effect of the design and quality of HRM policy on execution of LM's voice roles. Also the effect of bureaucracy on how LM's execute their rules**)

#### **Resources**

- To your knowledge, do you feel you receive support for managing employees? (**Prompt: HR support? Time, training, ownership and other incentives**) If no, what

are the challenges? If yes, what kind of support do you receive? who gives you the support? Is it adequate? Anything you would have liked to be provided?

- Do you feel you have the resources (*prompt: time, training, ownership, other incentives?*) to support employee voice? If no, what are the challenges? If yes, what resources do you have? Who provides these resources to you? Are they adequate?

### **General questions**

- Tell me what motivates you the most to go an extra mile in the work that you do? (**Exploring materialistic features of the African public sector**)
- Think about when you have a difficult work issue you want to decide. Where do you go to seek advice? Whose advice do you regard highly? Why do you highly regard their advice and not the advice from the others? (**Exploring cultural dimension e.g belief in wisdom of seniors**)

### **Appendix 3 Consent form**

#### **Consent Form Department of Work, Employment and Organisation**

##### **Title of the study: An exploration of employee voice in Malawi's public utilities**

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of personal information that identifies me and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio and/or video recorded as part of the project Yes /No

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

## **Appendix 4 Participant information sheet**



### **Participant Information Sheet (HR Managers)**

### **Department of Work, Employment and Organisation**

#### **Title of the study**

*Line managers' role in the effective implementation of voice-related HRM practices in public sector contexts. The case of public utilities in Malawi.*

#### **Introduction**

*My name is Franklin Banda. I am a PhD student in the department of Work, Employment and Organisation at Strathclyde University. Apart from being a PhD student at Strathclyde, I also have the experience of working with one of the Malawi public utilities. As part of my doctoral studies in Work, Employment and Organisation, I am carrying out research that is aimed at evaluating how well managers in the Malawi public utilities support employees to have voice at work.*

#### **What is the purpose of this investigation?**

*The main purpose of the research is to explore employee voice in Malawi's public utilities. Particularly, the research project evaluates how the organisational policy framework and managerial support creates (or fails to create) opportunities for employee voice.*

#### **Do you have to take part?**

*No, you do not need to take part in the research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to take part, you can withdraw at any point*

#### **What will you do in the project?**

*Your participation will involve taking part in an interview with me. The interview should last approximately 60 mins. If you agree to take part, I will contact you within the next couple of weeks and we can arrange a time and place that suits best. For the purposes of accuracy, and with your agreement, I will record the interview, but I am equally happy just to take detailed notes if you'd prefer*

#### **Why have you been invited to take part?**

*I will be interviewing several people who will be able to help me better understand employee voice in the Malawi's public utilities. I will be interviewing senior managers, line managers*

*and HR Managers in the selected public utilities. You have been invited to take part because you are an HR manager in a public utility and therefore able to provide a valuable perspective*

**What are the potential risks to you in taking part?**

*This research will take place at your workplace during normal working hours. There are no problematic risks associated with participating.*

**What information is being collected?**

*I have a series of questions that I want to ask you about the organisational policies and mechanisms on employee voice and the role you play in ensuring that those policies are actualised. If you agree, I will audio-record your answers, or if this is not acceptable to you, I will take notes of what you say.*

**Who will have access to the information?**

*In line with the University of Strathclyde's Privacy Policy (attached), the information you provide will be treated as confidential. No one other than myself and my supervisor will have access to this data.*

**Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?**

*data will be securely stored and then destroyed after my PhD thesis has been marked. No individuals or organisations will be identified in my dissertation. Any illustrative quotes that I may use will be anonymised.*

**Thank you for reading this information; please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.**

**What happens next?**

*I will analyse the data from the interview along with other similar data I am collecting from other participants and then present the results in my PhD thesis.*

**Researcher Contact Details:**

1. YOUR NAME: *Frankline Banda*
2. YOUR UNIVERSITY EMAIL ADDRESS: *frankline-banda@strath.ac.uk*

**Chief Investigator details:**

*This research project is being supervised by Professor Dora Scholarios and Dr Kendra Briken who can be contacted at [d.scholarios@strath.ac.uk](mailto:d.scholarios@strath.ac.uk) and [kendra.briken@strath.ac.uk](mailto:kendra.briken@strath.ac.uk), respectively.*

**This investigation has been granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Work, Employment and Organisation.**

**If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:**

**Dr Tony McCarthy**  
**Chair, Department Ethics Committee**  
**Department of Work, Employment, and Organisation**  
**University of Strathclyde**  
**Sir William Duncan Building**  
**130 Rottenrow**  
**Glasgow**  
**G4 0QU**  
**Scotland, UK**

**Email: joseph.mccarthy@strath.ac.uk**

## **Appendix 5 Privacy notice.**

### **Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects**

#### **Introduction**

This privacy notice relates to individuals participating in research projects led by the University of Strathclyde. It explains how the University of Strathclyde will use your personal information and your rights under data protection legislation. It is important that you read this notice prior to providing your information.

Please note that this standard information should be considered alongside information provided by the researcher for each project, which is usually in the form of a Participant Information Sheet (PIS). The PIS will include further details about how personal information is processed in the particular project, including: what data is being processed; how it is being stored; how long it will be retained for, and any other recipients of the personal information. It is usually given to participants before they decide whether or not they want to participate in the research.

#### **Data controller and the data protection officer**

The University of Strathclyde is the data controller under data protection legislation. This means that the University is responsible for how your personal data is used and for responding to any requests from you in relation to your personal data.

Any enquiries regarding data protection should be made to the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@strath.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@strath.ac.uk).

#### **Legal basis for processing your personal information**

If you are participating in a research project, we may collect your personal information. The type of information that we collect will vary depending on the project. Our basis for collecting this information is outlined below:

Type of information	Basis for processing
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Personal information and associated research data collected for the purposes of conducting research.	It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.
Certain types of personal information such as information about an individual's race, ethnic origin, politics, religion, trade union membership, genetics, biometrics (where used for ID purposes), health, sex life, or sexual orientation are defined as 'Special Category' data under the legislation.	<p>It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest</p> <p>and</p> <p>It is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes in accordance with the relevant legislation (Data Protection Act 2018, Schedule 1, Part 1, Para 4).</p>
Criminal conviction / offence data	<p>It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest and is processed in accordance with Article 10 of the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018, Schedule 1, Part 1, Para 4.</p>
<b>Details of transfers to third countries and safeguards</b>	
For some projects, personal information may be transferred outside the UK. This will normally only be done when research is taking place in locations outside the UK. If this happens, the University will ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. You will be fully informed about any transferring of data outside the UK and associated safeguards, usually in the Participant Information Sheet.	
<b>Sharing data</b>	
If data will be shared with other individuals or organisations, you will be advised of this in the PIS.	
<b>Retention of consent forms</b>	
If you participate in a research project, you may be asked to sign a participant consent form. Consent forms will typically be retained by the University for at least as long as the identifiable research data are retained. In most cases they will be retained for longer, the exact	

time frame will be determined by the need for access to this information in the unfortunate case of an unanticipated problem or a complaint. 5 years after the research is completed will be suitable for many projects, but beyond 20 years will be considered for any longitudinal or 'high risk' studies involving children, adults without capacity or a contentious research outcome.

### **Data subject rights**

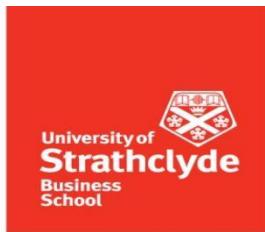
You have the right to: be informed about the collection and use of your personal data; request access to the personal data we hold about you; request to have personal data rectified if it is inaccurate or incomplete; object to your data being processed; request to restrict the processing of your personal information; and rights related to automated decision-making and profiling. To exercise these rights please contact [dataprotection@strath.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@strath.ac.uk).

Please note, many of these rights **do not** apply when the data is being used for research purposes. However, we will always try to comply where it does not prevent or seriously impair the achievement of the research purpose.

### **Right to complain to supervisory authority**

If you have any concerns/issues with the way the University has processed your personal data, you can contact the Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@strath.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@strath.ac.uk). You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>).

## Appendix 7 Survey questionnaire



### **LINE MANAGERS' IMPLEMENTATION OF VOICE MECHANISMS IN MALAWI PUBLIC UTILITY SECTOR**

#### **Introduction:**

This research is part of the PhD research project sponsored by the university of Strathclyde through John Anderson Research Excellence. The study seeks to explore how line managers execute different roles in the delivery and actualisation of the intended HRM policies and practices. In this exploration, the study gives particular attention to how line managers deliver and actualise employee voice as one example of HRM practices. While I understand that you have very busy work schedules as managers, I would appreciate your taking the time to complete this survey questionnaire. The results from this survey not only shall they be of use to the PhD research project, but they shall also enable your organisation to implement better practices and policies relating to employee voice.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences. The survey has 67 questions and It should take you a maximum of **20 minutes** to complete.

Responses will not be identified by individual but will be compiled together and analysed as a group. If you have any questions or concerns relating to this research, please do not hesitate to contact me through email on [frankline.banda@strath.ac.uk](mailto:frankline.banda@strath.ac.uk)

## **PART A: YOUR BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

*Please provide information about yourself and your experience as a line manager through ticking in the box that best describes your response to the question being asked.*

**1. What is your gender?** a. Female  b. Male

**2. What is your age?** a. 21-30  c. 31-40  d. 41-50  e. 51-60

### **Your experience as manager**

No	Question	Years of experience	Below 1 year	1-5	6-10	11-15	Over 15 years
3	Years of experience working in this organisation						
4	Years of experience as manager in this organisation						
5	Years of experience as manager in your previous organisation						

## 6 Your functional area in the organisation

No	Functional area	Tick here
a	Operations	
b	Infrastructure Development	
c	Finance	
d	Human Resource and Administration	
e	General Management	

## 7. Please state how many subordinates you manage in your section.....

PART B: AVAILABILITY OF VOICE MECHANISMS IN THIS ORGANISATION		Present	Absent	Unsure
<b>Availability of voice channels</b>				
In the questions from 8 to 25, reflect on the channels of employee voice which you think are available and are practiced in this organisation ( <i>Please, for each voice mechanism listed below, rate whether it is available, absent or you are not sure by ticking in the correct box</i> )				
<b>8</b>	Established hierarchy of authority/through supervisors and managers			
<b>9</b>	Open door policy			
<b>10</b>	Formal meetings e.g. departmental or sectional			
<b>11</b>	Union			

<b>12</b>	Emails			
<b>13</b>	Internal Audit function			
<b>14</b>	Institutional Integrity committees			
<b>15</b>	tip off anonymous (Toll-free line)			
<b>16</b>	Human Resource function			
<b>17</b>	WhatsApp			
<b>18</b>	Social media-Facebook			
<b>19</b>	Informal meetings-one on one discussion			
<b>20</b>	Informal meetings-group meetings			
<b>21</b>	Phone calls			
<b>22</b>	Suggestion boxes			
<b>23</b>	Anonymous letters			
<b>24</b>	grapevine			
<b>25</b>	gossip			

**PART C: IMPLEMENTING VOICE POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	

In the questions from 26 to 33, reflect on the official roles which HR department expect you to undertake in implementing voice policies and practices  
*(Please, in each role, tick in only one box which contain your response to each question)*

26	I monitor activities to support the implementation of voice policies and practices						
27	I translate the message (s) of the voice policies and practices into my day-to-day action plans						
28	I translate the message of the voice policies and practices into my subordinates' objectives						
29	I promote the voice policies and practices to my subordinates through different forums						
30	I act as a role model to my subordinates of the expected patterns of behaviours associated with the voice policies and practices						
31	I coach my subordinates on the expected behaviours relating to voice policies and practices						
32	I give feedback to my subordinates on how they live up to the expected behaviours relating to voice policies and practices						
33	I periodically assess my subordinates' understanding of the voice policies and practices						

**PART D: YOUR VIEWS ON YOUR COMPETENCY, WILLINGNESS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPLEMENT HRM PRACTICES**

### Your competency to deliver HRM practices

In the questions from 34 to 40, consider the HRM practices that exist in your organisation and think of your competency in delivering those HRM practices

*(Please, in each role, tick in only one box which contain your response to each question)*

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
34	I can remain calm when facing difficulties in performing my responsibilities because I can rely on my abilities						
35	When I am confronted with a problem in performing my HR responsibilities, I can usually find several solutions						
36	Whatever comes my way in performing my HR responsibilities, I can usually handle it						
37	My past experiences in my job have prepared me well for performing my HR responsibilities						
38	I meet the goals I set for myself in performing my HR responsibilities						
39	The courses I followed were relevant for performing my HR responsibilities						
40	The course offerings were sufficient for performing my HR responsibilities.						

<b>Your desire and willingness to implement HRM practices</b>							
	In the questions from 41 to 53, consider your desire and willingness to deliver HRM practices. <i>(Please, in each role, tick in only one box which contain your response to each question)</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
41	Because I think that this activity is interesting						
42	Because this activity is fun						
43	Because I feel good when doing this activity						
44	Because I am doing it for my own good						
45	Because I think that this activity is good for me						
46	Because I believe that this activity is important for me						
47	I do this activity, but I am not sure if it is worth it.						
48	I don't know: I don't see what this activity brings me						
49	I do this activity, but I am not sure it is a good thing to pursue it						
50	Because it helps the people in my team to grow, improve and develop themselves						
51	Because it helps me to supervise my team						

52	Because it helps me to reach my production goals						
53	Because it helps me to treat employees in a fair and consistent way.						
	<p><b>Your views on organisational opportunities for implementing HRM practices</b></p> <p>In the questions from 54 to 67, reflect on your knowledge of the organisational opportunities that exist for you to be able to implement the HRM practices</p> <p><i>(Please, in each role, tick in only one box which contain your response to each question)</i></p>						
54	I can't seem to get caught up with performing my HR responsibilities						
55	Sometimes I feel as if there are not enough hours in the day						
56	Many times, I have to cancel my commitments to my HR responsibilities						
57	I find myself having to prepare priority lists to get done all the responsibilities I have to do, Otherwise, I forget because I have so much to do						
58	I feel I have to perform my HR responsibilities hastily and maybe less carefully in order to get everything done						
59	I work under incompatible HR policies and HR guidelines						

60	I receive an HR assignment without the manpower to complete it.						
61	I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out my HR responsibilities						
62	I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently in performing HR responsibilities						
63	I perform HR tasks that are accepted by one person but not the others						
64	I have concrete, planned goals for my HR responsibilities						
65	I lack HR policies and guidelines to help me						
66	I have to feel my way in performing my HR responsibilities						
67	The explanation is clear of what has to be done in performing my HR responsibilities						

*The end. Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire*

## Appendix 8 Predetermined conceptual themes

No	Theme	Apriori Codes
1	Adoption & Quality of intended voice related HRM practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Management-led/direct voice practices (<i>meetings, written mechanisms</i> e.g. surveys, emails, grievance processes and suggestion schemes and <i>downward mechanisms</i> e.g. notice boards)</li> <li>b. Management-led practices driven by promotive voice intentions.</li> <li>c. Employee-led/indirect voice practices (unions, works councils, social media, open door policy, word of mouth and gossip)</li> <li>d. Employee-led practices driven by remedial voice intentions.</li> <li>e. Quality of voice practices; Degree of accessibility; range and importance of issues; base of legitimacy; rules and range of people involved; extent of usage of voice exchange.</li> </ul>
2	Line managers' role in implementing voice related HRM practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Line managers as primary and sole implementers of voice related HRM practices through roles as conduits, engineers of adaptability and translators.</li> <li>b. HR as providers of allocative resources for implementation</li> <li>c. Senior managers as creators of conducive culture for implementation</li> </ul>
3	Contextual influences on LM's implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Influence of LM's AMO-Ability (skills, HR Knowledge, resources)- <i>Motivation</i> (norms, incentives) &amp; <i>Opportunity</i> (HR, Policy support, capacity, time &amp; interaction with other actors) on LM's implementation</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>b. Influence of public sector structural features (red tape, rule-based structures, multiple actors) on LM's implementation</li><li>c. Influence of African cultural and materialistic features (based on traditional and communalistic values) on LM's implementation</li></ul>
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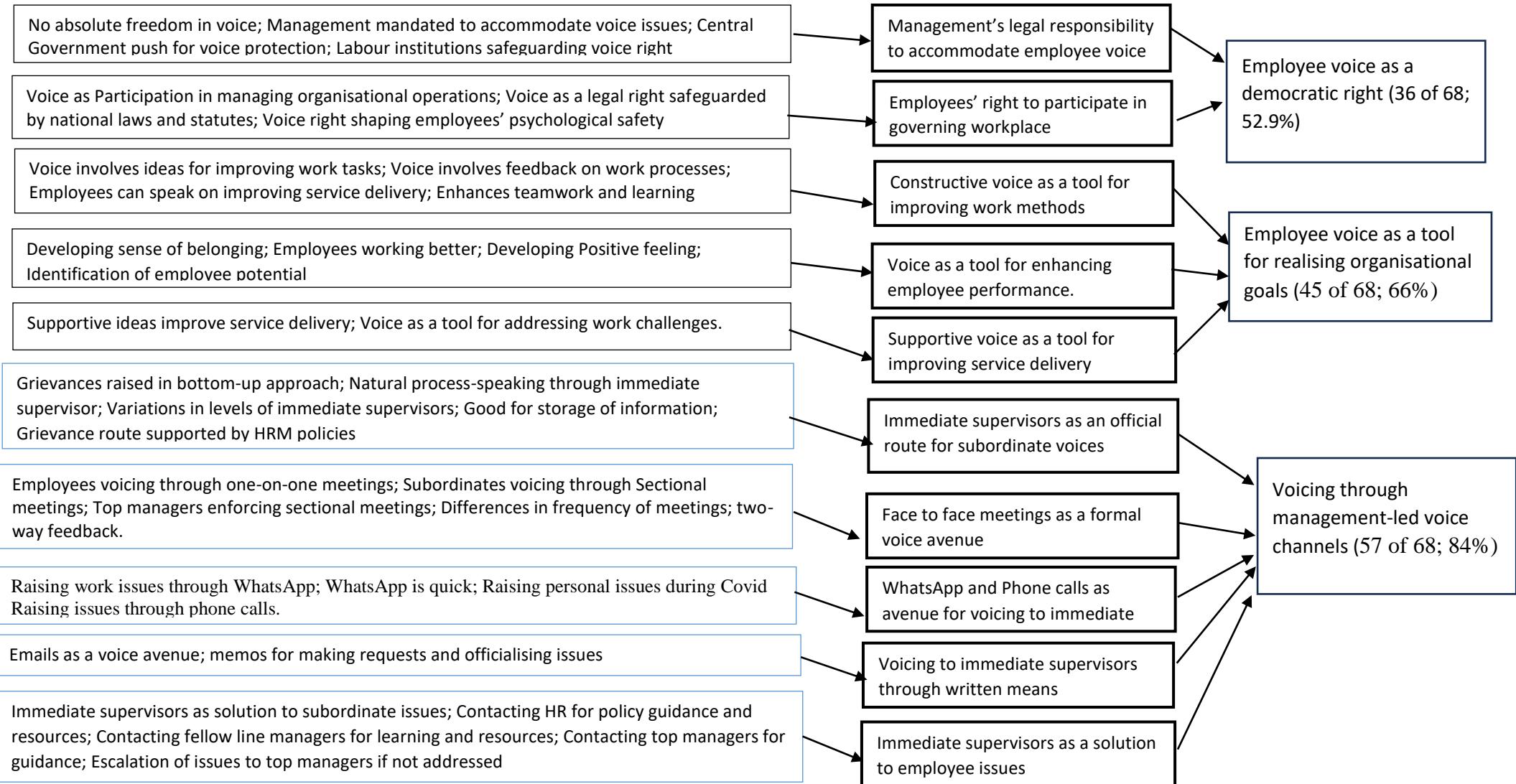
- b. Influence of public sector structural features (red tape, rule-based structures, multiple actors) on LM's implementation
- c. Influence of African cultural and materialistic features (based on traditional and communalistic values) on LM's implementation

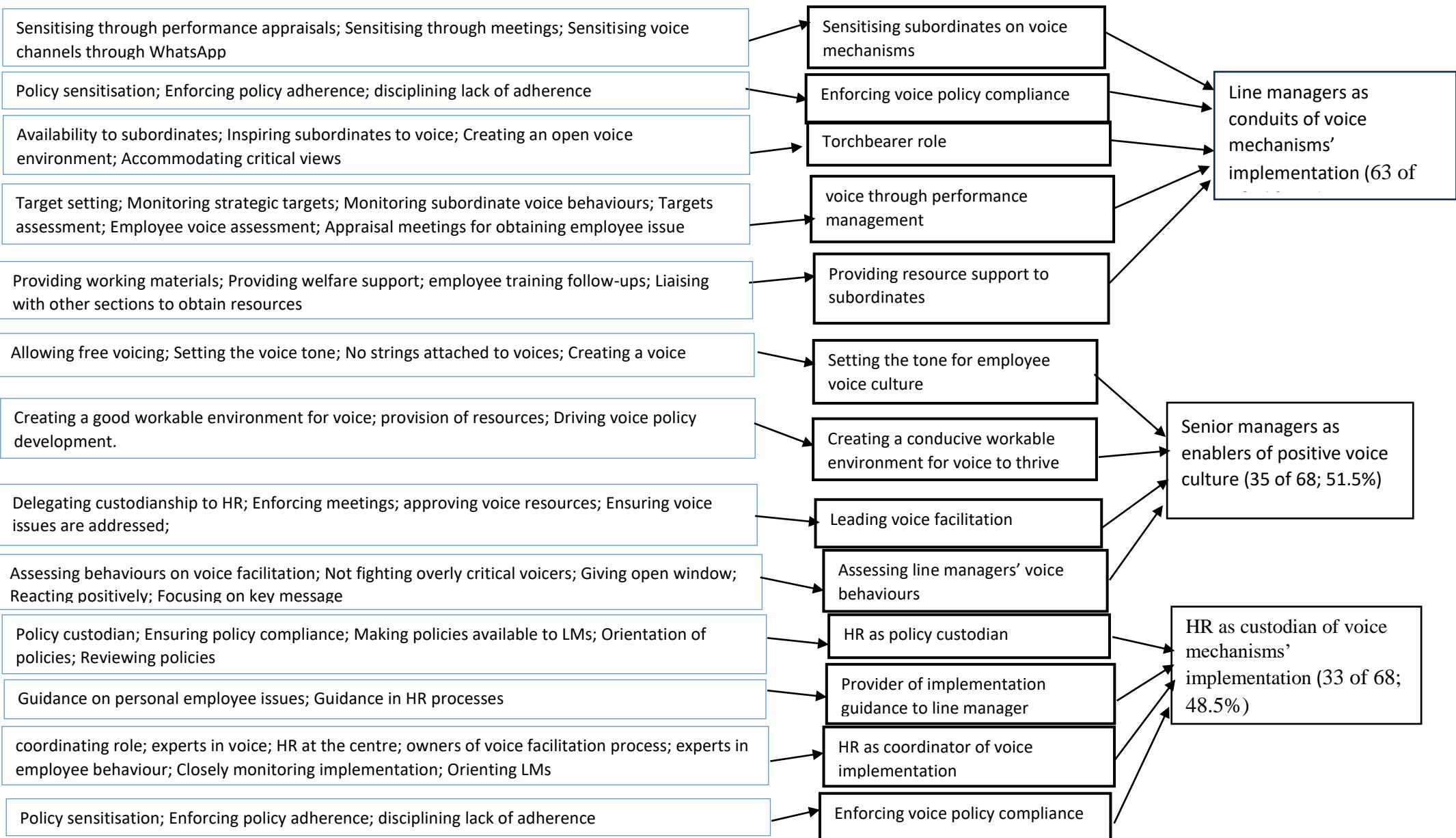
## Appendix 9 Data structure for Chapter 8

### Empirical (first order) concepts

### 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes

### Aggregate theoretical concepts & Count.





## Appendix 10 Data structure for Chapter 9

### Empirical (first order) concepts

### 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes

### Aggregate theoretical concepts & Count.

Taking headaches to senior managers; Discussing resource challenges; Professionalism in presentation of issues; Senior managers providing guidance on issues; Maintenance of working relationship; legitimacy in handling employee issues

Debriefing sessions for presenting voice issues and obtaining guidance

Workplans defining work to do; Debriefing sessions guiding workplans

Debriefing sessions shaping workplans

Simplifying message to employees' level; Detailing the message; Articulating message according to context; LMs' not simplifying & detailing message; LMs not giving feedback; Monitoring subordinates' work; Obtaining issues/challenges; Assigning new tasks

Subordinate interface

Using employee issues to review workplan; Flooded with HR issues; Prioritising issues; Contacting other sections; Taking issues to debriefing sessions

Addressing subordinate issues

Relaxing policies on untouchables; Policy relaxation to please senior managers; Policy relaxation for favours

Relaxing policies on the untouchables

Relaxing policies on bereavement; Considering circumstances; Sensitivity of welfare issues; Relaxing policies on maternity leave; Relaxing policies on sick leave; Policy relaxation supported by senior managers

Relaxing policies on sensitive welfare issues

Relaxing policies on personal employee issues; Empathy on personal issues; Humanistic approach to difficult circumstances; Humanistic approach supported by senior managers.

Humanistic approach in handling subordinate personalistic issues

Inconsistent application of policies; Favouring certain subordinates; Subordinates feeling side-lined

Subordinates' discontent with inconsistencies in policy application

Inconsistencies in policy application; Subordinates Feeling not part of the section; Institutionalising discretion

Institutionalising managerial discretion

personal attacks; Disliking personal attacks; critical voicers misleading others; denying critical voicers in field trips; Denying critical voicers trainings; Intentions to restrict WhatsApp platform

Discouraging destructive voice

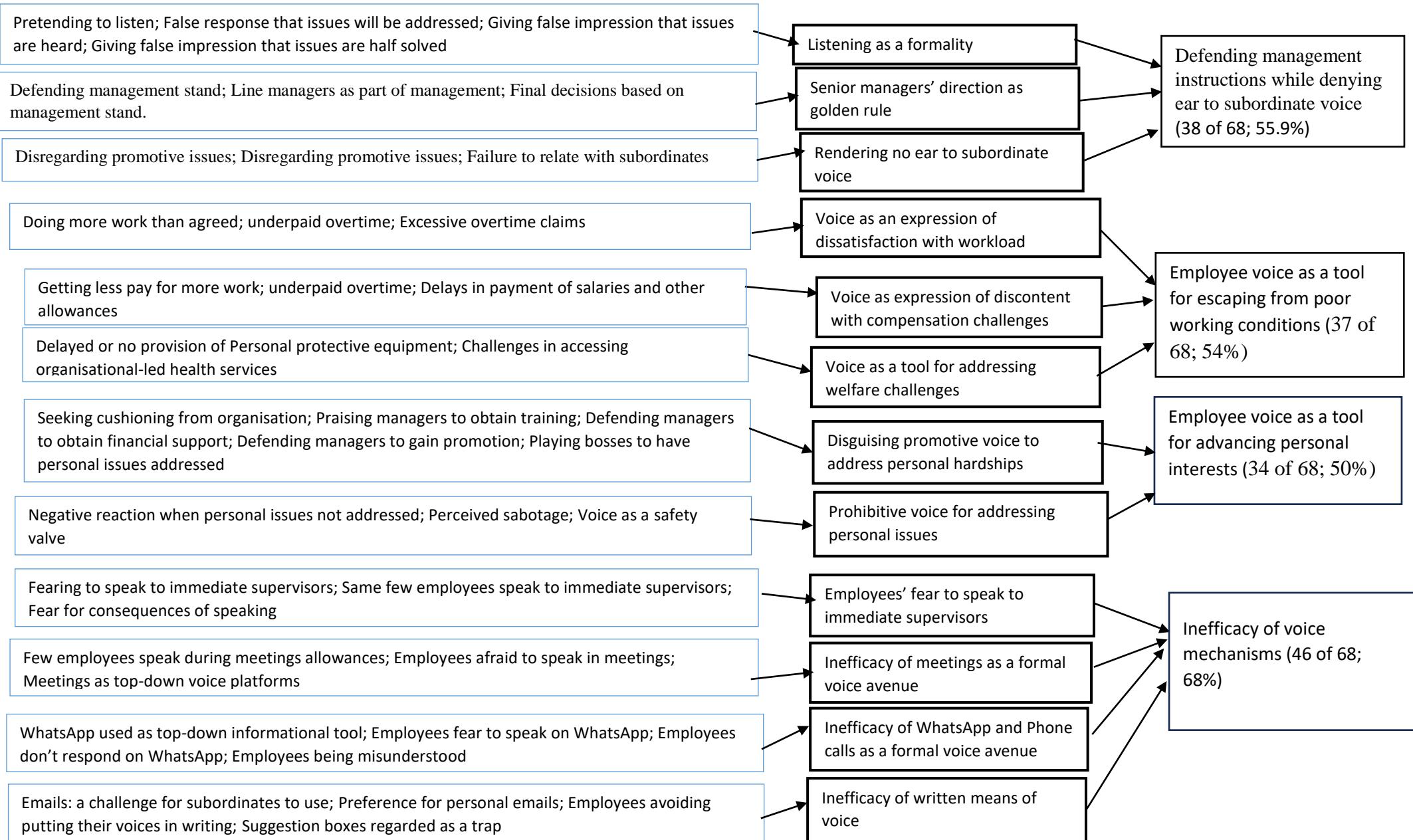
Choice of words as act of respect; Not being direct; speaking in private; subordinates' duty bound to respectful voice

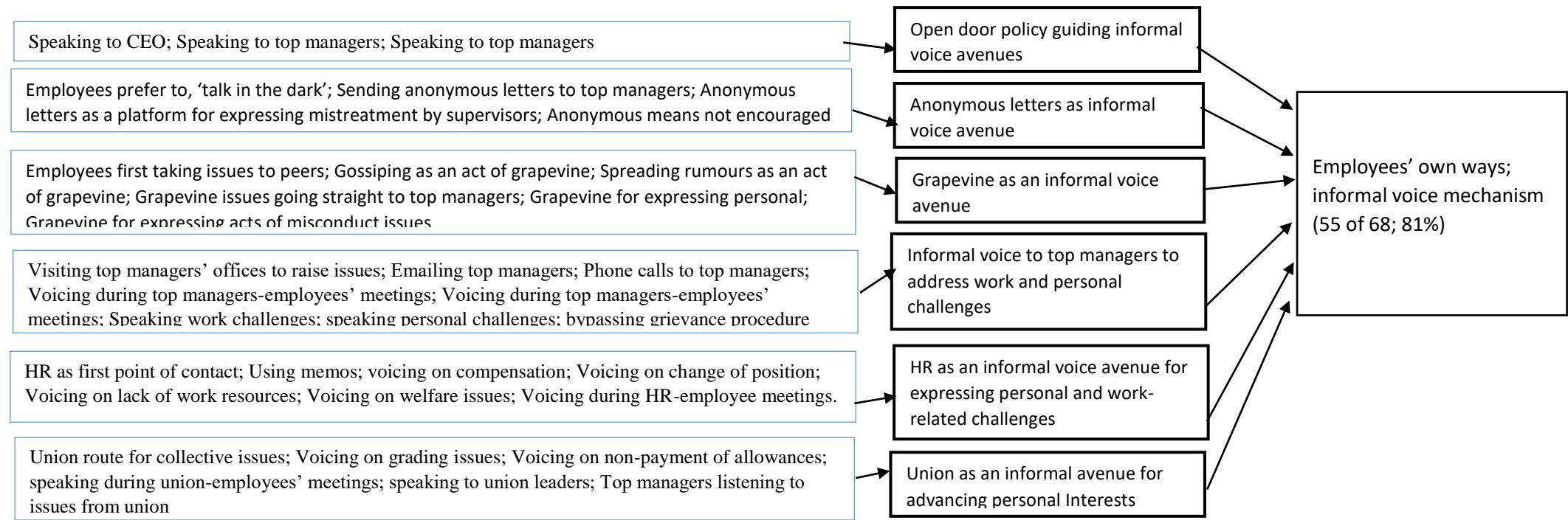
Encouraging respectful voicing

Line managers' stages of voice facilitation (65 of 68; 95.6%)

Managerial discretion as a binding practice in addressing personalistic issues (32 of 68; 47.05%)

Reinforcing respectful voice and discouraging destructive voice (41 of 68; 60.2%)



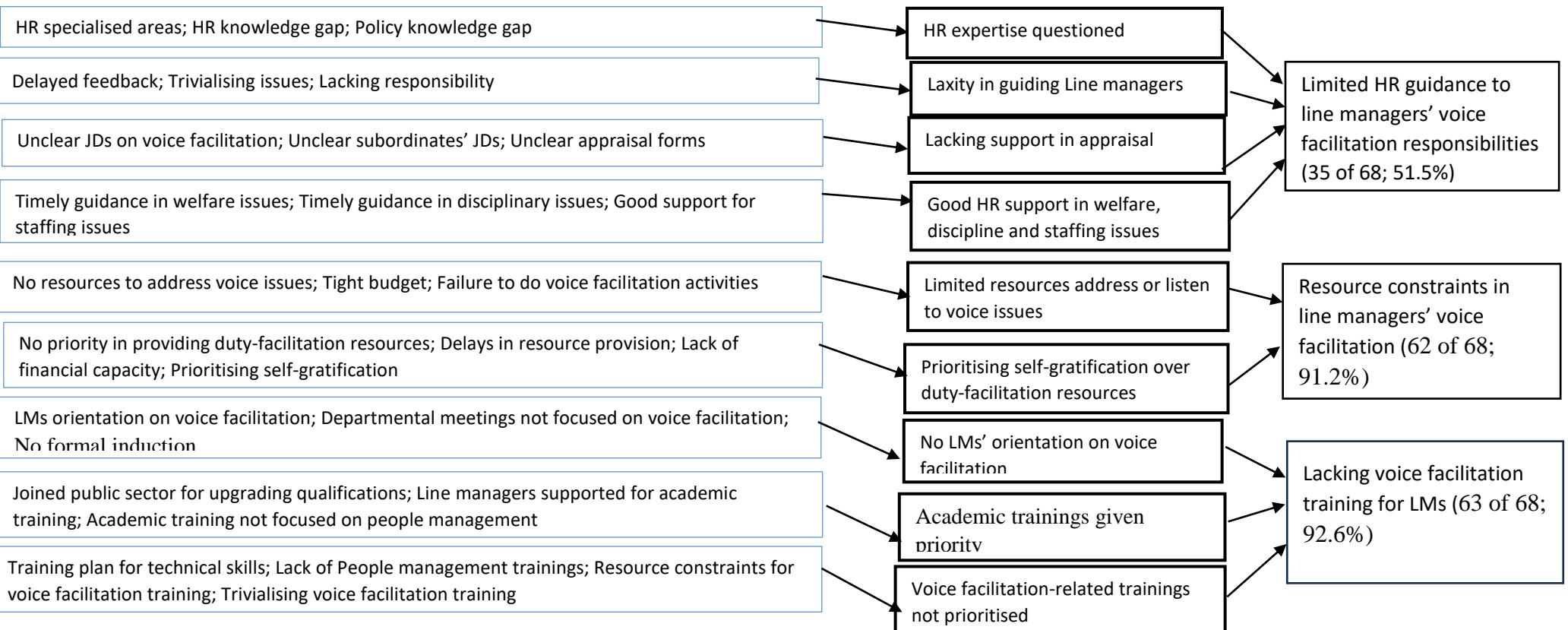


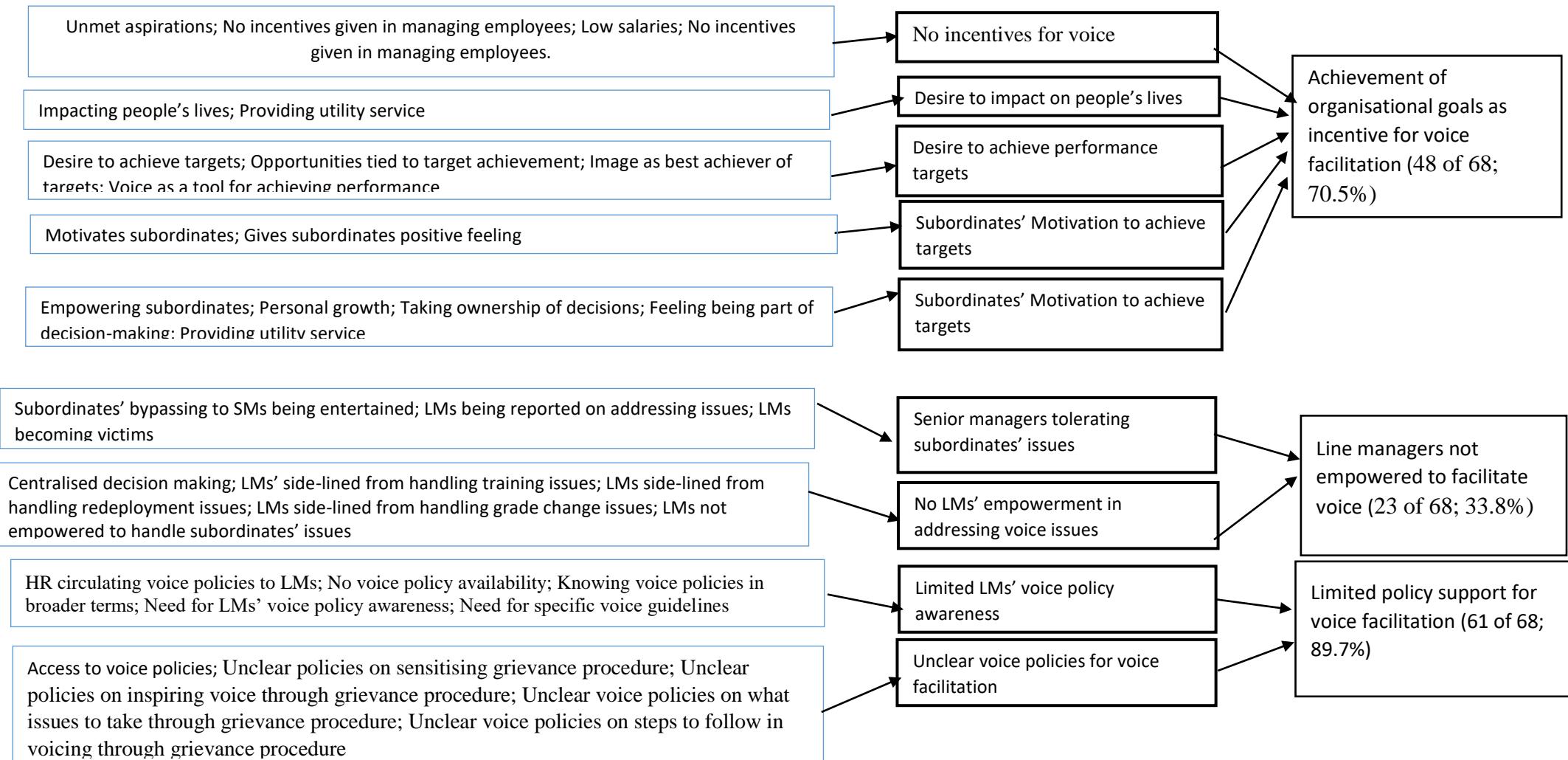
## Appendix 11: Data structure for chapter 10

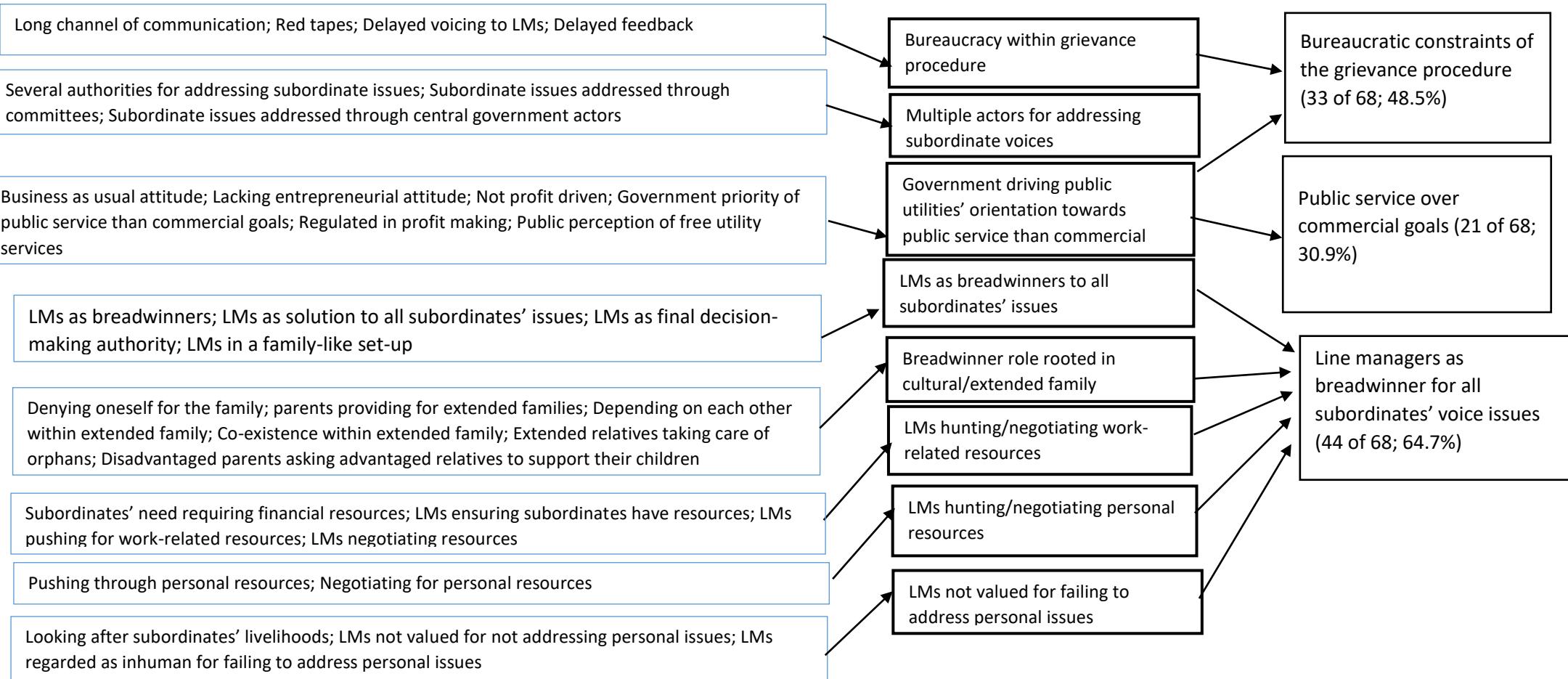
### **Empirical (first order) concepts**

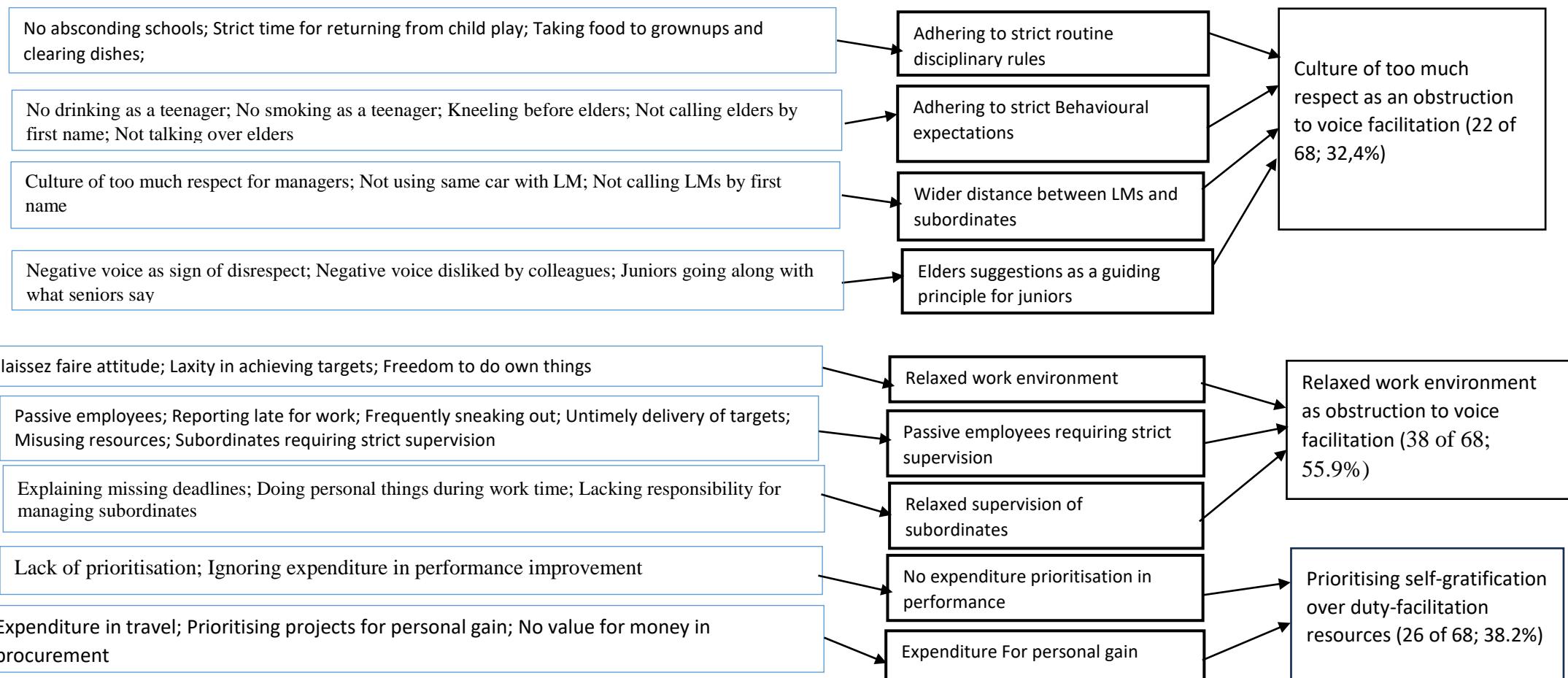
### **2<sup>nd</sup> order themes**

### **Aggregate theoretical concepts & Count.**









## Appendix 12 Job description of human resource manager for utility 1

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**2. HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER**

**Grade:** M3 **Location:** Head Office **Reports to:** Director of Human Resources and Administration

**Purpose of the job**

To provide administrative, procedural, and operational support and assistance to the efficient implementation of a broad range of Human Resources functions for all categories of staff, ensuring accurate and timely delivery that is in compliance with board's HR rules and regulations.

**Key duties and responsibilities**

1. Providing leadership in the implementation of human resource policies and strategies in order to ensure that the department contributes effectively and efficiently to the goals of the board;
2. Participating in the recruitment process, performance counselling, and disciplinary enquiry hearing for senior, Junior and temporary members of staff and provide professional advice in all cases;
3. Supporting the conducting of training needs analysis in liaison with Training Department in the process of developing knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees for improved job performance;
4. Supporting the administration of performance and reward management systems, processes and procedures in liaison with the Departments;
5. Ensuring a healthy working environment
6. Implementing HRMIS to improve quality of human resource data and link between HRMIS and payroll for better control over Payroll Expenditure;
7. Coordinating the plans and budgets for HR Department in order to achieve the vision, mission, outputs and outcomes as provided by the Strategic plan; and compile activities to be within the financial year, cost the activities, implement the planned activities;
8. Managing board's on-boarding and off-boarding procedures utilizing HRIS system

Page 1 of 1 341 words  English (United States)  Accessibility: Investigate  Focus     100%  15:27 18/05/2024

**Appendix 13; Behavioural traits performance assessment form for utility 2-Senior employees**

<b>SN</b>	<b>Behavior/Trait</b>	<b>Qualities/Attributes to be assessed</b>	<b>Max Score (5)</b>	<b>ACTUAL SCORE</b>
1	Leadership	i. Communicates key decisions to all employees		
		ii. Focuses all employees on common corporate goals		
		iii. Motivates all employees to work well		
		iv. Leads by example		
		v. Quickly resolves employee conflicts		
2	Problem Solving	i. Communicates problems in a timely manner		
		ii. Owns problems and tries hard to solve them		
		iii. Recognizes and accurately analyses a problem to arrive at cost effective solutions		
		iv. Works hard to remove processes that do not add value		
		v. Bases decisions on facts		
3	Creativity/Innovation	i. Develops better, faster and less expensive ways of doing things		
		ii. Supports new ways of doing things		
		iii. Cooperates with others to find new and better ways of doing things		
		iv. Creates novel solutions to problems		

		v. Challenges traditional practices and proposes better ways		
		vi. Seeks continuous improvement.		
4	Managing change	i. Establishes structures and processes to implement change		
		ii. Helps employees to understand what needs to change and why.		
		iii. Effectively deals with fear and resistance to change		
		iv. Takes lead in doing things differently		
5	Communication	i. Pays attention to detail		
		ii. Gives clear upward and downward feedback		
		iii. Willfully shares information with all relevant others		
		iv. Uses multiple channels of communication to convey vital messages		
		v. Listens well		
		vi. States opinions clearly and audibly		
		vii. Writes effectively		
		viii. Communicates in time		

6	People Management	i. Pays attention to welfare of all employees		
		ii. Maintains good relations with all employees		
		iii. Resolves employee complaints and disputes in a timely and humane manner		
7	Punctuality	i. Reports for duty in time		
		ii. Does not knock off before time		
		iii. Does not frequently sneak out.		
8	Meeting deadlines	i. Does not miss deadlines without due cause		
		ii. Communicates in advance if deadlines are to be missed giving clear reasons		
9	Reliability	i. Arrives at work prepared		
		ii. Completes work in a timely and consistent manner		
		iii. Is regularly present at work		
		iv. Is personally responsible		
		v. Is committed to doing the best job		
10	Discipline	i. Did not receive verbal or written warning for poor conduct		
		ii. Fully understands and follows discipline rules		
		iii. Helps others to comply with discipline rules		
11	Teamwork	i. Values good working relationships with other employees		

		ii. Works well with subordinates, co- workers and managers.		
		iii. Coordinates own work with others		
		iv. Shares critical information with all others involved in a task		
		v. Works well with others to get things done		
12	Customers orientation	i. Strives to exceed internal and external customer expectations		
		ii. Listens and effectively responds to internal and external customer queries		
		iii. Is always positive and cheerful to internal and external customers		
		iv. Quickly resolves internal and external customer problems		
13	Developing others	i. Shows commitment to developing subordinates		
		ii. Gives subordinates challenging assignments in order for them to grow		
		iii. Gives helpful feedback to employees so they can improve their performance		
		iv. Provides effective coaching		
		v. Shows confidence in the ability of others		

		vi. Encourages groups/ individuals to resolve problems on their own		
14	Forward thinking	i. Anticipates possible future challenges and prepares advance contingency plans.  ii. Anticipates how groups and individuals will react to decisions or developments and plans accordingly to prevent disruptive tensions		
		iii. Notices trends in the operating environment and prepares plans to deal with threats and opportunities		
		iv. Employs a holistic and futuristic approach to decision making (sees beyond the nose)		
15	Integrity	i. Complies with the code of conduct and ethics  ii. Maintains confidentiality of sensitive information  iii. Is a role model on ethical behaviour  iv. Takes appropriate action to prevent unethical behaviour		
16	Management Excellence	i. Aligns people and systems to corporate goals and strategies  ii. Continuously sets goals for employees and regularly reviews employee performance  iii. Provides working tools and resources in order for employees to deliver good performance		

		iv. Rewards good performance and promptly corrects poor performance		
		v. Provides good coaching to employees		
17	Quality of work	i. Produces work minimal or zero errors		
		ii. Gets things right first time		
		iii. Maintains very high performance standards		
		iv. Corrects own errors promptly		
		v. Produces thorough and professional work		
18	Stress Management	i. Remains calm under pressure		
		ii. Remains calm when criticised		
		iii. Handles several tasks effectively		
		iv. Manages own behaviour to avoid stressing oneself and others		
		<b>Total Score</b>		
		<b>40% of total score (to be added to 60% of score on targets to determine final score)</b>		
	<b>PERFORMANCE RATING RATIOS</b>			
	<b>Behaviours shall contribute 40% to the final score for</b>			

<p><b>supervisors and managers. Performance on targets shall thus contribute 60% for supervisors and managers.</b></p>			
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**Appendix 14; Behavioural traits performance assessment form for utility 2-Junior employees**

<b>S N</b>	<b>Behavior/Trait</b>	<b>Qualities/Attributes to be assessed</b>	<b>Maximum Score (5)</b>	<b>Actual Score</b>
1	Problem Solving	i. Communicates problems in a timely manner		
		ii. Owns problems and tries hard to solve them		
		iii. Recognizes and accurately analyses a problem to arrive at cost effective solutions		
		iv. Works hard to remove processes that do not add value		
		v. Bases decisions on facts		
2	Creativity/Innovation	i. Develops better, faster and less expensive ways of doing things		
		ii. Supports new ways of doing things		
		iii. Cooperates with others to find new and better ways of doing things		
		iv. Creates novel solutions to problems		
		v. Challenges traditional practices and proposes better ways		

		vi. Seeks continuous improvement.		
3	Communication	i. Pays attention to detail		
		ii. Gives clear upward and downward feedback		
		iii. Willfully shares information with all relevant others		
		iv. Uses multiple channels of communication to convey vital messages		
		v. Listens well		
		vi. States opinions clearly and audibly		
		vii. Writes effectively		
		viii. Communicates in time		
4	Punctuality	i. Reports for duty in time		
		ii. Does not knock off before time		
		iii. Does not frequently sneak out.		
5	Meeting deadlines	i. Does not miss deadlines without due cause		
		ii. Communicates in advance if deadlines are to be missed giving clear reasons		
6	Reliability	i. Arrives at work prepared		

		ii.Completes work in a timely and consistent manner		
		iii. Is regularly present at work		
		iv. Is personally responsible		
		v. Is committed to doing the best job		
7	Discipline	i. Did not receive verbal or written warning for poor conduct		
		ii. Fully understands and follows discipline rules		
		iii. Helps others to comply with discipline rules		
8	Team work	i. Values good working relationships with other employees		
		ii. Works well with subordinates, co- workers and managers.		
		iii. Coordinates own work with others		
		iv. Shares critical information with all others involved in a task		
		v. Works well with others to get things done		

9	Customers orientation	i. Strives to exceed internal and external customer expectations		
		ii. Listens and effectively responds to internal and external customer queries		
		iii. Is always positive and cheerful to internal and external customers		
		iv. Quickly resolves internal and external customer problems		
10	Integrity	i. Complies with the code of conduct and ethics		
		ii. Maintains confidentiality of sensitive information		
		iii. Is a role model on ethical behaviour		
		iv. Takes appropriate action to prevent unethical behaviour		
11	Quality of work	i. Produces work minimal or zero errors		
		ii. Gets things right first time		
		iii. Maintains very high performance standards		
		iv. Corrects own errors promptly		
		v. Produces thorough and professional work		

1	Stress Management	i. Remains calm under pressure		
2		ii. Remains calm when criticised		
		iii. Handles several tasks effectively		
		iv. Manages own behaviour to avoid stressing oneself and others		
		<b>Total Score</b>		
		<b>30% of total score (to be added to 70% of score on targets to determine final score)</b>		
	<b>PERFORMANCE RATING RATIOS</b>			
	<b>Behaviours shall contribute 30% to the final score for junior employees (none supervisors.)</b> <b>Performance on targets shall thus contribute 70% for none supervisors.</b>			

**Appendix 15 A list of all documents collected from the public utilities with their purpose**

S/N	Document name	Abbreviation	Utility 1	Utility 2	Purpose
1	Organisational structure		✓		To aid methodological choices in terms of interview participants
2	Organisation structure			✓	To aid methodological choices in terms of interview participants
3	Conditions of service	COS		✓	To understand the mechanisms of employee voice
4	Staff service regulations	SSR	✓		To understand the mechanisms of employee voice
5	Human Resource strategic plan 2020-2025	HRSP	✓		To understand what HR is tasked to do in relation to implementation of voice-related HR practices
6	Behavioural assessment form for sectional heads			✓	To understand what line managers are expected to do in implementing voice-related HR practices
7	Behavioural assessment form for junior employees			✓	To understand what line managers are expected to do in implementing voice-related HR practices

8	HR manager Job description		✓		To understand what HR is tasked to do in relation to implementation of voice-related HR practices
9	2022-2023 Training plan			✓	To understand the concentration of trainings accorded to line managers if they included people management
10	2021 Code of conduct	COC	✓		To understand the delegation of voice facilitation responsibilities to line managers
11	Policy and procedure statement	PPS	✓		To understand the delegation of voice facilitation responsibilities to line managers
12	Training and Development Guidelines	TDG		✓	To understand the delegation of voice facilitation responsibilities to line managers