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**Headline: New research examines the powerful effect of office back-channeling**

## **New research examines the powerful effect of office back-channeling**



We're probably all guilty of having arranged or participated in a secret backchannel conversation on more than one occasion in our work lives. For instance, you may be on a conference call for work, and in disagreement with what most of your colleagues are saying, so you email or instant message a colleague who is also on the line, and whom you know agrees with you, perhaps venting about the topic of discussion and where it's going.

This quiet rebellion has a lot more power than you might realize.

A [new study](#) by business and management researchers at INSEAD, Columbia Business School, and Singapore Management University suggests that the mere existence of private backchannels reshapes the power dynamic between those who hold majority and minority opinions in a team decision. When those who are in the more powerful majority group know that people who disagree with them have access to private channels—and therefore that dissenting opinions and novel information might be getting aired—they will be more likely to take a minority opinion seriously and seek information about it.

To reach their finding, the researchers set up a series of experiments involving a computerized task that pushed some participants to support an acquisition in a hypothetical group investment decision, and others to lean the other way, based on information that not everyone held. When those who had been primed to back the investment discovered that people who didn't *might* be talking in private channels, they were more likely to make inquiries and become engaged in a dialogue with the dissenters, and thus they discovered what the minority group knew that they didn't.

Between the easy-to-set-up, private discussion channels on instant-message platforms like Slack and the widespread use of laptops and phones during meetings, there are more means, and more immediate opportunities, for office back-channeling than ever before. It's reshaping more than just the modes of office communication.

Just the possibility that there may be other ideas in circulation is enough to reduce the majority's perceived sense of power to the point where they'll wonder about what others are saying, says Kathy Phillips, a professor at Columbia Business School and a co-author of the new study. "We see this as a positive," she adds, because it suggests a stronger outcome for the decision-making team.

Citing past research, the study's authors note in the introduction to their findings that groups that "encourage both expression and consideration of dissenting minority view-points, regardless of their accuracy, tend to process information more thoroughly, are more creative, learn more during group deliberations, and make better decisions."

This well-studied truth about diversity's impact on the quality of the decision-making process is one reason companies are encouraged to hire and promote with diversity in mind. Most of the time,

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ensuring that diverse voices are sitting around the table guarantees that a wider range of salient information and perspectives will be woven into decisions, large or small.