

Being Bypassed: Uncovering Skip-Level Meetings from U.S. Frontline Technology Leaders' Perspectives

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Abstract: This exploratory qualitative study examined the practice of skip-level meetings, in which employees meet with a manager above their direct supervisor. Scholar research on this leadership practice is scarce, while it is widely yet inconsistently implemented in industry and frequently discussed in business publications outside academia. The study focused on investigating the experiences and perspectives of the potentially “skipped” managers, who may have the most unpredictable views on the practice. A diverse group of 25 first-level engineering managers from U.S. technology organizations, differing in individual and organizational contexts, participated. Findings revealed surprisingly broad support and implementation, with perceptions linked to culture, generation, meeting format, and other aspects. Synthesized with existing literature and intersecting theories, various insights and practical implementation guidelines emerged, along with recommendations for future research directions.

Keywords: Skip-level meetings, Skip-Level, Leader–Member exchange, Employee voice, Leadership communication, Skip-Level voice

1. Introduction

Research has extensively examined traditional hierarchical communication; however, the literature on skip-level meetings, where employees interact directly with higher-level leaders, is scarce. In contrast, such meetings are common in industry, as also indicated by this study, and discussed in well-regarded non-academic outlets (e.g., Nawaz, 2025; Zebroski, 2023). They may benefit employees, managers, and organizations (e.g., Detert & Treviño, 2010; Xu, Liu & Jia, 2012) but can also have adverse effects (e.g., Parsons, 1974; Xu, Liu & Jia, 2012).

This study qualitatively explored the perceptions of skipped leaders in the multicultural and otherwise leadership-challenging (as will be established) U.S. technology sector. As the ones being bypassed, skipped leaders may have the most unpredictable perspectives among all involved stakeholders. Some findings were surprising, diverging from expectations based on earlier studies, yet potentially explainable when considering specific contexts and related theories. Other findings aligned with and extended existing theories.

2. Theoretical Background

Skip-level meetings' roots lie in works such as System 4 Management, which advocated bypassing hierarchy (e.g., Likert, 1961; Nealey & Fiedler, 1968), followed by intersecting theories such as adaptive and inclusive leadership, employee voice, and leader-member-exchange (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Thompson & Matkin, 2020; Yammarino, 2013). Direct empirical research remains limited, primarily confined to case studies or anecdotes. Specifically, no study was found via Google Scholar that focused on examining the perceptions of skipped leaders across individual or organizational contexts, in any industry or country. Nevertheless, such meetings are widely yet inconsistently implemented, and frequently discussed in popular business publications (e.g., Nawaz, 2025; Zebroski, 2023).

Effective implementation is theorized to enhance employee engagement, voice, trust, psychological safety, and organizational alignment (e.g., Detert & Treviño, 2010; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Parsons, 1974; Salamon & Robinson, 2008; Xu, Liu & Jia, 2012). Conversely, they may, especially when poorly executed, create tensions and misalignment, and reduce psychological safety (Burris, 2012; Detert & Treviño, 2010; Liu, Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2013; Parsons, 1974; Xu, Liu & Jia, 2012).

The U.S. technology industry is characterized by a high reliance on foreign-born employees, primarily from India and China (American Immigration Council, 2022), which introduces highly diverse workplace cultural norms (e.g., Hofstede, 1983). The sector also experiences high rates of turnover (Li et al., 2021) and remote work (Flex Index, 2024), overall elevating leadership challenges, while first-tier engineering leaders tend to lack leadership skills (Coetzee, Johnston & Van Belle, 2014), which are even more important than technical skills (e.g., Kalliamvakou et al., 2019), offering a unique environment for skip-level meetings' examination.

3. Method

Using qualitative exploration with elements of interpretive phenomenology and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuohy et al., 2013), 25 first-tier engineering managers in mid- and large-sized U.S. technology companies, differing in individual (e.g., age) and organizational (e.g., workplace or team size) attributes, were purposively selected. A small incentive was offered to encourage participation without introducing a significant ethical risk (Abdelazeem et al., 2022; Halpern et al., 2021).

Rich textual responses were collected through mostly open-ended online surveys and analyzed inductively and deductively. The analysis was then reviewed by ChatGPT in “Temporary Mode” (Bijker et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024), along with a review by an external researcher, to increase rigor.

4. Results

Findings suggested that skip-level meetings are widely adopted in U.S. Tech, more than in other contexts (Zebroski, 2023). Surprisingly, participants almost unanimously favored the concept of skip-level meetings, and the vast majority expressed positive sentiment towards their implementation in their referenced workplaces, contrary to assumptions (Burriss, 2012; Parsons, 1974; Xu, Liu & Jia, 2012). Improved transparency, communication, and alignment were frequently highlighted.

Interestingly, both the subgroup of leaders who had not recently experienced relevant skip-level meetings and the subgroup of leaders who were able to compare recent work environments with and without such meetings had positive sentiment towards the concept. Table 1 summarizes various subgroups and sentiments within them:

Table 1: Overall sentiment towards skip-level meetings

| Subgroup | | Subgroup participants | Subgroup participants' sentiment towards skip-level meetings | | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------|--|----------------------|-----|----------|---|----|
| | | Positive | | Conditional negative | | Negative | | |
| | | n | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Referenced a current work environment with skip-level meetings, no comparison environment without | | 20 | 17 | 85% | 2 | 10% | 1 | 5% |
| Comparable | Current work environment with skip-level meetings and prior without | 1 | 1 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| | Current work environment without skip-level meetings and prior with | 2 | 1.5 | 75% | 0.5 | 25% | 0 | 0% |
| | Total comparable | 3 | 2.5 | 83% | 0.5 | 17% | 0 | 0% |
| Hypothetical (no relevant current or prior environment with skip-level meetings) | | 2 | 2 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Grand total | | 25 | 21.5 | 86% | 2.5 | 10% | 1 | 4% |

Negative sentiments were rare and linked to the reported cultural backgrounds of stakeholders and to participants’ generation and certain perceptions, such as about misalignments or disagreements with their state of inclusion or exclusion from these meetings. Skip-level meetings were mainly reported in two formats: One-on-ones, which usually excluded direct leaders, and multi-team, which usually included them. Interestingly, almost no team-unit skip-level meetings were reported, and surprisingly, participants generally preferred to be excluded, and exclusion was linked to positive sentiment.

While excluded participants (mostly from one-on-ones) reported more misalignments due to skip-level meetings, these virtually nullified when excluded participants were involved in follow-ups, suggesting that combining exclusion with follow-up involvement is the most preferable in terms of sentiment and misalignment concerns, likely also with employees’ psychological safety. Inclusion (mostly from multi-team meetings) was linked with more misalignment reports due to skip-level interactions external to skip-level meetings, suggesting that direct leaders’ inclusion, or perhaps the larger (multi-team) forums, hindered psychological safety and led employees to seek alternative voice opportunities. Nevertheless, inclusion has its advantages too, as also called out by participants.

Additionally surprising was that despite the importance of agendas (e.g., Bicharra Garcia et al., 2004; Flinchum et al., 2022) and follow-ups, many excluded leaders reported no involvement in these for skip-level meetings. Table 2 summarizes sentiment against inclusion/exclusion, follow-up involvement, and types of misalignment concerns:

Table 2: Participants’ inclusion / exclusion, follow-ups, misalignment concerns, and sentiment

| Overall sentiment | n | Included / excluded | Follow-ups involvement | Misalignment concerns due to | | | |
|-------------------|---|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| | | | | Skip-level meetings | | External skip-level interactions | |
| | | | | n | % | n | % |
| Negative | 2 | Excluded | No ^a | 2 | 100% | 0 | 0 |
| | 2 | Included | Yes | 0 | 0 | 1 | 50% |
| | | | | | | | |
| Positive | 8 | Excluded | Yes | 1 | 12.5% | 0 | 0 |
| | 5 | Excluded | No | 2 ^b | 40% ^b | 0 | 0 |
| | 6 | Included | Yes | 0 | 0 | 5 | 83.3% |

^a One out of the two indicated they have a follow-up, but it was unclear whether it is with the follower or the manager. ^b Both participants mentioned a minor concern about misalignment.

Additional patterns and mediators, not described in this paper, were identified.

5. Conclusions

Skip-level meetings appear to be the norm and widely favored by skipped first-tier leaders in the U.S. tech industry. Generational and cultural influences, as well as alignment with skipped leaders, such as about their inclusion or exclusion, and via follow-ups, play a significant role and should be addressed in implementation.

This study fills a literature gap in an understudied topic, offering insights that are sometimes novel, unexpected, or extend other theories. Combined with existing knowledge and acknowledging limitations (e.g., the small and purposively selected sample), an early practical implementation framework can emerge. Future research should extend to other sectors, cultures, organizational tiers, and contexts.

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Ethical statement: The study received IRB clearance. All participants explicitly acknowledged a waiver of consent statement.

AI statement: ChatGPT in "Temporary Mode," with data excluded from training and not saved beyond a short period, was used to review the analysis, increasing rigor and ensuring that no significant bias effect occurred, as established earlier, in addition to non-A.I. methods.

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