

Organizational Silence

(Basic Concepts and Its Development Factors)

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Abstract

There are powerful forces in many organizations that cause widespread withholding of information about potential problems or issues by employees named as organizational silence. The base of our model factors are from Morrison & Milliken. They know organizational silence as a “collective” phenomenon and these factors have been organized under levels of analysis (1) Top management team characteristics, (2) Organizational and environmental characteristics, (3) Affecting employee interaction, (4) Managerial belief, (5) Organizational structures and policies, (6) Managements’ fear of negative feedback and (7) Demographic dissimilarity.

Keywords

Organizational Silence, Silence of Employees, voice.

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Introduction

Organizational silence is a behavioral choice that can deteriorate or improve organizational performance. Excluding its emotionally difficult expression, silence can convey approval and sharing or disfavor and opposition, thus becoming a pressure mechanism for both individuals and organizations (Gambarotto et al., 2010). During the 1980's, silence and voice were studied through the lens of justice theory. Issues of fairness and mechanisms of voice in organizational settings were the main focus. The exposure of corporate scandals and ethics violations brought a scholarly focus on whistle blowing and boat rocking. In the 1990's, scholars continued to focus on voice mechanisms and it was not until the year 2000, as a result of Morrison and Milliken's highly publicized article in the *Academy of Management Review*, that scholars began to focus on the relation between management practices, organizational policies and silence and other antecedents to a "climate of silence" (Bogosian, 2012). So in this review definitions, effects of silence on organization and employees, and one of the important model of organizational silence will be discussed.

Employee Silence / Voice

Although the primary focus of this paper is on employee silence, a thorough understanding of this concept requires an examination of how both silence and voice have been examined. While silence is considered significant beyond simply the absence of voice, the two constructs are inexorably related and hence much of the voice literature informs a deeper understanding of silence.

For over 50 years, researchers have been interested in silence and voice related concepts. Employees often have ideas, information and opinions for constructive ways to improve work and work organizations. Sometimes these employees practice voice and express their ideas, information, and opinions; and other times they remain silent and withhold their ideas, information, and opinions. Apparently, expressing and withholding behaviors might appear to be polar opposites because silence implies not speaking while voice implies speaking up on important issues and problems in organizations (Zehir & Erdogan, 2011).

Hirschman defined voice as 'any attempt at all to change', and he suggested that it becomes a better way of preventing decay in organizational performance when an exit is unavailable. He was a forerunner of voice investigation, but his analysis of motivations focused on the voice and exit reaction functions instead of voice and silence. In the management literature, silence is not simply defined as the opposite

of voice in the sense that we cannot qualify silence and voice with just the act or absence of speaking up (Gambarotto et al., 2010).

Therefore, voice can be defined as the expression of ideas, information, opinions or concerns while silence can be defined as withholding those (Brinsfield et al., 2009). While traditional conceptualizations of silence refer to be passive behavior, not all forms of silence represent passive behavior, and all silence is not merely the opposite of voice. Instead, as suggested by Pinder and Harlos, silence can be active, conscious, intentional, and purposeful (Zehir & Erdogan, 2011).

Finally, Brinsfield's results (2009) indicate that employee silence is pervasive, multi-dimensional, can reliably be measured, and is significantly related to other important organizational behavior phenomena.

Definition of organizational silence

Early definitions of silence equated it with "loyalty" and the assumption that nothing was wrong if concerns were not being voiced. But researchers today have shown that a climate of silence can work against desired organizational outcomes (Aylsworth, 2008). Different definitions from organizational silence are as follows :

Pinder and Harlos (2001) defined silence as the absence of voice as it has its own form of communication, involving a range of cognitions, emotions or intentions such as objection or endorsement. Additionally, they recognized that the phenomenon of employee silence might take on different meanings depending on its underlying motives.

Van Dyne, Ang and Botero conceptualized organizational silence as a multi-dimensional construct and present three types of silence, acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence. Acquiescent silence is described as an intentionally passive silent behavior. Defensive silence is described as deliberate omission of work related information based on fear of reprisal. Prosocial silence is withholding of work related information for the benefit of others including the organization (Bogosian, 2012).

Morrison and Milliken see organizational silence as a "collective" phenomenon. They ground the question "why silence?" in the sociology of the workplace, not the psychology of individual workers (Maria, 2006: 226). They proposed that when most members of organizations choose to keep silent about organizational matters, silence becomes a collective behavior, which is referred to as organizational silence (Dan et al., 2009: 1647).

Actually, organizational silence is an inefficient organizational process

that wastes cost and efforts and can take various forms, such as collection silence in meetings, low levels of participation in suggestion schemes, low levels of collective voice and so forth (Shojaie et al., 2011).

So employee silence refers to situations where employees withhold information that might be useful to the organization to which they are a part of whether intentionally or unintentionally. This can happen if employees do not speak up to a supervisor or manager (Subra Tangirala, 2008).

Effects of Silence on Organization and Employees

Organizational Effects

Employee silence is extremely detrimental to organizations often causing an “escalating level of dissatisfaction” among employees, “which manifests itself in absenteeism and turnover and perhaps other undesired behaviors” (Colquitt and Greenberg: 311-312).

Communication is the key to an organization’s success. If employee silence does occur, communication suffers and as a result harms the overall functioning of the organization. In an article entitled “Get Talking” author Chris Penttila says, “Employee silence is killing innovation and perpetuating poorly planned projects that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line” (Penttila, 2003).

This indicates how much an organization can suffer just because of a lack of proper communication. In an article titled “Re-Creating the Indifferent Employee” Carla Joinson talks about negative effects of employee silence such as monetary losses to the organization. Over time silence within organizations causes some employees to be extremely indifferent. Indifferent employees are those who are “indifferent to their jobs, employers and quality of work” (Joinson, 1996).

Indifferent employees cause the organization to lose money and function poorly. Unfortunately when major monetary losses are detected in organizations, managers tend to react by trying to recover the loss, overlooking the fact employees have become indifferent as a result of unaddressed employee silence. More often than not employees who are not doing their share of the work are also not speaking up with the problems they see, leading to a perpetual cycle of employee silence (Joinson, 1996).

Effects on Employees

Employee silence also has many effects on the employees themselves. Indifferent employees, often products of ignored employee silence, tend to feel like cogs at machinery factories, developing the attitude “to get along, go along” (Joinson: 1048).

Of this attitude employees sometimes develop depression and other health problems. Sometimes these employees use pills and alcohol as a “cure” for the problems they are experiencing at work, which actually make their problems worse. In the book *Moose on the Table* by Jim Clemmer, Pete who is the main character of the book develops these types of health problems (Clemmer, 2008).

Another example of such effects on employees is articulated by researcher Subrahmaniam Tangirala who says that “employee silence affects the personal well-being of employees, increases stress,” and causes them to “feel guilty, where they often experience psychological problems, and have trouble seeing the possibility of change”.

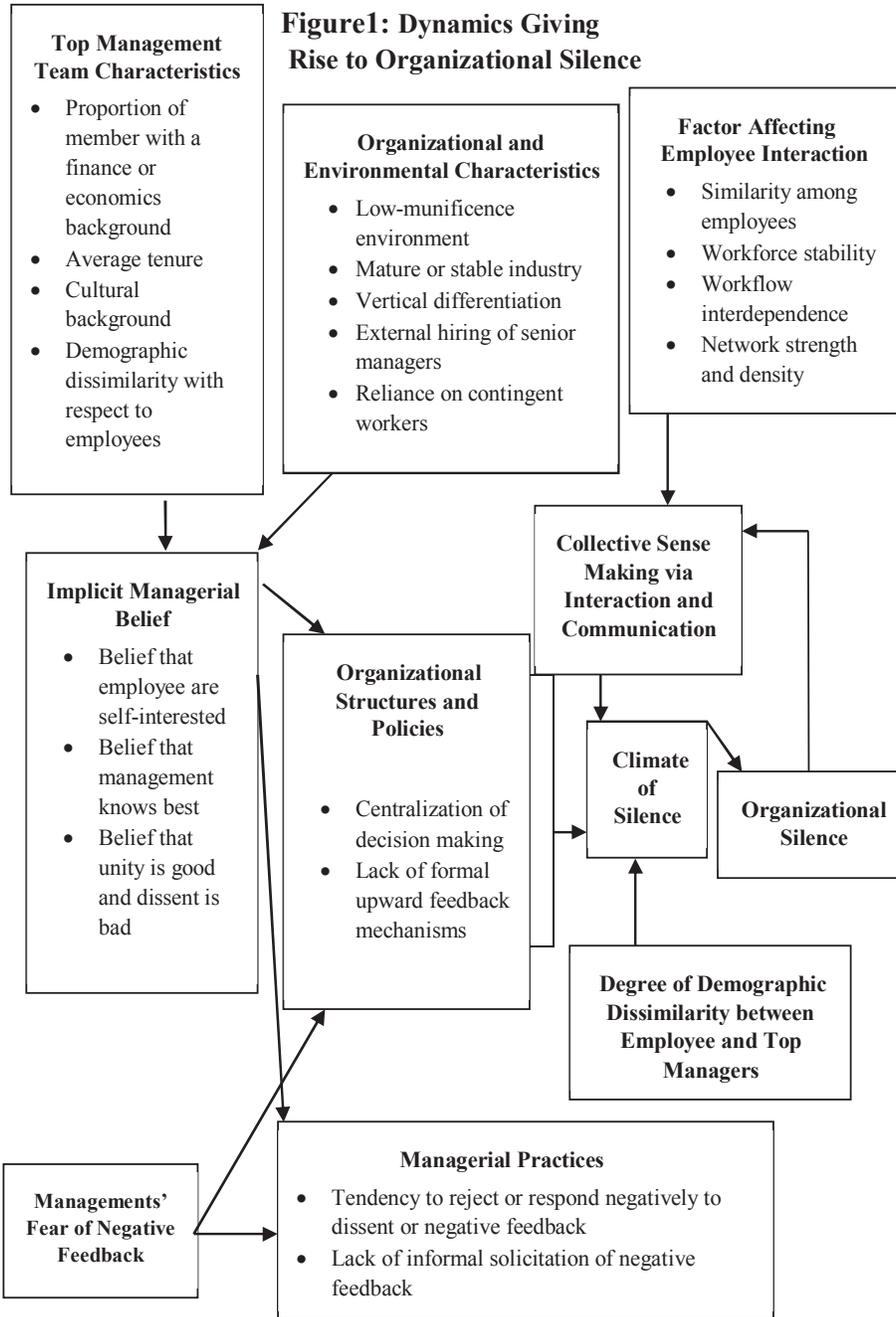
Most people assume that employee silence only hurts the organization, but realistically it hurts both the organization and the employees.

The Development of Organizational Silence

Figure 1 provides an overview of the organizational condition under which organizational silence is most likely to develop. Fundamentally, organizational silence is an outcome that owes its origins to (1) managers' fear of negative feedback and (2) a set of implicit beliefs often held by managers (Morrison & Milliken, 2000: 708).

Managers' Fear of Negative Feedback

One important factor that facilitates the creation of a climate of silence in organization is top managers' fear of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. Argyris and schone (1978) argue that many managers feel a strong need to avoid embarrassment, threat, and feeling of vulnerability or incompetence. Hence, they will tend to avoid any information that might suggest weakness or that might raise questions about current courses of action (Argyris& schone, 1978).



Managers' Implicit Beliefs

Another important factor that lies at the root of organizational silence is a set of beliefs that managers often implicitly hold about employees and about the nature of management. One such belief is that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy. When an organization's top-level managers believe employees are self-interested and untrustworthy, they will then act in ways that discourage upward communication (Redding, 1985: 250).

A second unstated belief is likely to create conditions conducive to organizational silence is the belief that management knows best about most issues of organizational importance. Redding points to the implicit belief among managers "hired hands should put up or shut up" (Redding, 1985: 250). If employees are self-interested, then they are unlikely to know about what is best for organization.

A third unstated belief as a factor in creating a climate conducive to wide-spread silence is the belief that unity, agreement and consensus are signs of organizational health, whereas disagreement and dissent should be avoided. Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe this belief as part of the "unitary view" of organizations, which stands in stark contrast to a "pluralistic view", in which dissent is regarded as normal and conflict as potentially healthy.

Conditions Fostering Managers' Implicit Beliefs: top management team characteristics and organizational and environmental characteristics.

Because the belief about employees being self-interested and untrustworthy are rooted in economic models of human behavior, they are more likely to be held by those whose training and job experience have been oriented toward economics or finance, and these beliefs are likely to be solidified when one's peers hold them as well. Further, the more homogeneous the top management team is with respect to functional training and experience. Also impact of functional background will be intensified when the composition of the top management team is stable over time. The longer top managers have been together, the more entrenched their shared assumptions will tend to be and the less likely the members will be to question those assumptions (Pfeffer, 1997).

The cultural background of the top management team also may affect the beliefs that its members hold about employees. For example, if the top management team is composed of individuals who all come from high power distance cultures, these managers especially will be likely to believe that they know best. In high power distance cultures, individuals are much more likely to believe that the boss is right merely because he or she is the boss.

Also expect that the similarity or dissimilarity of the demographic profile of the top management team in comparison to that of lower-level employees might influence the prevalence of silence-creating beliefs. Hence, the greater the demographic dissimilarity, the more likely it is that top management will view employee input with suspicion (Cosier & Schwenk, 1994).

Organization-level and environmental variables are also likely to affect the likelihood that silence-fostering beliefs will be held by top management.

Also predict that the belief structure contributing to organizational silence will be more likely to dominate management thought in more mature and stable industries than in newer and/or volatile industries. In order to survive, organizations in high-velocity environment need to become adept at considering alternatives and responding to changes in their environment.

High vertical differentiation is also likely to reinforce silence-creating beliefs. Also within tall organizational structures, top managers will be less likely to interact with employees.

In addition, firm that brings in top managers from the outside may be more likely to create a gap between top management and the rest of the organization. Top managers will view employees as untrustworthy.

Finally, heavy reliance on contingent workers is likely to foster the managerial belief. Contingent employees may be viewed by managers as especially self-interested because of their temporary status within the organization (Rousseau & Park, 1993).

Organizational Structures, Policies, and Practices

When the unspoken yet dominant ideology within an organization is that (1) employees are self-interested, (2) management knows best, and (3) disagreement is bad, then management will erect structures and policies that either does not facilitate or that discourage upward information flow. Two common structural features of organizations dominated by these beliefs will be high centralization of decision making and lack of formal upward feedback mechanisms.

If the dominant belief in an organization is that employees are opportunistic and not knowledgeable about what's best for the organization, then it is reasonable for managers not to involve them in decision-making processes. Decentralized decision making, as well as other participative forms of management, will be seen by managers as not worth the time and effort they require. Excluding employees from decision making is also a way to avoid dissent and negative feedback

and, thus, will also stem from the belief that disagreement is bad and from fear of feedback (Foegen, 1999).

The Creation of Shared Perceptions via Collective Sense Making

The term organizational climate refers to shared and enduring perceptions of psychologically important aspects of a particular work environment. Researchers have emphasized that work settings have numerous climates, each pertaining to a particular type of activity. A climate of silence as one is characterized by two shared beliefs: (1) speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort, and (2) voicing one's opinion and concerns is dangerous.

Schneider and Reichers (1983) proposed an interactions perspective. In this perspective it is argued that climate originates from a process of collective sense making, whereby employees together try to derive meaning about their workplace. Through social interaction that employees share their perceptions and experiences and derive a common understanding of the meaning of various aspects of their work context. Because individuals have a strong need to evaluate their beliefs and perceptions, they compare them with those of others. Through this process people "triangulate on a single set of perceptions and meanings". This perspective is similar to the notion that reality within organization is socially constructed. Thus a climate of silence is rooted not only in objective features of the workplace but also in social interactions that contribute to a subjective process of sense making. A process of collective sense making moderates the relationship between organizational structures and managerial practices on the one hand and climate on the other. Hence, to understand how a climate of silence develops within an organization, it is necessary to understand this sense making process and the factor that makes it more likely to occur.

Social network research has indicated that the following variables facilitate contact and communication and hence, increase the likelihood of a strong climate of silence developing.

Similarity, stability, workflow interdependence, and informal social networks are dense and composed of strong ties.

Demographic Dissimilarity

Demographic dissimilarity between top managers and lower-level employees was a factor that we hypothesized would increase the likelihood of management holding beliefs that contribute to silence. This variable is also likely to contribute more directly to a climate of silence by affecting the perceptions and beliefs of lower-level employees.

Conclusion

A new role for health care leaders and managers is envisioned. It is one that places a high value on understanding system complexity and does not take comfort in organizational silence or in simple explanations. It focuses on the interdependencies and not just the components. It values dissent and multiple perspectives as signs of organizational health, and questions agreement, consensus and unity when they are too readily achieved. It is a role that is sensitive to the hidden pitfalls of the availability heuristic, self-serving bias, and the status quo. It understands the impact of social factors on group behavior and the potentially harmful consequences of conformity, diffusion of responsibility, and microclimates of distrust. It does not allow prevailing beliefs to go unchallenged, it thinks differently about what it means to be a good provider, and it is mindful of the frequently neglected interdependencies of care. In this new role, leaders recognize that superb technical knowledge and dedication of front-line providers is no match for the toll that flawed and poorly performing interdependent systems of care can take. In brief, leaders must demonstrate a willingness to understand the complexity of the socio technical systems of which they are a part and be prepared to break the silence. The silence of organization cases low satisfaction , turnover and is harmful both to employees and organization .It suggested that the communication is the key to an organization's success , participative management , proposed system and eventually prepare a safe and secure climate to receive the employees idea and suggestions.

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