

Destructive Role of Employee Silence in Organizational Success

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Abstract

Employees are regarded as major sources of change, creativity, learning, and innovation, which are critical factors to the success of organizations. However, many employees choose not to voice their opinions and concerns about matters in their organizations. Silence can convey approval and sharing or disfavor and opposition, thus becoming a pressure mechanism for both individuals and organizations. Through silence, organizational members suppress concerns about difficult or troubling personal as well as organizational issues. Moreover, there are three types of employee silence as Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence, and Pro-social Silence. Fear, embarrassment, narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility, implicated friends, lack of opportunity for voice, and lack of organizational political skills are factors to cause silence. Employee silence 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”. Indifferent employees cause the organization to lose money and function poorly. If employee silence does occur, communication suffers and as a result harms the overall functioning of the organization. However, it is not easy to break silence climate of employees and their managers. Meanwhile, it is suggested to regulate some rules for supporting the employees' attitudes, to make decisions about the work groups of the organizations and to establish some programs in order to improve the human resource management for training skills of decision – making.

Keywords: Silence, employee silence, organizational success

Introduction

Introduced in 1974, the spiral of silence theory is one that explores hypotheses to determine why some groups remain silent while others are more vocal in forums of public discourse. The theory contends that the silence displayed by certain groups is due to the unpopularity of their opinions in the public sphere. While the majority groups are supported by and consequently

have the willingness to speak out on their issues, the minority groups remain silent due to a fear of isolation (Neill, 2009).

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).

Bowen and Blackmon (2003) used the spiral of silence theory to support their writing on the dynamics of gays and lesbians choice to speak out or remain silent within workplace organizations. The authors address the willingness to speak out dynamic by positing that there is a second spiral of silence that exists on a "micro level within the workgroup and organization".

Morrison and Milliken (2000) proposed that when most members of an organization choose to keep silent about organizational matters, silence becomes a collective behavior, which is referred to as organizational silence. Organizational silence may take various forms, such as collective silence in meetings, low levels of participation in suggestion schemes, low levels of collective voice, and so forth (Huang, et al., 2005).

Employees are regarded as major sources of change, creativity, learning, and innovation, which are critical factors to the success of organizations. However, many employees choose not to voice their opinions and concerns about matters in their organizations. While in a changing world, organizations need for employees who express their ideas. Also, employees choose organizations in which they can express themselves. Because, both employees and managers have high motivation and high performance in a place that silence doesn't exist. How to break silence culture and establish a free climate to encourage employees' voice are big challenges faced to managers (Liu, et al. 2009).

In the current study, we focus on concept of silence and employee silence. Also, we will survey the dimensions, and outcomes of employee silence as a barrier to success in workplace.

Concept of employee silence

Is silence gold? Silence is associated with many virtues: modesty, respect for others, prudence, decorum. People silence themselves to avoid embarrassment, confrontation and other perceived dangers (Perlow & Williams, 2003). But, silence can convey approval and sharing or disfavor and opposition, thus becoming a pressure mechanism for both individuals and organizations (Bagheri, et al. 2012).

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). Defining silence as an employee’s ‘motivation to withhold or express ideas, information and opinions about work-related improvements’ (Donaghey, et al. 2011). 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.

Pinder and Harlos (2001) examined the relationship between theoretical concepts of voice and silence as proposed by Hirschman (1970) as a means to reflect how employees express a sense of dissatisfaction. Pinder and Harlos suggest that Hirschman’s concept of silence reflects a bifurcated means of understanding employee’s concerns in essentially a simple binary either/or manner. That is, the organizations either recognize employee dissatisfaction by voice when employees express themselves by speaking up or by exit as expressed when employees leave the organization. As such, Hirschman devoted little attention to the phenomenon of silence in organizations. That is, he did not study the alternative concealed behaviors that describe those who both remain silent within the organization and yet are assumed loyal by those in authority (Slade, 2008).

Richard (2003) mentioned following factors to cause silence:

- *Fear*: The fear obstacle is perhaps easiest to understand, not so easy to overcome. However, there are some methods that can help enable courage. Most of us do not like conflict. If we oppose unethical behavior, the powerful people engaging in unethical behavior may retaliate against us. We should be afraid. The preponderance of evidence demonstrates that public whistle blowers are effectively retaliated against in their organizational lives with often devastating consequences in the private and family lives.
- *Embarrassment*: The embarrassment obstacle is more subtle. Many of us are reluctant to talk about messy topics such as sex, money, politics, and ethics because we feel that we may not be able to adequately and/or professionally express our concerns
- *Narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility*: Many define ethical responsibility in a very narrow, individualistic rather than in an organizational citizenship sense. We assume that if we personally understand what is ethical and do not act unethically ourselves, then we are ethical even if around us, unethical behavior prevails. If we act ethically in our individual organizational work boxes we are not obligated to see, hear, or speak about the unethical behaviors around us. As Edmund Burke observed, “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an un-pitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” Organizational ethics education and research as reflected in journal articles and textbooks reinforce this too narrow framework. For the most part, the textbooks and journal articles end when the individual understands and/or makes a

personal, individualistic decision about what is ethical. That is a good part of the beginning, but certainly not the end of the problem.

- *Implicated Friends*: Sometimes, our friends being involved in the unethical behavior is just as important an obstacle as more powerful people being involved. While we may fear the powerful, we naturally want to help and not hurt our friends. We can risk those friendships when we inquire, question, and/or challenge the behavior of friends on ethical grounds. While the old saying about “opposing the sin but not the sinner” sounds good, it is very difficult to operationalize.
- *Lack of opportunity for “voice”*: Macro level, structural characteristics of organizations often do not permit political space for voice. Where there is no safe, political space for voice, silence can result. Where can we discuss organizational ethics issues? Most organizations are not democracies. Even when organizations encourage participative management and decision making, the participation is tightly focused and controlled from the top. For example, upper level management can encourage participation about how to more efficiently accomplish top management’s objectives. The agenda is often not very open to participative formulation. In addition, relatively few organizations have participative or democratic assemblies or congresses where organizational employees, members and other stakeholders are able to both formulate agendas and participate in making decisions on important issues including ethical issues.
- *Lack of organizational political skills*: Many of us do not understand or have the political skills useful for organizational ethics effectiveness. There are at least five sets of methods that can be both effective and relatively safe: forcing methods, win-win methods, dialogic methods, third-party methods, and social movement methods. While the dialogic methods are theoretically better, often the political-economic reality is such that the powerful people involved in the unethical behavior are unwilling and even unable to engage in dialog about unethical and corrupt behaviors. Further, they have the power to choose not to discuss the issues.

Moreover, if the group includes the people of who have the same cultures, their behavior is valuable. Therefore, such cultures help the employees improve their job performance (Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, the difference between the cultures causes the employees to keep silent.

In addition to above factors, Van Dyne, Ang & Botero (2003) differentiate three specific behaviors based on three employee motives. They introduced three types of silence as followings:

- Acquiescent Silence,
- Defensive Silence, and
- Pro-social Silence

Acquiescent Silence

When most people label another person's behavior as 'silent', they often mean the person is not actively communicating. As noted above, however, we limit our conceptualization of silence to situations where employees have relevant ideas, information, and opinions and yet choose not to express these ideas. We do not view silence as the mere absence of voice and instead propose that different forms of silence are driven by different employee motives. Drawing on Pinder and Harlos' (2001) conceptualization, the first form of silence we consider is Acquiescent Silence. We define Acquiescent Silence as withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions, based on resignation. Thus, Acquiescent Silence suggests disengaged behavior that is more passive than active (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

Defensive Silence

Pinder and Harlos (2001) used the term Quiescent Silence to describe deliberate omission based on personal fear of the consequences of speaking up. This is consistent with Morrison and Milliken's (2000) emphasis on the personal emotion of fear as a key motivator of organizational silence. It is also consistent with psychological safety and voice opportunity as critical preconditions for speaking up in work contexts. Building on the work of Pinder and Harlos/Morrison and Milliken, we define Defensive Silence as withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions as a form of self-protection, based on fear. Defensive Silence is intentional and proactive behavior that is intended to protect the self from external threats. In contrast to Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence is more proactive, involving awareness and consideration of alternatives, followed by a conscious decision to withhold ideas, information, and opinions as the best personal strategy at the moment (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

Pro-social Silence

Thus far, our description of Acquiescent and Defensive Silence draws on prior management literature on silence. In this section, we now extend existing conceptualizations of silence by proposing a third type of silence that to our knowledge has not yet been addressed in the literature. Here we focus on Pro-social Silence. In developing this notion, we draw on the Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) literature which describes Pro-social forms of employee behavior. We define Pro-social Silence as withholding work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organization – based on altruism or cooperative motives. Like organizational citizenship, Pro-social Silence is intentional and proactive behavior that is primarily focused on others. Like OCB, Pro-social Silence is discretionary behavior that can not be mandated by an organization. Like Defensive Silence, Pro-social Silence is based on awareness and consideration of alternatives and the conscious decision to withhold ideas, information, and opinions. In contrast to Defensive Silence, Pro-social Silence is motivated by concern for others, rather than by fear of negative personal consequences that might occur from speaking up (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

Outcomes Of Employee Silence

Employee silence 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”. 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” (Bagheri, et al. 2012).

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). 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” (Bagheri, et al. 2012).

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 Penttilla says, “Employee silence is killing innovation and perpetuating poorly planned projects that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line” (Pentilla, 2003).

By silencing, in various ways, managers are able to achieve at least three outcomes. First, these managers are able to construct and maintain the discursive, if not physical, separation of personal and professional. This is an approach that some managers indicate that they learned from mentors. Second, managers perpetuate the façade of a singular, unproblematic commitment to the organization – a commitment that is not now, nor in the foreseeable future, affected by a personal commitment such as eldercare. Third, through absolute silencing these managers protect their organization from learning about and potentially having to develop responses to help their employee manage these difficult, personal problems (McGowan, 2002).

It is not easy to break silence climate of employees and their managers. The behavioral cycles that maintain organizational silence will be hard to break in part because they are not subject to direct observation or discussion. To prevent silence from characterizing their organizations, leaders should not only permit, but reward, employees who come forward with sensitive or risky information, and should create formal mechanisms through which employees can speak up anonymously if they wish to do so. Otherwise, undesirable reactions may elicit from employees, such as not valued, lack control, and cognitive dissonance (Reichers, et al. 1997). Organizational silence can have detrimental effects on decision-making and processes of change by blocking alternative views, negative feedback, and accurate information.

Conclusion

It is often believed that the employees do not have suitable experience in perceiving main issues. They do not authority over the issues and their behavior can only increase the difficulties and negative attitudes toward the partnership. Increasingly, the managers believe that the employees are encouraged to speak plainly. On the other hand, they use various methods to silence the opposite employees (Panahi, et al. 2012).

Discursive engagement in organizations involves complex micro-processes of talk and silence. Through talk, organizational members develop understandings of organizational policies and procedures, construct role identities, both organizational and personal, and generally learn the rules of the game (Boden, 1994). Through silence, organizational members suppress concerns about difficult or troubling personal as well as organizational issues (McGowan, 2002).

Silencing can have the undesirable consequences of reinforcing existing patriarchal structures and processes as well as positions of power and powerlessness. Silencing, whether absolute, revisionist or selective, does not facilitate an understanding of the issues facing employees. As concluded, it is not neglected the management ideas affect on the managers' and employees' behavior.

Regarding the results, it is suggested to present a suitable rewarding system for creative ideas, to train the relational skills to the managers and the supervisors, to regulate some rules for supporting the employees' attitudes, to make decisions about the work groups of the organizations, to change the organizational cultures related to the learning organizations and organizational learning, to establish some programs in order to improve human resource management for training skills of decision – making.

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