

Understanding workplace voice and silence

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About the author

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Abstract

It is important for managers to gather feedback from employees in order to make important organizational decisions. However, employees don't always provide open and honest feedback to their managers. Where organizations have a large number of employees who routinely withhold information from management, a culture of silence is said to exist. This article provides a background to the workplace silence literature and highlights the mismatch between employee and management views surrounding the value of feedback in the workplace. Suggestions are also

provided for ways in which managers and employees can communicate more effectively.

Background

Employee voice has been described by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as “two-way communications, an exchange of information between managers and employees or 'having a say' about what goes on in the organization” (CIPD, 2014). Nowadays, most employees would be familiar with the terms *employee engagement* and *employee voice* which are mechanisms designed to provide employees with the opportunity to be open and honest about their ideas and opinions with regards to situations occurring within the workplace.

Despite the fact that many organizations demand that their employees display *openness* and *honesty*, many employees do not feel that they can be open and honest with their manager (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). Many organizations advertise openness as a

corporate value to emphasise that they seek to recruit and cultivate employees who have a predisposition to share information willingly. However, not all organizations are successful at promoting openness and honesty and where a lack of openness exists, a climate of silence is said to exist (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

A climate of silence, thought to be collective in nature, has been defined as “widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p.708). Therefore, silence persists in organizations when a large number of employees choose intentionally to withhold ideas, information and opinions with relevance to improvements in work and work organizations (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). For example, this could be a suggestion by an employee about how to improve customer service, or it could be an employee sharing their feelings with their manager about a recent change initiative. The reasons employees withhold information has received a lot of theoretical and empirical attention, a summary of which is presented in this article.

Why is employee voice important?

One of the reasons employee voice is so valuable to organizations is that it makes available multiple points of view about situations allowing managers to make better decisions (Nemeth, 1997) and it has been shown to improve organizational performance (Enz & Schwenk, 1991). In particular, for organizational change to be successful, it has been found that employees need to feel comfortable speaking up (Edmondson, 2003). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that workplace silence is potentially detrimental to organizational performance and understand how this can be so.

At an individual level, silence has been linked to absenteeism, turnover and poor job satisfaction, indicating that those who do not feel listened to by management feel unfairly treated (Greenberg & Folger, 1983). Furthermore, those who feel dissatisfied and don't get the opportunity to speak up feel less satisfied, less committed and are more likely to leave the organization (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers & Mainous, 1998).

At an organizational level, Nemeth (1997) discussed how by preventing people from talking openly and voicing their opinions, organizations can become resistant to change and reliant on top leadership for

creative ideas, resulting in a lack of innovation and creative solutions to problems at lower levels. Others have highlighted the reduced ability for organizational learning (Argyris, 1977), poor quality of outputs (Oestreich, 1995) and the danger of top management making decisions based on partial information (Detert & Burris, 2007).

There are a number of common ways in which organizations seek feedback from employees and these can be formal or informal. Some examples of formal methods, which may be seen in the workplace include an annual survey seeking employee feedback about particular aspects of the organization or a suggestion box where ideas for improvement are contributed. However, gathering formal feedback can be time-consuming. For example, many employee engagement surveys only happen once a year. Even if they do happen more frequently, it takes time to design the questionnaire, wait for responses and analyse the data. In addition, before the results are released, there is usually a committee meeting at which decisions about how to present the data to the different audiences are made. Therefore, many managers use informal methods as a more direct and speedy

way to gather feedback. Informal methods could include unscheduled meetings, cigarette breaks, conversations in the corridor or grabbing a coffee together. However, employees seem to be uncomfortable taking part in both formal and informal feedback activities which results in the organization and its managers lacking vital information with which to make important decisions about organizational performance.

What prevents employees from speaking up to managers?

The silence research draws on both theory and empirical evidence to help make sense of individual behaviours in the workplace and explain why it's sometimes really hard for employees to say what they want to their managers.

Implicit Employee Beliefs

Individual belief systems have been found to be important for driving levels of silence within an organization. In a study carried out by Detert and Edmondson (2011), it was found that there were five key beliefs that prevented employees from talking openly with their manager:

- Firstly, employees believe that when managers hear feedback on the current situation they perceive

this as criticism of their personal performance;

- No employee should speak to their manager without being armed with facts and figures to avoid losing face when challenged;
- It is wrong to speak directly to a manager's manager for fear of reprisals for bypassing the immediate line manager;
- An employee should never challenge the manager in a group setting because that will embarrass the manager and will attract sanctions;
- Finally, any of the above will impact upon career progression and therefore these activities should never be carried out.

Somewhat surprisingly, Detert and Edmondson (2011) found that the participants were unable to cite any examples of where the actual behaviour of the manager had matched the behaviour the employees feared.

Detert and Edmondson were keen to understand how these beliefs developed and following more investigation, it was suggested that voice and silence behaviours originate outside of the workplace and are brought into the workplace as part of everyday behaviour.

For example, from an early age, individuals are brought up to view older people such as parents, grandparents, teachers and religious leaders as authority figures. Through interactions with these authority figures, beliefs are formed about the effectiveness of voicing opinions and asking for things and these beliefs are then applied during the workplace when interacting with managers. For example, a child who has an attentive parent that provides and cares for them when they express a problem or a concern is more likely to speak up than a child with a parent who only attends to the child when the parent feels it is appropriate; not when the child requests it. Therefore, if an individual's experience has previously been that speaking up never ends in a favourable outcome, then it is unlikely that the individual will act differently in the workplace. In a similar way, if an individual has developed a more positive attitude to speaking up, then they are more likely to adopt that behaviour in a work environment too (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino & Edmondson, 2009).

Fear

It has been shown that beliefs play a fundamental role in shaping levels of silence even though the beliefs are likely

to be formed before individuals enter the workplace. However, one of the key factors underpinning the persistence of beliefs, even though they do not appear to be based on actual managerial behaviour, is a fear of what might happen if the employee spoke up (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003).

In a study conducted to understand what fears people hold about speaking up in the workplace it was found that common fears included:

- Damaging a relationship through loss of trust and respect;
- Fear of retaliation or punishment like losing a job or being overlooked for promotion;
- Fear of being labelled or viewed negatively as a troublemaker or a complainer (Milliken et al., 2003).

In fact, 85% of participants in this study indicated that at some time, they had chosen to keep quiet about a workplace issue rather than speak to their manager about it. This would suggest that the inability to talk about issues with managers is a common experience for many employees and that beliefs endure over time because fear prevents evidence from being gathered to demonstrate otherwise.

Detert and Edmondson (2011) found that individuals were less influenced by the behaviour of their manager than by their initial beliefs about speaking up, which would indicate that although the role of managers is important in encouraging voice, perception of the managers' behaviour may in fact be a more important determinant than actual observed behaviour, further underlining the power of beliefs in shaping silence.

Silence has been found to be a collective concept indicating that individuals are unlikely to speak up unless they know that they have the support of others (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This *spiral of silence* is thought to be driven by the desire to be accepted by peers so they are keen to avoid the risk of isolation by speaking out about something which is deemed to be inappropriate by others. Therefore, the employee will try to gauge the most popular opinion amongst peers and go along with this opinion. That course of action could be contradictory to the personal beliefs of the employee themselves, such is the strength of their desire to belong to the peer group.

In a group setting, the lack of vocalised opinions from all group members can lead to misleading dominant opinions, formed by the loudest and most

vociferous people (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). This poses a real risk for organizations which practice the mantra “silence is agreement”, meaning that managers treat decisions as unanimous if employees do not speak up to represent the minority opinions. This has a knock-on effect in that managers think that the employees are happy with the course of action when in fact the employees could be unhappy or doing something other than that which the manager thinks they are doing.

It is thought that one of the reasons that people are worried about negative consequences including loss of reputation or being called a troublemaker is the loss of social support networks that might follow from being rejected by colleagues for speaking up (Milliken et al., 2003).

Employees rely on both formal and informal co-operation from colleagues to carry out their role effectively (Milliken et al., 2003). However, one of the problems associated with rejection by peers is that in situations where colleagues prefer not to work with someone because of the way they have behaved, the rejected employee will find their role increasingly difficult to carry out. In turn, this isolation might deepen as colleagues distance themselves from employees who are

subsequently perceived to be underperforming.

No-one wants to deliver bad news

A large number of studies completed by Rosen, Tesser and colleagues confirmed that not only do individuals dislike passing on bad news, but that they will take longer to pass on bad news than good news (Tesser, Rosen & Tesser, 1971). This unwillingness to deliver bad news has become known as the MUM effect (Rosen & Tesser, 1970). Examples of this behaviour could be an employee not passing on a customer complaint to a manager or an employee failing to tell the manager about a large quantity of defective product.

When considering the status differential that exists between managers and employees in a hierarchical organization, a study about the effects of hierarchy on upward communication found that a lack of trust in the manager was highly correlated with the amount of information withheld or distorted in communications with them (Roberts & O’Reilly, 1974). Therefore, if an employee trusts their manager, there is more chance that they will share bad news with the manager than if they don’t trust them.

Taking into account implicit beliefs, fears and a natural predisposition to avoid delivering bad news, there is a powerful combination of forces which naturally lead employees to be cautious about speaking up. Yet, the difficulty is that organizations rely on employees speaking to managers to tell them what's happening so they can make effective decisions. This would suggest that managers should therefore encourage employees to speak up. However, as will be seen in the next section, this is not always the case.

What role does the manager play in influencing silence?

Many studies have focused on the role of employee silence, but less studies have focused specifically on the way in which managerial behaviour affects levels of employee silence.

A key role of managers within the workplace is to encourage openness in employees, and managers do this by increasing "subordinates' perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised" (Detert & Burris, 2007, p.871).

It has been found that a manager who is perceived to openly encourage feedback and challenge from employees elicits

more feedback than a leader who isn't as encouraging (Detert & Burris, 2007). Furthermore, managers who believe that seeking feedback is indeed important for organizational performance are shown to make more opportunities for employees to provide feedback to them (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

Implicit Managerial Beliefs

In the same way that employees have beliefs that shape the way they view manager behaviours, managers also have beliefs that influence how they view employee behaviour. Morrison and Milliken (2000) presented three beliefs that attempt to explain managerial behaviour that leads to silence:

- Employees are self-interested and untrustworthy and are therefore unlikely to act in the organization's interest without specific instruction and close management;
- Management knows best about most issues of organizational importance therefore employee opinion is not important;
- Unity and agreement are signs of a healthy organization whereas dissent and disagreement are not.

It is thought that these beliefs are reinforced by the focus on rational-

thinking which is promoted in the economics and financial educational backgrounds of many senior managers (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). As a result, organizations where such beliefs are widespread often display a lack of upward feedback mechanisms for employees to pass information to management easily (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

Fear of negative feedback

There is evidence to show that no-one likes negative feedback and that many people will go out of their way to avoid hearing negative feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). This is because it could threaten their self-esteem by providing information which does not support the image that an individual has of themselves. Furthermore, it does not matter if the feedback is about the individual directly or about something with which they identify because both are undesirable (e.g., a change programme which they are leading). However, it is not always possible to avoid hearing negative feedback, and it has been shown that after a manager has received negative feedback from an employee or someone else lower than them in the hierarchy, a manager may discredit the feedback or ignore it completely. However, feedback from those more

senior is taken more seriously because managers have more influence over the employee's career (Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979). Managers may therefore prefer employees to be silent so that they don't hear negative information.

So how can employees and managers communicate more effectively?

It would appear that within the workplace both employee and managerial level influences interact with each other to produce varying degrees of silence within individuals; and it is this which leads to different behaviours in different situations. For example, an individual may offer feedback to their manager in a one-to-one setting but amongst a group of peers may remain silent. Although this may appear confusing to the manager, it is nonetheless understandable when viewed from the employee perspective, as fear of peer rejection may be stronger than any fear associated with speaking to a manager. However, for others, in particular those who are more skilled socially, speaking up in a group setting poses less concern because they are confident that they will not be rejected for their views.

One of the great paradoxes highlighted by the voice and silence literature is that management has overall responsibility for

shaping levels of silence within the organization. Management attitudes have been shown to directly affect the number of upward communication channels (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005) yet it is this group of people who are less inclined to welcome feedback from those below them.

The voice and silence literature has not traditionally focused on solutions, but has focused more on understanding the dynamics of why some people speak up and some don't. However, there are a few suggestions based on the literature which could be useful for managers to consider as next steps in increasing information flow between employees and managers.

- Bies (2009) gave an example of a technique used by President Kennedy, acting as a manager, who deliberately stayed away from a meeting with his cabinet members, who were employees, so that they could speak as equals whilst he wasn't present. This allowed the employees to talk freely amongst themselves and think about the type of issues that they wanted to raise to the President, which were then fed back to him directly by a

spokesperson at a later date. This allowed President Kennedy to hear a range of views that he wouldn't have heard had he been there, and it provided a safe opportunity for the employees to share their ideas and opinions.

- High levels of perceived safety, defined as "the individual's judgment about the risks or potential negative outcomes associated with speaking up" helps employees to feel less fearful about the protection of their image and reputation and weigh up the risks of formal sanctions before deciding whether to speak up or not (Morrison, 2011, p.382). Therefore, managers could help employees to develop higher levels of perceived safety through understanding perceived risks and fears and providing reassurance that speaking up would not have a negative outcome.
- As was described earlier, fear was shown to be a strong driver of behaviour and asking an individual to speak up against an already formed opinion usually leads to fear of rejection by the individual (Noelle Neumann, 1974). Bowen and Blackmon (2003)

subsequently highlighted that minority opinions are therefore often lost in group settings. By practising the mantra “silence is not agreement”, managers could remind themselves that every single one of their work group team members deserves the opportunity to speak up and participate in any decisions which require employee feedback. Furthermore, seeking one-to-one feedback may be a more suitable solution than relying on feedback through meetings or group gatherings given the fear of rejection and isolation that is attached to speaking up in a group.

- Detert and Edmondson (2011) demonstrated that employee beliefs drive their behaviour. Therefore, to invite more employee feedback, a manager could gain an understanding of employees’ belief systems. For example, an employee who believes that disagreement with a manager is disrespectful could be engaged more successfully when asked to come up with their own ideas rather than being asked to critique the manager’s already formed

ideas. On the other hand, Detert and Edmondson (2011) also found that employees do not speak up to their manager because they are scared of what might happen. However, there was no evidence to show that if employees did speak up, the manager would act in the same ways that the employees feared. Therefore, employees could be encouraged to speak up to demonstrate that fears do not necessarily come true, therefore allowing employees to gain confidence in speaking up.

- In an extension to the studies of the MUM effect (see page 31), it was found that if the recipient wanted to know the bad news, there was a greater chance that they would hear the bad news than if they did not want to hear it at all (Conlee & Tesser, 1973). Therefore as a manager, being prepared to accept bad news is more likely to shape appropriate manager behaviour and yield more feedback from employees.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that managers are employees also and they themselves have a manager, so this should encourage a level of empathy in

the manager towards the employee. This means that the manager could look at ways in which they themselves would like to be engaged as a guide to how employees might also like to share information with their managers.

In summary, information is required by managers to make decisions but there are influences within the workplace that make the sharing of information between employees and managers difficult. It is therefore important to consider these influences and create opportunities to encourage information flow in order to enhance organizational performance.

If you are interested in hearing more about fostering better working relationships between employees and managers, the EAWOP WorkLab in November 2014 will be addressing this topic. For more details please visit the Worklab [website](#).

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