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Why Won't People Speak Up? Unpacking Silence at Work

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines employee silence, namely, the causes of silence and how it might be overcome.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing from academic research and work with organizations, the author explains that workplace diversity is insufficient to guarantee the contributions of diverse voices. The author then provides an overview of why individuals choose to remain silent and explores aspects of organizational culture and climate that contribute to silencing behaviors. Finally, the author offers suggestions on how organizational leaders can overcome silence.

Findings – The findings suggest that employee voice can be activated through a psychologically safe working environment in which leaders adopt a learning mindset, practice humility, create opportunities for all team members to contribute, treat people with fairness and respect, and hold others accountable to do the same. The findings also indicate that leaders can support safe and inclusive working environments by challenging their basic assumptions and accepting vulnerability.

Originality/value – This paper makes an important contribution to the field of organization development and change by providing suggestions for how organizations can address workplace concerns and enhance performance by removing the inhibitors of ‘employee voice’.

Keywords: silence; voice; diversity; psychological safety; fairness; humility

Why Won't People Speak Up? Unpacking Silence at Work

Workplace diversity has long been seen as a means to improve organizational performance by leveraging the diverse perspectives and experiences people bring to work. However, the 'presence' of diversity does not necessarily mean that individuals will readily speak up and share their thoughts, ideas, and/or concerns. In many situations, individuals weigh the pros and cons of speaking up before ultimately choosing the safer response of 'silence' (i.e., consciously withholding "potentially important information, suggestions or concerns"; Morrison et al., 2015, p. 548). When this occurs, teams and organizations may not have the information required to make more effective decisions or to identify and address important issues.

Through academic research and work with organizations, I have encountered numerous examples of employee silence. For instance, women, persons of color, and individuals from other traditionally marginalized groups have elected to withhold their ideas rather than take the risk that these ideas might be rejected. Similarly, individuals who have not been part of the in-group have refrained from sharing an unpopular opinion out of concern that it might be ridiculed. Worse still, individuals who have been bullied and harassed have chosen to remain silent rather than potentially make the situation worse through disclosure.

Choosing Silence

Elizabeth Morrison, a professor in management at New York University, suggests that people typically consider two key factors when deciding whether to speak up at work, namely, the perceived safety and value of doing so. Decisions to withhold potentially valuable information generally stem from concerns that sharing this information could lead to negative outcomes, including increased conflict with colleagues, being viewed unfavorably, retaliation from colleagues or supervisors, or lower performance evaluations. On the other hand, individuals

may be just as likely to remain silent, particularly, if they believe that sharing information will have limited impact. An important consideration is that silence is not motivated by the need to see the team or organization fail, but rather self-preservation (Morrison et al., 2015).

Contributors to Employee Silence

Given the importance of gaining insights and other relevant information from employees, it is essential to understand the contextual factors that perpetuate employee silence. One of the key enablers of silence is social status. Because higher status individuals tend to be listened to over others, they can exert greater influence in decision making. Unless there is openness to seek out the opinions of others, individuals who are perceived to be of lower status are likely to refrain from sharing potentially critical information with others.

What's more, high status individuals may be protected from some forms of misconduct, particularly, if an organization's culture promotes results over people. As described in a recent article, these conditions can perpetuate network silence in which members withhold information, are discouraged from reporting misconduct or threatened with retaliation, or if they do choose to report, their complaints are dismissed (Hershcovis et al., 2021).

Organizational cultures that seek to assign blame and hold people responsible rather than learn from their slipups may also compel employees to hide or downplay mistakes due to concerns of repercussions for themselves or others. Equally, a climate of injustice, in which leaders make inconsistent, unethical or biased decisions that lead to inequitable and unfair outcomes for employees, is likely to influence employees to hold back from sharing potentially important information. Finally, silence is expected to be reinforced when employees perceive that their organization neither supports nor values diverse voices (Workman-Stark, 2017).

Voice Activating Behaviors

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that employee voice cannot be activated without individuals having a sense of psychological safety—the belief that the work environment is safe enough for taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 2018). In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson suggests that leaders can help create a sense of psychological safety by adopting the following behaviors:

- Encourage constructive voice – candid sharing of adverse or unpopular information
- Promote learning from mistakes rather than seeking to assign blame
- Adopt a learning mindset – the acknowledgment that leaders do not have all the answers and require input from others
- Practice humble inquiry – ask questions and listen to the answers
- Create opportunities for input from all team members
- Respond productively – acknowledge and thank people for their input
- Confront ‘silencing’ behaviors

In addition to the above list, I stress that leaders also need to consider their decision-making processes that involve people. Specifically, to assess whether these processes and outcomes are fair, bias-free, and consistently applied.

When employee voice is largely foreign to an organization or team, leaders may also need to support team members with developing specific behaviors that promote safety and inclusion at the team level, such as seeking input and soliciting feedback, engaging in more productive forms of conflict, and speaking up when they see evidence of disrespectful or exclusionary treatment.

Putting Behaviors into Practice

Through my work with senior leaders, putting these inclusive behaviors into practice often requires much more than making the decision to lead differently. It may also require leaders to challenge assumptions about certain groups of people, the value of learning from mistakes, and the importance of demonstrating both humility and vulnerability.

Organizational development experts, Edgar and Peter Schein, define humble leadership as an intrinsically relational process of learning and sharing that builds trust, openness and the psychological safety for people to speak up and be heard (Schein & Schein, 2018). Part of this leadership process involves asking more questions to draw people out and build relationships and less telling people what to do.

In addition to providing opportunities for leaders and team members to experiment with new behaviors, such as through developmental assignments and action learning, I encourage taking advantage of various resources (e.g., articles, books, videos) and specialized training programs that focus on recognizing and mitigating bias and the practice of humble inquiry. As I have learned through the graduate leadership courses that I teach, there is an art to asking good questions and actively listening to the answers.

Taken together, these steps have the potential to significantly upend a climate of silence and enable teams and organizations to benefit from the unique insights and experiences that people bring to work. By accepting vulnerability, practicing humility and bringing assumptions and biases to the forefront, leaders can become more open and curious about other points of views (including those that are unpopular) and lead a process of change toward a more inclusive environment in which diverse perspectives are welcomed and valued.

Conclusions

There are many reasons why individuals choose to remain silent at work, including concerns for safety and the perceived value of their input. Unpacking the various factors that perpetuate silence and limit voice, and taking steps to address them, will go a long way to realizing the value of diverse voices, particularly, those that have been traditionally marginalized.

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