

## Organizational silence Some Conceptual Contemplations

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### Introduction

In today's competitive world employees are treated as the most valuable assets in an organization. Organizations are in search of employee who can actively contribute to their growth. Potential employees are looking for friendly environment where they can share their knowledge and ideas and be part of the team. If they have a positive work environment where employees are recognized and where there is a good communication system, in which they have the freedom to voice their opinions and concerns, they will be more committed and loyal to the organization. According to Quinn and Spreitzer (1997), organizations are increasingly demanding more and more from their employees such as taking initiative, speaking up and accepting responsibility because of more intensive competition, higher customer expectations, more focus on quality indicating a constant world of change. The absence of a proper system for communication, either due to organizational factors or due to personal factors, may lead to a phenomenon called silence.

Organizational silence, a more recent construct in organizational behavior, refers to the withholding of potentially important input instances when an employee fails to share what is on his or her mind (Morrison & Milliken 2000, Pinder&Harlos 2001). It is explained as "consciously withholding of works, ideas, knowledge and thoughts towards organizational development by the employees". Organizational silence is a phenomenon which exists in all organizations at various intensities. When the intensity of organizational silence is low, it is not a matter of concern but, when it becomes a collective behavior it will affect organizational performance.

If the silence become collective in nature that means the decision to be remain silent may be interrelated with the decision that the other employees are making (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).In most of the time most of the employees are aware about the problem but they are not ready to report to the top level, then the silence will be collective in nature and that reflect the

social dynamics involved in the silence. This paper arise from the review of literature and focusing on the factors that lead to a silence culture in organization.

Existing literature argues that the difference in employee motives and individual factors are the reasons for withholding their opinion .Organizational silence can be classified into various forms,based on the focal categories of employee motives like disengaged, self-protective, and otheroriented. Disengaged behavior based on resignation or feeling unable to make a difference leads to one form of silence namely Acquiescent Silence .In this form of silence employees are withholding their opinions and ideas based on the belief that speaking up is pointless and that doesn't make any differences at all.

The other type of silence which arises from the feeling of fear and that leads to self- protective behavior of employees is named as Defensive silence. This is consistent with Morrison and Milliken's (2000) emphasis on the personal emotion of fear as a key motivator of organizational silence.In this form of silence, the employee withholds their ideas, opinion and suggestion as a form of self-protection based on fear. Compared to acquiescent silence,defensive silence is more intentional and proactive in nature intended to protect themselves from external threats (Schlenker and Weigold, 1989).

The third form of silence known as Pro social silence focuses on the other oriented motive of the employee based on the believe of cooperation. Pro social silence is motivated by concern for others in the organization rather than fear of negative personal consequences that might occur as a result of expressing their opinion. This form of silence is more related to the Organizational Citizenship behavior which reflects personal voluntary behaviors which contribute to the sociological and psychological climate of the organization.Literature on OCB and silence shows that there are some common dimensions of OCB like,Altruism:assistance to an individual colleague on a task, Courtesy:warning other people in the organization regarding changes which may have an impact on their work,Conscientiousness: conducting one`s tasks in a manner that exceeds the minimum requirements,Sportsmanship: avoiding complaining about insignificant issues andCivic virtue: taking part in the management of the organization.Podsakoff et al. (2000), identified that sportsmanship has direct relevanceto ProSocial Silence. Sportsmanship is defined as the Pro Social absence of complaints; tolerating the inevitable inconveniences and impositions of work without whining and grievances (Organ, 1988).

### **Why Silence Occurs in Organization**

Morrison and Milliken (2000) define organizational silence as a typically collective act of employees consciously not sharing their knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and experiences with the

management about the issues for their work or to improve their working environment. Employees are forced to remain silent when they have to work in an environment where a culture of fear prevails. This makes them reluctant to open up their ideas and opinions on organizational policies and top management decisions. And in some cases managers want to avoid negative feedback from the employee as they think that it will negatively affect their career. Thus, they may make an effort to create a climate that inhibits negative feedback that comes from their subordinates (Slade 2008).

Literature shows that there are different reasons for silence. This can be classified into two categories: -one is organizational factors and the other is individual factors. **Organizational factors** include:-

1. **Administrative Reasons:** This reason for silence exist in most of the hierarchical organization .If the employee feel that there is discrepancy between employee and the executives or sometimes the attitude of the executive that they know the best and the culture of the organization doesn't support employees for speaking up against the administrative matters. All these reasons restrict employees to come up with new ideas and suggestions. The organization does not have a proper communication system or they follow a rigid hierarchical structure and centralized decision making style create a silence culture in organization.
2. **Top management and supervisor's attitude:** The top management and supervisor are not ready to hear the voice of their employees that create the silence climate. Top management feel threatened by their performance and responsibility if they allow the employees to voice their opinion
3. **Fear:** Fear of isolation, fear of damaging relationship, fear of revenge or punishment, fear of being seen and labelled as a negative person or complainer or trouble maker..... etc build the culture of silence in an organization.

**Individual factors includes:-**

1. **Personal Sense of Power:** Power is defined as the individual's capacity to influence others. It is viewed as a psychological state that occurs when an individual perceive that he or she is capable of influencing others (Anderson et al., 2012; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 08). Literature shows that individuals are more likely to remain silent regarding a known performance problem when they are experiencing a sense of low power. Individuals with low sense of power are much more likely to remain silent than those with high sense of power.

2. **Self-esteem and Locus of control:**Literature has reported that individuals with internal locus of control showed greater tendency of speaking up where external are not interested to speak up. Self-esteem basically involves self-evaluation based on context favorability and a significant element in predicting individual behavior (LePine and Van Dyne). Literature revealed that self-esteem is positively related with individual explicit behavior. Individuals with low self-esteem will speak up more.

Being silent about the issues and problems at work is a very common experience for all of us. Before deciding to voice the suggestions or withholding the information, the employee must develop a cognitive map about the culture of the organization and the communication system. This paper throws light into some of the common factors that create a climate of silence in an organization. The decision to remain silent is very common. The decision of the employees to remain silent can lead to significant consequences for both the individuals and the organization.

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