Chapter 10

Making the Decision to Speak Up or to Remain Silent: Implications for Organizational Learning

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Abstract

Employees often fail to speak to their managers about the issues or problems they encounter in the course of doing their jobs. To the extent that such silence is common and potentially collective, it suggests a lost opportunity for learning about what might not be working in an organization. Further, if employees are more likely to be silent about information that signals potential problems than they are to be silent about positive news, then the information that managers receive is likely to be biased and managers' ability to learn about the effectiveness of organizational policies and procedures is likely to be seriously compromised. We examine why there might be a bias against communicating information about potential problems or issues up hierarchies and the contextual factors that affect employee's likely willingness to speak up about issues or problems. We also explore the implications for managerial learning.

Research suggests that employees often do not speak to their managers about the issues or potential problems they encounter in the course of doing their jobs (Argyris, 1977; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2005; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). One reason that employees give for being silent is that they believe that speaking up about problems or issues will be futile — in other words, employees often believe that their managers will not act on the information they provide (Detert & Edmondson, 2005; Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Another reason that employees give for being silent is that they fear that they may
suffer negative consequences for speaking up about problems (Detert & Edmondson, 2006; Dutton et al., 1997; Van Dyne et al., 2003). In many cases, this disinclination to speak up extends even to the sharing of ideas or suggestions for improvement with their supervisors (Detert & Edmondson, 2006; Milliken et al., 2003; Stamper & Van Dyne, 2001). Interestingly, managers may be as likely to be silent about their concerns and suggestions with their managers as rank and file employees are (Detert & Edmondson, 2006), suggesting that there may be risks perceived to be associated with speaking up about problems at all levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Recent work on voice and silence (e.g., Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2005, 2006; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) suggests that employees' decisions about speaking up may be strongly influenced by the characteristics of the organizational context. Though recent research suggests that there may be interaction effects between the context and individual-level factors such as self-monitoring tendencies and professional commitment (e.g., Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), certain characteristics of organizational contexts (e.g., a very high level of centralization of decision making, high levels of demographic dissimilarity between top management and employees) are likely to be associated with a collective tendency among employees to be disinclined to speak with their managers about issues or problems that have come to their attention (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In other words, the organizational or departmental setting, in some cases, may be such a "strong context" that individual differences in the propensity to speak up may be overwhelmed by the contextual characteristics that facilitate or inhibit voice. This perspective suggests that decisions to be silent may be widespread in organizations with certain characteristics. In such settings, it may be possible to talk about silence being collective. In a qualitative study, Milliken et al. (2003) found that 70% of their interviewees indicated that the problems about which they chose to be silent were ones about which their colleagues had knowledge and were also making the choice to be silent.

When employees choose not to speak up about their ideas or concerns, especially when this becomes a norm, potentially valuable information may be lost to the organization and to its top-level decision-makers. This, in turn, may threaten the quality of organizational decision-making and learning (Argyris, 1977; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Thus, understanding the factors that encourage employees to share their ideas and concerns with their managers is likely to facilitate our understanding of organizations' capacity for innovation and learning.

The notion that widespread employee silence can be a source of organizational problems is not a new one. For example, in his 1977 Harvard Business Review article, Chris Argyris argued that it is often difficult for managers to get honest feedback from employees about organizational problems and processes (Argyris, 1977). In his article, Argyris distinguishes between what he calls "single-loop learning," which involves fine-tuning existing systems or procedures in response to feedback much as a thermostat will adjust the temperature in a room to meet a target temperature and "double-loop learning," which involves the questioning of the procedures and
policies themselves. In the case of the thermostat, double-loop learning would involve questioning whether the temperature setting itself was correct. Thus, double-loop learning requires active intervention on a system to question and possibly change its basic operating procedures. The reluctance to communicate negative information up hierarchies, Argyris argued, created a serious obstacle to managers' ability to engage in "double-loop learning."

Argyris (1977) argued that the reason that employees do not communicate negative feedback up hierarchies, especially information that would call into question established policies and procedures, is because to do so would violate powerful organizational norms that discourage open disagreement with the dominant logic of their organizations. Furthermore, Argyris argued, these norms generally are not discussable. Accordingly, this phenomenon is extremely difficult to change.

Although we are not the first to argue that there is a connection between employee silence and organizational learning (see also, Detert & Edmondson, 2006), by elaborating on this link in this chapter, we seek to contribute to the literature by examining some of the specific ways in which employees' decisions about speaking up can affect an organization's capacity for learning, changing, and innovating. Indeed, we assert that facilitating employee voice may be a vital precursor to organizational learning and adaptation.

In the next section of the chapter, we note some of the reasons why employee silence, especially about negative feedback, may be a common phenomenon in organizations. Following this, we discuss some of the potential connections between employee silence and learning in organizations. In the final section, we describe some of the organizational and group-level factors that influence the upward flow of information. We then conclude by suggesting some potentially fruitful directions for future research.

10.1. The Dynamics of Upward Communication in Organizational Hierarchies: What Employees may Filter Out and Why

Previous work on issue selling has suggested that employees are likely to evaluate the risks and benefits of speaking up before doing so (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). For example, research on issue selling (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 1997; Dutton & Ashford, 1993) found that middle managers contemplating the selling of gender equity issues to upper management evaluated the risk of presenting a potentially controversial issue before doing so. In this case, image risk, or fears about damaging others' impressions of oneself, was cited as a deterrent to issue selling. The fear that others may view potential issue sellers as troublemakers, in this case, was sufficiently strong to prevent middle managers from calling managerial attention to even an important issue like gender equity.

Not surprisingly, the level of risk perceived to exist in speaking to one's bosses about an issue is likely to be dependent on the content of the information being
conveyed. In this section, we argue that employees are much more likely to be silent about information that signals the potential existence of a problem than they are to be silent about information that they think will be interpreted as positive by management. The tendency to be more likely to speak up about positive information than about negative information is known in the social psychology literature as the "mum effect" (Rosen & Tesser, 1970). The idea is that people find it easier to convey "good news" than to convey "bad news."

Sometimes, even new ideas or suggestions may fall into the category of information that employees are uneasy expressing because ideas suggest a need for potentially threatening change to the status quo (Detert & Edmondson, 2006; Milliken et al., 2003). Next, we examine some of the reasons how the dynamics of organizational hierarchies lead to a systematically greater likelihood of positive information flowing up hierarchies than negative information.

### 10.1.1. Power and Silence

Power differences between employees and their managers are, of course, at the heart of understanding the distortions in information and knowledge transfer that are likely to occur in organizations as employees are silent about potential problems or concerns that they have (Morrison & Rothman, this volume). Managers obviously hold reward and coercive power (French & Raven, 1959) and thus, have the capacity to influence the lives of their subordinates. Thus, one of the reasons why employees may be afraid to express their concerns about problems or issues in their organizations is that they fear that their bosses will punish them in some way (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison & Rothman, this volume). However, this is only one consideration. A more subtle yet more pervasive force is the fear of being perceived negatively or being labeled as a "difficult person" or "not a team player" (Milliken et al., 2003; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Because they reduce others' perceptions of one's loyalty or competence, negative labels such as these can make it extremely difficult to get one's work done effectively (Ashforth & Humphreys, 1995). Low-power subordinates may perceive more image risk when confronting situations that involve speaking up to their high-powered superiors about problems or issues because they have few opportunities to make an impression with these high-powered individuals and if they make a negative one, then they will have few opportunities to correct it.

Power may also operate in other more subtle ways to affect the flow of information in organizations. The possession of power, for example, has been found to affect how people perceive and interpret events as well as the emotional reactions they have to these events (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2003). For example, high-powered people are more likely to perceive events in abstract, future-oriented, and positive or goal-oriented ways (Keltner et al., 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Milliken, Magee, Lam, & Menezes, 2008), making it potentially difficult for powerful people to "hear" the negative information that is conveyed to them. Thus, although subordinates may voice their concerns to their
managers, the managers may not interpret the expressed information in the originally intended way. Managers may, for instance, construe the articulated voice to be more positive than the speaker intended it to be and not act on the employee input.

In their chapter in this volume, Morrison and Rothman (Chapter 5) argue that a key reason that managers may not be perceived as open to hearing concerns about issues or problems is that their higher level of power lowers their attentiveness to risks and threats in their environment (Keltner et al., 2003). Thus, people with high power may hear information about potential problems through a "positive" filter, which leads them to discount the seriousness of the communication. To the extent that this is true, such individuals may be disinclined to act on the problems that are presented to them, thereby promoting a perception among subordinates that speaking up about problems is futile.

10.1.2 Filtering Out the Negative

Imagine that every time an employee speaks up with information that matches current managerial beliefs or that conveys positive outcomes, the boss displays pleasure. Now imagine that every time this employee speaks to her boss about a problem confronting their unit, the boss reacts in a cold and critical manner, as if he or she is challenging the employee's perceptions. Worse yet, suppose the manager actually yells at the employee and tells her that the problem she identified was too trivial to warrant mentioning. Basic reinforcement theory (Domjan, 2003) suggests that it would not take long before the employee would speak to her manager only about positive or non-threatening topics and would be reluctant to bring up any concerns about the workplace that do not match current managerial beliefs. This reinforcement effect, if repeated, and if observed by others (i.e., thereby creating opportunities for vicarious learning), eventually would lead to positive information or information that matches current managerial beliefs flowing up hierarchies far more frequently than potentially negative information or communication that may be outside of management expectations.

Managers also play another role in creating the dynamics that lead to the withholding of negative information. Consider the situation from the perspective of the manager. An employee relays a positive outcome to the manager to which the manager reacts positively because this information is seen as good news. Indeed, this positive news reinforces the inclination of high-powered people towards seeing the world in positive terms (Keltner et al., 2003). Ideally, if managers are aware of the biasing nature of power, -they would ask questions to assess the accuracy of the information they have received. Realistically, however, this occurs only rarely. Instead, people who are in power, like the rest of us, enjoy hearing positive news and are likely to refrain from going out of their way to seek information to test the accuracy of the positive news. This tendency to want to hear good news may be exacerbated by the tendency of high-powered people to extrapolate positivity from the information they are given. So, they may hear "good news" when that was not the intended message of the speaker.
Now, suppose that an employee communicates some potentially negative information to her manager and that the message is, indeed, received as being not good news. According to the power, approach, and inhibition theory (Keltner et al., 2003), this negative information may threaten the manager's desire to believe that the status quo is going well. Thus, there may be a natural inclination for the high-powered manager to ignore it. In addition, there is uncertainty about the extent to which the information is accurate and about the degree to which it signals the existence of a serious problem. The information required to gauge whether there truly is a problem, and if so, to determine the appropriate solution, may be missing. Without further evidence that there is an actual problem, in the face of uncertainty, it is far easier simply to discount or ignore the information that points to a potential problem than to address it.

Consider the case of the NASA and the space shuttle Columbia as an example. When a NASA engineer noticed that the protective tiles on the space shuttle Columbia had been hit by a piece of debris upon liftoff, he brought the issue to the attention of his managers. At the time, he was uncertain about the severity of the damage (problem #1) but had a gut feeling that the issue should be investigated. He brought it to the attention of his managers, requesting that the astronauts take photographs to assess the damage. Note that in this example, the lower-level employee initially was not silent. The situation at NASA also was characterized by the fact that, if the damage was serious, the solution to was not obvious (problem #2). Managers at NASA were reluctant to take pictures of the debris strike without more information to convince them that the problem was serious (problem #1), leading to a decision not to take action (Milliken, Lant, & Bridwell-Mitchell, 2005). After repeated unsuccessful efforts to bring the issue up to managers at NASA, the individual in question became frustrated and eventually, silent.

Given managers' incentive to believe that the status quo is satisfactory, along with a lack of specific information to the contrary and their bias towards seeing the world in a positive way (Keltner et al., 2003; Milliken et al., 2008), it seems likely that managers may often be skeptical about the veracity of the negative feedback they receive. Not surprisingly, they may ignore it. Managers may also become frustrated with messengers who convey vague problems with no obvious solutions. If messengers repeatedly voice information that is negative or does not match current managerial beliefs, over time, managers may discount the speakers' voices and disregard the importance of their messages. As a result, to avoid losing credibility, messengers are likely to limit future negative feedback. In addition, messengers who have previously voiced information to which management does not react favorably may increase their frequency of speaking up about positive or non-threatening news in an effort to re-establish a positive image for themselves. In sum, the cycle of withholding potentially important negative information is perpetuated by both potential speakers and managers.

10.1.3. **Pervasiveness of Silence**

Research suggests that this editing of information in upward communications is pervasive across organizations. In a recent study, Detert and Edmondson (2006)
found that in approximately 70% of what they labeled "latent voice episodes" (defined as instances in which an employee considered speaking up about a problem or issue), the speaker made the decision that it was unsafe to speak up with their concerns or suggestions for improvement. Similarly, in an earlier study, Ryan and Oestreich (1991) reported that 70% of their respondents indicated that they had been silent about important issues or problems. Milliken et al. (2003) found that 85% of their respondents could think of an instance in which they did not convey important information to their managers. Roughly 26% of the respondents in their study indicated that they never felt comfortable raising issues to their managers and another 23% indicated that they felt comfortable talking with their managers only about some topics. Further, as previously mentioned, 70% of the respondents indicated that other employees also were aware of the problem or issue about which they were choosing to be silent.

In the next section of this chapter, we explore how the dynamics of upward communication relate to what and how an organization or a unit of an organization learns.

10.2. The Dynamics of Upward Communication and Organizational Learning

According to Daft and Weick (1984), organizational learning is "the process by which knowledge about action-outcome relationships between the organization and its environment is developed" (p. 286). For this learning to occur, feedback is required about the impact of an organization's actions on the environment. For example, does the action in question promote consequences that are valued or consequences that are undesirable? Put differently, the question is: Are the organization's actions associated with a level of performance that is above (or at least equal to) a managers' aspiration level? If an organization's performance falls below the aspiration level, then that organization may need to explore alternative responses that might lead to more success (March, 1991).

Most behaviors in organizations are based on routines (Levitt & March, 1988) and organizational change and innovation often occurs by modifying routines. Employee voice can promote organizational learning by enabling managers to recognize the need for change in policies or routines, thereby, promoting a search for better routines. Successful knowledge transfer about a potential problem between subordinates and their supervisors can affect the degree to which these supervisors believe that change may be needed. And this is a vital step in activating a search for information and alternative responses.

Our premise in this section of the chapter is that if silence about issues or problems is widespread and persistent for any or all of the reasons outlined in the previous sections, then organizations will become quite poor at learning. We elaborate on this idea and offer several propositions in this section. First though, we examine briefly the connections between employees' decisions about whether or not to speak up, manager's decisions about how to react, and the phenomenon of organizational learning.
The term "organizational learning" is anthropomorphic because organizations do not learn; people do. But people in organizations attempt to learn not only about the effects of their behavior on their own outcomes in the organization, they also attempt to learn about the effects of the organization's actions on various outcomes that are valued by the organization's stakeholders (e.g., profitability, market share, perceived product quality). Such learning, however, is characterized by high levels of uncertainty (March, 1991; Szulanski, 1996). For example, cause-effect relationships are not easy to understand (Szulanski, 1996). Thus, it is not always clear what is causing a negative outcome for the organization. Is a downturn in an organization's performance, for example, simply a reflection of a larger downturn in the economy or is it a reflection of an outdated strategy? Further, the knowledge transfer process contains many points of uncertainty or ambiguity and occurs within the context of a hierarchical social system that rewards certain behaviors and punishes others.

Both employees and their managers face decisions under uncertainty or ambiguity when determining how to treat information about organizational issues. Employees face decisions about whether or not to speak up complete with all the potential consequences that we outlined earlier, the analysis of which often results in silence. Managers, then, must decide how best to respond to the information that is relayed to them.

Once an employee speaks up, the manager has to determine whether the information conveyed warrants attention or not. If the matter is, in fact, believed to require attention, the manager is obliged to seek a solution to the situation to avoid making matters worse (i.e., "a stitch in time saves nine"). Indeed, managers who fail to attend to problems that escalate into crises may be blamed or held accountable for the resulting negative outcomes.

With 20/20 hindsight, we can see that much of this sequence played out in the case of NASA and the Space Shuttle Columbia accident (Milliken et al., 2005). As we noted earlier, the concerns that an engineer had about the damage to the protective tiles on the space shuttle Columbia prompted him to request that photographs be taken of the area hit by debris. Although he spoke up repeatedly, his concerns were met with responses suggesting that his bosses did not believe the situation to be serious enough to merit the attention he requested. Because the managers were uncertain as to whether or not a true threat existed and because no one could prove that the situation was potentially life-threatening, no action was taken. In fact, as we now know, the engineer's concerns turned out to be justified even though he could not substantiate his claims at the time. Disregarding the engineer's voice resulted in an unresolved problem that had tragic consequences. Subsequently, NASA's managers were faulted by both internal and external sources, such as powerful government committees, for ignoring crucial employee input.

Retrospective analyses of communication failures in hierarchies can, however, make the manager's job of analyzing information that is coming up the hierarchy look much easier than it really is. From the manager's perspective, the decision to act on employee voice is a gamble. In Table 10.1 (see Table 10.1), we depict the voice-response dilemma from the perspective of the manager. In the case of the Space Shuttle Columbia, managers did not pay sufficient attention to a concern.
Table 10.1: Managerial responses to employee's decisions about speaking up about problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does employee speak up about a potential problem or issue?</th>
<th>Does a significant problem actually exist?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, employee speaks up</td>
<td>Yes, there is a significant problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Successful upward information flow of information about a problem</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manager agrees that there is a problem in need of a solution Search for alternative solutions to the problem is activated (exploration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, employee does not speak up</td>
<td>A problem is not significant or its existence is unclear</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information about a potential problem is received There is uncertainty about whether this is really a problem; it may be a &quot;false alarm&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The manager's gamble (If it is a false alarm, spending resources on searching for a solution would waste resources and managers would be blamed. Therefore, no action should be initiated to address employee voice.) Employees may feel that speaking up is futile If it is a real problem and managers do not respond, the managers will be blamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If there is no problem, then there is a match. No problem and no action needed If there is a problem of an uncertain nature, then resources will not be deployed to explore solutions unless managers themselves become aware of the problem or issue</td>
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</table>

voiced by an employee because they were unsure whether the problem that has been voiced was a serious problem. We now know that they gambled incorrectly. On the other hand, if a manager responds to employee voice by taking action on an issue that is unimportant, then he or she has wasted valuable resources on a false alarm. However, if the manager ignores subordinates’ input on an
unimportant issue, then he or she adeptly avoids unnecessary utilization of resources. Managers are likely to be punished if they waste resources but are unlikely to be reprimanded if they do nothing so long as serious harm does not result from their inaction.

Because of the power difference between managers and their subordinates, managers also may perceive issues differently than their employees. Managers, because of their power in organizations, may be predisposed to view issues through a "positive" filter that causes them to discount the likelihood that an actual problem exists (Keltner et al., 2003). They may be less likely than their subordinates to identify threats to the status quo. Another way of thinking about this would be to argue that high-powered people simply have higher thresholds of threat and so, a potential problem has to rise to a higher level of severity to be classified as a problem by a high-powered person than by a low-powered person. Inaction in response to employee voice about potential problems, then, is seen as a reasonable option by the manager compared to the alternative of gambling on something that may be perceived as being low gain and high risk. Thus, managers may be inclined to stick with the status quo and not utilize resources to change it.

Managers may also be inclined to discount employee voice because they may possess the power to avoid unfavorable outcomes that can result from disregarding voice. For example, managers may be better equipped (i.e., more skill sets, more professional and personal connections) to escape the negative consequences of failing to respond to an actual problem by leaving the organization before the negative consequences accumulate into larger crises.

The ability of organizations to learn is influenced by the aggregated decisions of actors in those organizations about how to address the issues they encounter that might have organizationally relevant consequences. Thus, employees' decisions about whether or not to speak up about issues and problems affects the state of knowledge that managers have about performance outcomes. Once employees communicate their concerns to their managers, those managers then face important decisions as to how to interpret the information receive. For example, managers have to decide whether the threat or opportunity is sufficiently significant to warrant actions such as allocating valuable resources or passing the information on to other managers or up the hierarchy. These decisions in turn influence the information that top-level managers have as they attempt to understand "action-outcome" relationships at the organization level of analysis.

We now offer some preliminary propositions about how employee silence and voice can affect innovation and learning in organizations.

We begin by proposing as a simple conjecture the core idea that we already have advanced regarding the differential rate of communicating positive and negative information up hierarchies.

**Proposition 1.** Employees are more likely to transmit information up the hierarchy when they perceive that the information is positive in nature (i.e., it reinforces current managerial beliefs or conveys positive performance feedback) than when they perceive that it is negative in nature (i.e., it could be interpreted as negative
performance feedback by managers or it would challenge current managerial beliefs).

This proposition is consistent with the psychological literature on the "mum effect" (Rosen & Tesser, 1970) as well as with prior predictions about how information flows up hierarchies (Athanassiades, 1973; Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

To the extent that employees are significantly more likely to transmit positive than negative information up hierarchies, then there is likely to be a systematic distortion in the type of information that reaches management. Specifically, managers are less likely to know about what may be going wrong in their organizations than lower-level employees will, knowledge which is necessary to prevent existing problems from escalating and new issues from arising. Further, even when negative feedback is transmitted up the hierarchy, it is likely done in such a way so as to increase the probability of acceptance of the message. That is, the communication of "bad news" may be done in such a way so as to make the situation seem less pessimistic or urgent (Argyris, 1977; Dutton & Ashford, 1993) than the communicator believes it to be. For example, information may be "packaged" by the speaker to be less negative and less critical than the speaker believes it to be. Thus, it may be difficult for managers to correctly interpret the nature of the employee input. Alternatively, certain negative information may be omitted altogether.

In addition, there is the power effect, which suggests that managers may interpret negative information through a positive filter, making the problems that are reported to them likely to be interpreted as less serious than the speaker intended. The literature on power suggests that powerful people are more likely to perceive opportunities than threats in their environments compared to the less powerful people (Keltner et al., 2003). Thus, powerful people may interpret negative information as less negative than their less powerful counterparts. Those in power may be more likely to pay attention to rewards and means to obtain the rewards than less powerful people (Keltner et al., 2003). When subordinates convey information about a work-related issue, those with power may hone in on the reward aspects of the message. Further, those with elevated power have been shown to display a higher level of optimism (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). This focus on the positive aspects of the message and over-optimism may interfere with the receipt of the message as intended by the speaker. For example, when a subordinate brings up an issue regarding a downward sales trend, her manager may focus on the part of the data that suggests the downward trend is less severe than the overall data suggests. In addition, the optimistic manager may interpret the trend to be less threatening than it actually is (i.e., "it is not that bad").

Thus, managers are likely to believe their organizations are performing better than they actually are and are likely to hold more optimistic beliefs about the organizational future than their employees do. We capture this idea in Proposition 2

Proposition 2. Employees' beliefs about their organization's future performance prospects will tend to be less positive than those of their managers.
In a discussion of the dynamics of voice and silence on boards of directors, Westphal and Bednar (2005) capture how and why silence may be contagious and how it may impede information flow in a group or organization.

When individuals receive performance information that causes them to question the merit of a group norm, practice, or strategy, they will tend to hesitate in expressing their concerns until at least some other group members express similar concerns. If other group members follow the same decision rule, however, then no one will express their concerns about the practice or strategy in question. (Westphal & Bednar, 2005, p. 266)

In an earlier section of the chapter, we argued that some organizations or departments will be characterized by a shared belief that speaking up to managers about potential problems or issues may be risky (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The probability that employees will voice problems in such organizations is likely to be low. Such organizations or departments, we argue, are characterized by a climate of silence.

Proposition 3. In some organizations or departments, there is a high level of agreement among employees that speaking up about problems or concerns is risky.

In units characterized by a shared understanding that it is dangerous or futile to convey negative information to one's managers, learning and innovation are likely to be negatively affected insofar as it is negative feedback about the effectiveness of a current behavior that triggers the search behavior necessary for exploration (March, 1991). Exploration is the type of learning that fosters innovation and adaptation. In units characterized by employee silence about problems, employees may be reluctant to share their suggestions for improvement with their managers (Detert & Edmondson, 2005).

Proposition 4a. Organizations characterized by a climate of silence will tend to have low levels of exploration.

Proposition 4b. Organizations characterized by a climate of silence will tend to have low levels of innovation.

Propositions 4a and 4b result in a somewhat paradoxical prediction. We propose that the more employees withhold negative feedback from their managers, the more likely those managers will be to think that their organizations are doing well. Therefore, these managers will believe that it is not necessary to engage in the search processes needed to adapt their organization's strategy and processes to the changing demands of its environment. Thus, over time, these organizations could become poor
performers in spite of the fact that their managers are consistently receiving positive feedback about their performance.

We argue that the negative effects of a climate of silence are likely to be more pronounced in organizations that operate in volatile environments where adaptation to changes in environmental conditions is required to occur quickly and frequently.

Proposition 5. Organizations characterized by a climate of silence are less likely to be able to adapt to changing environmental conditions, especially in turbulent environments.

10.3. Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Collective Silence in Organizations

In this section, we speculate about some of the organizational-, group-, and individual-level factors that might contribute to collective silence about problems in an organization. We focus primarily on contextual determinants of silence because we believe that it is these factors that are most likely to create the conditions that foster collective silence, thereby interfering with organizational learning and innovation.

10.3.1. Organizational- and Group-Level Determinants of Collective Silence

10.3.1.1. Organizational structure Sutcliffe (1994) argued that in highly centralized organizations, employees may choose not to pass on the information they have about environmental trends and events to top managers because they feel that their knowledge and opinions are not valued. Further, in highly centralized organizations, there may be a greater tendency for managers to reject information that does not fit with existing expectations, preferences, and beliefs (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This is because managers in a highly centralized structure are much less likely to come into contact with information that challenges their beliefs and, over time, the team may tend to become homogeneous in its beliefs and perspectives. Sutcliffe (1994), in fact, found that centralization was related negatively to the accuracy of top management teams' perceptions of environmental instability, an indication that these teams may not be getting reliable and correct information or that they are ignoring it.

In addition, the number of levels in the organizational hierarchy may matter. In order for voiced suggestions or ideas to progress toward implementation, they have to flow up an organization's hierarchy until the appropriate decision maker grants approval and allocates resources for execution. In flatter structures, fewer levels of the hierarchy mean that there are fewer gateways at which information about issues or problems can be rejected by managers. This enhances the likelihood that information will reach the upper echelons of management.
10.3.1.2. The distribution of power It is when employees feel powerless that they are most likely to be silent. Several macro-level factors in addition to centralization of decision-making contribute to the perception of powerlessness in organizations. Detert and Edmondson (2006) speculate that employees who believe that they are unable to get other jobs are economically captured and thus, are likely to perceive great risk in speaking up about problems. Employees who believe that they have to stay in the organization to ensure their economic future are likely to have high levels of continuance commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Thus, one might expect that continuance commitment would tend to be associated positively with the probability of silence at both the individual and organizational levels of analysis.

Large differences in the average educational level between people at the top and the bottom levels of organizations also contribute to a power gap. In such settings, lower-level employees may be less inclined to speak up to their bosses.

Furthermore, organizations that do not promote from within may tend to create collective silence by creating a persistent "power gap" between individuals at different organizational levels. This "power gap" may tend to heighten a sense of psychological distance between employees and their managers; thereby, reducing employees' sense of affective commitment to the organization's outcomes (Allen & Meyer, 1996). On the other hand, though, a possibility of promotion may encourage employees to be risk averse and thus, to be less likely to convey negative news up the hierarchy out of fear that it might jeopardize their chances for promotion.

10.3.1.3. Demographic dissimilarity between the top and bottom levels of the organization Research on demographic diversity suggests that social cohesion tends to be lower in diverse groups than in homogeneous groups (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O'Reilly, 1996). Research also suggests that people communicate less frequently with people who are demographically different than with those who are similar. One reason for this is that there may be a lower perceived level of psychological safety in communicating with people who are different than in communicating with people who are more similar to oneself. Perhaps because of the lack of psychological safety, low levels of social cohesion in groups have been shown to increase the perceived risk of voicing minority opinions. Thus, in organizations that are characterized by marked demographic differences between the top (e.g., tending to be white males) and bottom levels (tending to be non-white), one would expect that lower-level employees might feel less safe about speaking up than they would in an organization where the demographic differences between the top and the bottom were less noticeable.

To the extent that demographic dissimilarity in groups is associated with low social cohesion as research suggests, then demographic diversity is also likely to be connected with an increased perception of risk associated with speaking up in groups, especially when those groups include people from varying levels of the hierarchy. In a recent study of boards of directors, for example, Westphal and Bednar (2005) found that outside members of boards of directors were more likely to accurately perceive whether other board members had concerns or issues when the two were
demographically similar than when the two were different. Thus, there appeared to be more willingness to raise issues and concerns on boards characterized by demographic similarity and friendship ties than on boards characterized by demographic dissimilarity and limited friendship ties (Westphal & Bednar, 2005). Friendship ties and demographic similarity appeared to give the members a sense of safety about expressing their concerns.

10.3.1.4. The tenure demographics of an organization March (1991) and others have argued that people who have been members of an organization for a long time tend to come to conform to what he called "organizational code." In other words, the longer the employee's tenure in an organization, the more likely he or she is to adopt the dominant logic in the organization and the less likely he or she may be to notice issues and problems as well as the more reluctant he or she may be to report them if they are noticed. Taken up a level of analysis, one may argue that organizations with a larger percentage of long-tenured employees tend to be more likely to be characterized by climates that do not reward upward communication of issues or problems.

10.3.2. Individual-level Determinants of Collective Silence

10.3.2.1. Perceived support from supervisor Some organizations encourage employee voice by establishing both informal and formal mechanisms for providing input. However, research suggests that many of these mechanisms, including open-door policies and suggestion boxes, are ineffective (Harlos, 2001). Since speaking up requires both a speaker and a target, the quality of the relationship between supervisors and subordinates is likely to affect voicing decisions. Having the support of one's supervisor has, in fact, been shown to influence voice (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Employees who perceive their supervisors to be effective voice managers (i.e., that they are approachable and responsive to speaking up) are more likely to express novel ideas and to speak up in general (Janssen, De Vries, & Cozijnsen, 1998; Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992). Aside from affecting the occurrence of voicing episodes, perceived supervisor support also has been shown to improve the quality of suggestions (Frese, Teng, & Wijnen, 1999).

10.3.2.2. Perceived psychological safety The perception of psychological safety is likely to be related inversely to the probability of silence (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001). Psychological safety can decrease the amount of risk perceived in the cost-benefit equation of the voicing decision. In environments in which employees collectively feel safe psychologically, the level of collective silence is likely to be low. It also seems likely that psychological safety mediates the relationship between such variables as power distance and the decision to speak up or remain silent.
10.4. Discussion

In this chapter, we have attempted to draw a conceptual link between employees' decisions about whether or not to speak up about workplace issues, suggestions, concerns and ideas, and their organization's ability to learn. The fundamental proposition that drives many of the negative effects of silence on learning in organizations is the idea that employees are less likely to communicate upwards information that they perceive their managers will interpret as negative (such as knowledge that challenges status quo or disputes current managerial beliefs) than they are to communicate information that they think their managers will be pleased to hear (such as information that convey favorable outcomes or match current supervisory views). A cycle of silence about problems or issues is created when employees perceive that managers' responses to their efforts to speak up about problems are either ignored or punished. If supervisors disregard or censure their workers, those workers are less likely to express risky ideas in the future. In addition, sharing positive information may increase in frequency to reduce employees' anxieties about potential damage to their reputation incurred by previously transmitting negative information.

This skewed transfer of information leads managers to have a distorted picture of how their organizations are functioning, believing them to be performing better than they actually are. The quality of decision-making by management, then, decreases because the misleading "rosy" outlook and understanding prevents managers from addressing threats and opportunities accurately and appropriately. Consequently, exploration is limited, potentially suboptimal routines remain unchanged, and new routines are not established. Further, organizational learning is compromised, change is jeopardized, and innovation lags. An organization with a climate of silence is expected to be ill-equipped to deal with a changing environment.

We have also argued that employees' propensity to speak up about problems is influenced by contextual and relational variables, some of which we have discussed in this chapter. These factors foster collective silence, a common phenomenon across different power levels and also across organizations of different sizes, industries, and geographic locales.

10.4.1. Research Implications

The relationship between employee voice and learning in organizations is a topic that spans both levels of analysis (individual, group, and even, organizational) as well as the boundary between the subfields of organizational behavior (OB) and organization theory (OT). Topics that span boundaries can get lost in a field that tends to want to characterize scholars' research into subfields and rewards scholars for the volume of publications they produce. Boundary-spanning topics are often tougher to study, meaning that publications take longer to produce. The relationship between voice and learning in organizations is clearly going to be in
the category of topics that are tough to study. It is our hope, however, that this does not discourage scholars from making the effort in this area.

In this chapter, we have advanced several propositions that attempt to explore the mechanisms by which employee silence may impede or limit organizational learning and innovation as well as several ideas about how contextual variables may influence employees' propensity to speak up about problems. We hope that readers will find these propositions interesting and warranting of future research efforts.

One key topic that we think is particularly important to study is the relationship between power and the probability of silence. If one were to operationalize power in terms of level of the hierarchy at which an employee is situated, then, at first glance, it appears as though power ought to be positively related to employee's propensity to speak up about the problems or issues they encounter at work. On second thought though, the relationship between power (as operationalized by level in the hierarchy) and the propensity to speak about problems does not seem so straightforward. The higher one goes in an organization, the more one has to lose and thus, the more risky it may be to speak up about problems (Detert & Edmondson, 2006). Thus, it is possible that the relationship between level in the hierarchy and propensity to speak up about problems might actually be negative. This is, of course, an empirical question and one that would be interesting to examine.

Another interesting topic would be to look at the propensity of middle managers to pass on information about problems or issues that their employees have relayed to them. What makes a manager decide to pass on information to their higher-ups? What makes the manager decide against doing this? If level in the hierarchy is actually inversely related to the probability of speaking up, then one would predict that a lot of silence in organizations actually occurs at managerial levels. Interestingly though, when managers fail to pass on information to their supervisors, silence might not be the word that is used to describe the behavior. Perhaps instead, these managers might be described as wisely using their discretion so as not to bother senior management with concerns that are not significant enough to warrant their attention (Argyris, 1977). This is probably what the middle managers at NASA who failed to pass on the engineer's concerns about the debris strike to the Space Shuttle Columbia thought they were doing. If so, then this suggests another motive for silence about issues that has not been given much attention and that is the motive to protect one's managers from receiving information about problems that either are not perceived to be important enough to warrant their attention or that do not have known solutions (Argyris, 1977).

The relationship between level of the hierarchy and the propensity to speak about problems will be important to understand because it suggests different potential solutions to the problem of silence. Employee suggestion boxes and organizational ombudsmen programs are unlikely to solve the problem of managerial silence about issues that employees, in fact, do bring to their attention. They are potential solutions when lower-level employees are afraid to speak up not when they do and nothing happens.
10.5. Conclusions

Argyris (1977) argues that in organizations in which communication about problems is perceived to be discouraged, double-loop learning can occur only if there is a crisis precipitated by some significant event in the external environment (e.g., a lawsuit, a performance downturn), turnover at the upper echelon, or an internally generated crisis designed to cause intentional organizational shakeups. Thus, organizations that do not foster conditions that make employees feel comfortable speaking up about problems are likely to be highly fragile but, their top-level managers may not be aware of their vulnerability.

In this chapter, we have argued that employees' decisions about voice and silence are important phenomena with effects that transcend the individual and group levels of analyses. These decisions, taken in the aggregate, can impede or facilitate the transfer of knowledge up and down organizational hierarchies. When silence about organizational issues or problems is pervasive, an organization's ability to learn about the effects of its actions can be severely disabled. We believe that the opportunities for research that lie at the intersection of organizational silence and organizational learning are both plentiful and important.

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References

