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Understanding silence in the workplace: Motivation and Emotion

Kirrane, M., O'Shea, D., Buckley, F., Grazi, A. & Prout, J.

Synopsis

Silence in the workplace is a highly prevalent behaviour, but more is needed to understand the causes and consequences of such behaviour. We examine the role of discrete emotions in decisions to remain silent or to speak up. Three studies with full-time employees were carried out utilising both qualitative and experimental methodologies. Our studies demonstrate that employees are silent for many reasons and that managers need to be sensitive to the multiple motives driving silence behaviour. Managers need to be aware that silence provokes specific emotions, with fear and anger being particularly common emotional consequences of silence. Employees are more likely to take action when emotions are intense and so managers need to incorporate a sensitivity to employee emotions in understanding worker silence and voice.

Introduction and Background

The prevalence of silence at work is well documented with studies suggesting up to 85% of employees declare such behaviour (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991).

Silence refers to the intentional withholding of information (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). It is a conscious decision to withhold

information, as distinct from an accidental breakdown in communication or just having no contribution to make to a discussion or issue (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). For the individual, feeling unable to speak up about concerns may lead to a sense of helplessness, reduced job satisfaction, isolation, absenteeism and turnover (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). It can provoke a sense of cynicism in those who are silent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Perlow & Repenning, 2009) and lead to symptoms of stress (Brewin, Dalgleish, & Joseph, 1996; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Richards & Gross, 1999). The interpersonal consequences of silence are identified as loss of trust, social rejection, weakened interpersonal ties, diminished power (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) and feelings of isolation, anger and resentment (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003). At the organizational level, silence can impede learning and development (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and may result in organizational decline going undetected (Hirschman, 1970).

Issues and Questions Considered

Our aim was to examine the role of emotions in the decision to remain silent or speak up in the workplace. Three distinct motives for silence have been identified, namely acquiescent, defensive and prosocial silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Acquiescent silence occurs as a result of disengagement

AUTHORS



Dr Melrona Kirrane
HR Group
Dublin City University
Business School,
DCU



Dr. Deirdre O'Shea
C. Psychol.Ps.S.I.
Lecturer in Work &
Organisational Psychology,
Department of Work &
Employment Studies,
Kemmy Business School,
University of Limerick



Prof Finian Buckley
Professor of Work
& Organisational
Psychology,
Dublin City University
Business School,
DCU



Adele Grazi
M.Sc. M.A.
PhD Scholar,
Dublin City University
Business School,
DCU



Joanne Prout
Graduate of the
M.Sc. in Work &
Organisational
Psychology
Kemmy Business
School,
University of Limerick

or resignation. This may occur because employees do not feel that their opinions are valued by their supervisors or managers (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), because they do not feel they have the energy to get involved (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001) or because they feel it is futile to do so (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Defensive silence is caused by the fear of negative consequences of speaking up. It occurs when employees are aware that there may be a better course of action to the one proposed, but say nothing about it. Prosocial silence occurs when employees believe they are doing other people a favour by withholding information. Given these different antecedents, we expected that different emotions would be associated with the three forms of silence.

Research on emotions experienced when engaged in silence behaviour is quite limited (Blenkinsopp & Edwards, 2008). Past research has demonstrated that the more negatively an individual reacts to an event, the less likely (s)he is to be silent (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). Fear has been strongly linked to silence (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009), specifically defensive silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003), while acquiescent silence is characterised by indifference, hopelessness (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) and feelings of resignation (Henik, 2008; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Our first study was exploratory in nature, and sought to identify why employees are silent in their workplace and what emotions they experience as a result of being silent. In our second study, we focused on how defensive, prosocial and acquiescent silence result in the experience of different emotions within a specific work domain. In our final study we investigated the role of two specific negative emotions (anger and fear), in combination with an observer's attribution regarding an observed transgression, in the decision to speak up or remain silent.

Methodology

We carried out three independent studies utilizing a variety of methods and a diverse range of employee samples. The first study took an inductive approach and qualitatively analysed the relationship between the reason or motive for being silent and ensuing emotions experienced using a cognitive mapping technique (Eden, 1992). Employing a quasi-experimental design (Grant & Wall, 2009), Study 2 built on the outcomes of Study 1 and targeted the examination of discrete emotions triggered by three different forms of silence. Following from the outcomes of

Study 2, our third study examined whether different negative emotions experienced following an observed transgression lead to differences in the tendency to remain silent or speak up.

Outcomes and Findings

Study 1 demonstrated that fear is one of the main emotions associated with silence. Study 2 confirmed that different motives for silence provoke different emotional experiences. Exploring the behavioural effects of emotions using a further experimental design, Study 3 showed that anger is an antecedent to speaking up about an observed transgression, whereas less intense anger was associated with staying silent. This pattern was not evident for fear.

Cumulatively, our studies contribute to our understanding of the role of emotions in employee silence and related behaviour. First, our findings establish that the reasons for being silent are proactively selected and result in appropriate behavioural patterns. Second, we demonstrate that different forms of silence provoke different emotional reactions, but responses to silence with a negative emotional tone are evident to a greater degree. Finally, we provide clarification regarding the effect of particular negative emotions on silence or voice behaviour by identifying the roles of anger and fear as antecedents to silence and voice behaviour.

This research has confirmed that silence within the workplace is a complex phenomenon, with both positive and negative consequences for the silent employee and the organization. For managers and leaders, the challenge is not just to understand the multiple reasons why employees might remain silent but also to appreciate the range and implications of employee emotions. While manifest anger may result in voice, lower levels of anger typify acquiescent and defensive silence, which would benefit from further consideration. Seeking to understand whether the source of silence emanates from employee efficacy attributions or safety concerns is important, as are steps to remedy the situation if these are confirmed. The recognition of the existence of factors that sponsor silence and the fostering of approaches to eliminate employee isolation and fear are key to improving constructive voice and engagement. However, not all silence has negative connotations, and managers and leaders should observe and acclaim the quiet support of pro-actively silent employees, reflecting the old adage attributed to Cicero that 'silence is one of the true arts of conversation'.

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Authors:

Kirrane, M., O'Shea, D., Buckley, F., Grazi, A. & Prout, J.

For further information and comments, please contact:

Prof Sheila Killian

Assistant Dean, Research

Kemmy Business School

University of Limerick, Ireland

T: +353 61 202237

E: sheila.killian@ul.ie

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