

Conceptualising Employee Silence at Workplace and Its Causes

Abstract

The potentially harmful consequences of Employee Silence for organisation as well as for the employees of the organisation have been well acknowledged by various scholars. However the topic is relatively novel in the field of Organisational Psychology, and not much literature is available also not all aspects of the phenomenon have been researched in detail. This study is an attempt to understand the concept of Employee Silence and causes of its origin at workplace. Also attempt has been made to explore various studies done by scholars and analyse the different sets of causal factors of silence they have used for their studies.

Keywords: Employee Silence, Employee Voice, Communication, Organisational Efficiency, Organisational Unfairness.

Introduction

Employee silence refers to situations where employees withhold information, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that might be useful to the organization which they are a part of. This can happen if employees do not speak up to a supervisor or manager (Tangirala, Shubhra 2008). Employee silence is the situation where employees suppress information that might be useful to the organization.. Organisational silence is a behavioural choice that can deteriorate organisational efficiency. Silence occurs when workers fail to bring pertinent information to the attention of their employer. Employees may withhold information from colleagues, line managers, leaders and HR and in a range of contexts. The withholding of this information prevents improvements to processes, projects and strategy being made. It's important to note that remaining silent is a conscious choice of employees; Organisational Psychology is concerned with identifying the reasons employees stay silent and finding ways to encourage participation in the communication process, known as employee voice. The effects of employee silence are considerable. For the organisation, employee silence can cause minor inefficiencies or problems to snowball into large problems that threaten the organisation's future. Employee silence can cause an escalating level of dissatisfaction among employees which can threaten productivity, also it can give rise to indifferent and unengaged employees, they may also feel alienated from their positions as well as guilty for failing to raise concerns. Silence is counterproductive not only for organisation, as it is an obstacle before innovation and organisational change; it is ruinous for employees themselves too. With silence turning into an ingrained belief, employees consider themselves worthless, and cognitive contradictions emerge between what they do and what they think; and thus, job satisfaction, fidelity and motivation are affected adversely (Morrison Milliken, 2000). They can even develop stress, hopelessness and depressed feelings.

Aim of the Study

Aim of the study is to explore the concept of employee silence and its causal factors. Also there is an attempt to inspect various set of causal factors taken up in different studies of Employee Silence.

Causes of Employee Silence

There are many different reasons for the origin of employee silence in an organization. The list of causal factors range long. Gul and Ozcan, (2011) emphasize that organizational silence may appear due to mistrust between employees and administrators, consideration of talking as a risky business, the fear of exclusion and the fear of relationship damage. Many factors contribute to the notion of employee silence, especially when it comes to how one is placed or ranked in an organizational structure. There are distinct organizational groupings or divisions, such as masculine or feminine, subordinate or dominant, manager or employee that can influence silence. Handbook of Organisational Justice suggest that Injustice (distributive, procedural, or interactional) can lead to situation of



Shivani Singh Chauhan

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Psychology,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow



P.C. Mishra

Professor and Ex. HOD,
Deptt. of Psychology,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow

disappointment among employees, thus leading to silence in organisation. Constant negative feedback from the supervisors could also result in silence. Communication system plays an important role in insuring healthy information and opinion exchange system, thus lack of proper communication arrangement can also lead to silence. There are many reasons for remaining silent in organizations that emerge from individual, organizational and cultural factors. Dergisi et al(2015) suggest that self esteem plays critical role in the formation of behaviour at workplace. Employees with high self esteem are more active and concerned for the betterment of the organisation, whereas employees with low self esteem have a self protective tendency and they prefer remaining aloof and silent on the organisational matters (Le Pine, Dyne 1998). Cooperative styles such as "integrating, obliging, and compromising" are more effective than "avoiding and dominating" styles, which could cause silence among employees (Colquitt and Greenberg 312). Insecurity is yet another reason that can cause silence. Employees think they may lose job if they speak up. Supervisors may take it as them being going against the authority (Pentilla and Chriss ,2003). Brinsfield (2013) propounded that neurotic personality traits increase silence whereas being extroverted decreases silence. Whiteside, Barclay (2013) add that emotional breakdown or psychological lethargy that a person may experience leads to indifference to the organization. Another situation responsible for cause of employee silence is when supervisors and subordinates fail to address problems and look for quick fixes, this only makes things worse. Employees loose hope that the real problems will actually be addressed and resolved (Carla, 1996). Employees then start to feel it is better to remain silent about issues because nothing will change anyway. Organisations need to confront the actual problem, deal with the situation and fix it because employee silence usually stems from higher management down to lower level employees, which is the cause of the indifferent employee (Joinson,1996). Bowen and Blackmon (2003) in the context of 'the spiral of silence' opine that people's willingness to explain their ideas or their preference of silence is not only affected by their personality characteristics but also by the perceived and obvious climate of ideas in the organization. Many scholars (like, Bowen, Blackmon 2003; Morrison, Milliken 2000; Brinsfield 2013) have seconded the fact that organizational silence turns into a culture of the organisation and get ingrained as a social norm leads to the emergence of people who know what is right but who do not express them. The culture of injustice in the organisation also increases silence. The injustice that the employee feel often stem from discrimination, favouritism, unfairness, non transparency in work procedures etc. (Whiteside, 2014). Subordinate/supervisor relationship is yet another aspect that plays crucial role in the concerned topic. Someone in a lower position will be uncomfortable expressing issues to someone in a higher position. Employees who work at an environment where a culture of fear and intimidation prevails are forced to remain silent, and

they seem reluctant to intervene in organizational policies and administrative powers. While employees who are supported and motivated to take part in the affairs of institution and who are comfortable in communication with their supervisors are more expressive (Milliken et al. 2003). Willman, P. et al. (2006) proposed that any hierarchical organization tends to support what its leaders already think is true more than it challenges them to think differently.

Causal Factors of Employee Silence Suggested in Various Studies

The researches of Employee Silence that try to study the causes of silence often use the method of factor analysis to group similar set of factors into one category. This allows the researchers to better understand and analyse the determinants of employee silence. Taking cue from this process, in the study titled "Employee Silence In Public and Private Sector Organisations" the determinants of Silence were grouped into two broad categories of variables- Organisational Factors and Individual Factors, for the sake of convenience effectiveness of the study. To study the variables in the present investigation Employee Silence Scale was developed by the investigator herself. For the development of the scale, the direct self report method was used. With a view to collect and consolidate the items from the draft scale, an exhaustive survey of literature related to the conceptualization and measurement of Employee Silence was conducted.

The following operational definition for the construct was accepted: "The phenomenon of Silence in the context of managing knowledge can be seen as the product of agents being silent, or being silenced (Blackman & Sadler- Smith,2009)". Ten important determinants of such behaviour of Employee Silence are as follows :

The first five determinants belong to Organisational category i.e. they owe their origin to the factors in the organisational set up. Five important such organizational factors are as follows :

Communication

Communication refers to imparting or exchanging of information through various means. Effective communication is important for ensuring that employees are motivated to voice their ideas and information with supervisors and among themselves.

Supervisor's Attitude

Attitude of supervisor towards their employees and the feedback they provide to their employees, plays major role in how comfortable and motivated employees would feel to exchange information with his/her superior.

Procedural Justice

It refers to how fairly or unfairly the procedures about planning, decision making and their execution are executed in the organisation.

Transparency

Transparency implies openness, communication and accountability. Transparent procedures include open meeting, financial disclosure statements, freedom of information legislation, budgetary review, audits etc.

Silence as Tradition

It refers to the situation where silence becomes norm and convention of the organisation that encourages culture of silence and prevents voice. The next five determinants belong to 'Individual Factors' category. These variables are majorly the result of employees own personality traits.

These factors areas follows:

Trying to Avoid Embarrassment

Refers to the hesitation in voicing, on the part of employees, so as to avoid the perceived awkward situation which they may face if the information turns out to be wrong or irrelevant.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction describes how happy and content the employee is with his/her job.

Fear to Loose Job

Refers to the situation where employees choose to remain silent when they perceive that their voicing, might risk their job.

Involvement and Interest

It refers to the amount of participation and interest of employees in their work and in the organisation as a whole.

Commitment

Job commitment is the feeling of responsibility that a person has towards the mission and the goals of the organisation.

The study attempted to cover maximum dimensions of causal factors of Employee Silence therefore from personality to organisational various factors were covered, based on which items were developed.

Other examples of studies which have proposed some different sets of variables as the determinants of Employee Silence are as follows:

Bagheri , Zarei and Aeen (2012) presented a research paper " Organizational Silence (Basic Concepts and Its Development Factors)" in which they proposed that fundamentally, organizational silence origin from following two factors:

1. Managers' fear of negative feedback and ,
2. A set of implicit beliefs often held by managers.

Managers' Fear of Negative Feedback: it implies apprehension that managers have of receiving negative feedback, especially from their subordinates. They try to avoid embarrassment which can occur if they are seen weak or vulnerable in front of their subordinates.

Managers' Implicit Beliefs: Managers sometimes infer that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy and it is the that management only which knows best about most issues of organizational importance, and not the employees. The result of such prejudiced belief is that top management start acting in a way that discourages upward communication, thereby connection and trust is hampered. Further they knowingly or unknowingly start adopting certain norms, habits and conventions that are conducive for silence in the organisation (Redding, 1985). A third unstated belief as a factor in creating a climate conducive to wide-spread silence is the belief that unity, agreement and consensus are

sings of organizational health, whereas disagreement and dissent should be avoided.

Eriguc G. ,Ozer O., Turac G. S. and Sognur G.(2014) in their study "The Causes And Effects Of The Organizational Silence: On Which Issues The Nurses Remain Silent?" categorised the causes of Employee Silence into two sets:

1. Fear and the perceived risk factors
2. Contextual factors

Fear and the perceived risk factors include: the fear of being seen or labelled as a negative person (e.g. complainer, trouble maker, intriguer, cry-baby, source of trouble); Fear of isolation (e.g.to be accused of inadaptability, los of respect, confidence and feeling of attachment) Fear of negatively affecting the others (e.g. avoidance of making someone ashamed or upset or causing problems for someone). Fear of relationship damage (e.g. disliked by the administrators, loss of recognition and support, loss of respect and image)

Contextual Factors include :Individual factors (e.g. lack of experience, low position, being external locus of control, low self esteem, high level of concerns for communication, high level of self adaptation) ; Organizational factors (e.g. the culture of injustice, deaf-ear syndrome, silence climate, hierarchical structure) Fear of revenge or punishment (e.g. loss of employment, lack of promotion, change of work location or position, fear of increasing work load, reprisals) Administrative factors (e.g. administrators do not support the culture of open talking, they are not open to different and new opinions, distant relations, mistrust towards the administrator, being unable to reach the administrator, tacit beliefs of the administrators, fear for negative feedback).

Alparslan A.L., Can A., Erdem R.(2015) conducted the study titled "Reasons for Employee Silence Behavior: Developing and Validating a Scale for Nurses". They also categorised various determinants and arrived at five major causes through process of factor analysis:

1. Lack of Trust in the Management
2. Fear of the Senior Management's Reaction
3. Getting Along with Co workers
4. Tendency towards Prosocial Behaviour
5. Passive Personality

Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) proposed that, apparently expressing and withholding behaviours may appear to be polar opposites because silence implies not expressing while voice implies speaking up on issues and matters in organizations. Thus absence of voice appears to be the basic cause of silence. That is to say employees become silence when they have nothing to express. However, both behaviours are complex and multidimensional in nature. Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) in their study presented that Employee Silence (intentionally withholding ideas) and Employee Voice (expressing ideas) are not polar opposites. They opine that Silence is not necessarily the anti thesis or absence of voice. They propose that the key feature that differentiates silence and voice is not the presence or absence of speaking up but the individual's motivation to withhold vs express ideas, information and opinions

about work related improvements. The framework emphasizes three specific employee motives based on existing management literature on silence and voice: disengaged behaviour, self-protective behaviour, and other oriented behaviour, resulting in three types of silence and three types of voice. Based on this they differentiated three types of silence viz. Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence, and Pro Social Silence). This categorisation thus also suggests different sources, origin or set of causes of Employee silence- Based on Resignation (Feeling unable to make a difference); Based on Fear (Feeling afraid and personally at risk); and Based on Cooperation (Feeling cooperative and altruistic).

Phenomenon of employee silence places a high value on understanding system complexity of organisational dynamics and focuses on the interdependencies and not just the components. It values dissent and multiple perspectives as signs of organizational health, and questions agreement, consensus and unity when they are too readily achieved. Silence at workplace is both validation and warning that employees are not well related to their jobs, thus are not only not productive enough for their organisation but also are impeding their psychological health and growth. The effectiveness of organisation is determined by how successfully resources are assigned in order to achieve organizational goals in the right way. It is not a one man's job, organizational work is a team work. One single silence can deprive organization of a good idea to be more close to achieve goal.

Conclusion

On the basis of above analysis following conclusion can be drawn:

There is consensus among scholars over the recognition of the concept of Employee Silence as a phenomenon detrimental to organisational efficiency. Regarding determinants of silence various causal factors are propounded by various studies. However certain factors are included in most of the studies, indicating the common opinion for those variables as the causal factors that effect employee silence, these are: culture of injustice, communication, supervisors attitude, job insecurity, transparency, involvement, industrial morale, employees self esteem, job satisfaction etc. Success of any organization depends on performance of the employees working there. It is thus quite clear that organisations must understand, introspect and analyse the causes of Employee Silence in the institution and look for measures to improve voice and lessen silence, if they wish to be more efficient and successful.

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