Imagine an organization where the CEO has no clothes. The CEO’s lack of clothes is apparent to all who set eyes upon him. Yet employees don’t say a word. Some employees even compliment and praise the CEO’s attire. The CEO takes pride and comfort in the fact that subordinates recognize his fine taste in clothing, and easily dismisses the few trouble-makers who eye him strangely in the elevator.

And yet these employees are not blind. Behind the safety of closed doors and in veiled whispers, they talk of their leader’s lack of clothing. They all clearly know that the CEO is not wearing clothes but only the foolish or naïve dare to speak of it in public.

While seemingly fanciful, our mock fairy tale captures an important phenomenon of organizational life, namely that, in many organizations, employees know the truth about certain issues and problems facing the organization yet they do not dare to speak that truth to their superiors. Employees tend to believe that they would face negative repercussions for speaking up, and that speaking up would not make a difference. An Industry Week survey of 845 line managers from diverse organizations found that only 29 percent of first-level supervisors thought that their organization encouraged employees to express opinions openly. In our own interviews with working MBA students, we have found that most (85 percent) have been in situations where they have felt unable to speak up about a concern at work, and that many feel this way frequently in their organizations.

This phenomenon—which we dub “organizational silence”—is a potentially dangerous impediment to organizational learning and change. It can hamper the development of truly pluralistic organizations—ones that value and allow for the expression of multiple perspectives and opinions. But to date, there has been little systematic academic exploration of why “organizational silence” is pervasive, or of the consequences of widespread silence—even in an era in which management universally extols the virtues of greater communication.

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In our recent work, we have sought to understand both the consequences and the causes of silence in organizations, especially when that silence is widespread.
Implications of Silence

Figure 1 provides an overview of the effects of silence.

Extensive research on group decision making has shown that decision quality is enhanced when multiple perspectives and alternatives are considered. Further, it has been argued that innovation requires a context where employees feel free to deviate—to offer totally novel perspectives or ideas or to question current beliefs and practices. Together, these research streams suggest that organizational silence will compromise the effectiveness of organizational decision-making and learning by restricting the variance in informational input available to decision makers. In addition, without dissenting viewpoints, there is less likely to be the type of critical analysis necessary for effective decision-making, which may similarly undermine organizational learning.

Organizational silence is also likely to compromise effective organizational learning and development by blocking negative feedback, or information that suggests that current practices are not working as intended. Without negative feedback, errors tend to persist and may even magnify. To make matters worse, top management may not recognize that they lack important information, and may interpret silence as signaling consensus and success. Even if management directly asks employees for feedback, employees may be careful to filter out negative information.

Effects on Employees

Individuals have a strong need for control over their immediate environment and over decisions that affect them. Being able to express opinions and concerns gives people a sense of control, and feeling that one is unable to express opinions and concerns makes people feel that they lack control. And a perceived lack of control has several detrimental effects, including reduced motivation, physical and psychological withdrawal, turnover, and even sabotage. Thus, when employees feel that they cannot speak up about problems or concerns, there can be serious negative effects on morale and performance.

Organizational silence is also likely to give rise to cognitive dissonance, an aversive state that arises when there is a discrepancy between one’s beliefs and one’s behavior. Consider a salesperson who is confronted daily with evidence that customers are not satisfied with a product, but feels unable to raise this information to his superiors without repercussions. In cases such as this, the individual may exist in a state of prolonged dissonance—knowing that there is a problem but not acting as if there is not. This dissonance can create high levels of anxiety and stress, both of which can undermine performance and contribute to turnover.

The above dynamics are particularly troubling because they may disproportionately affect those who differ from the majority. Not only will such employees feel greater pressure to remain silent (because they are more likely to see the world differently), but they may be more likely to experience the negative effects of silence.

Origins of Silence

To investigate the origins of organizational silence, our objective was not to explain why a particular employee will choose to speak up or
not to speak up, but rather to explain why the dominant response within many organizations may be for employees (en masse) to remain silent about important issues or problems they encounter on the job.

Figure 2 provides an overview of some of the managerial and organizational conditions that we believe are likely to promote silence in organizations.

Fundamentally, we believe that organizational silence owes its origins to two major factors. The first is top managers' fear of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. People often feel threatened by negative feedback, and as a result, try to avoid it. As well, when they do receive negative feedback, they often try to ignore the message, dismiss it as inaccurate, or attack the credibility of the source. Because managers may feel a particularly strong need to avoid embarrassment and feelings of vulnerability or incompetence, they may tend to avoid information that suggests weakness or errors, or that challenges current courses of action. And it has been shown that when negative feedback comes from below rather than from above— from subordinates rather than bosses—it is seen as less accurate and legitimate, and as more threatening to one's power and credibility. Thus, a fear of, or resistance to, "bad news" or negative feedback can set into motion a set of organizational structures and practices that impede the upward communication of information.

A second important factor that we believe to be at the root of organizational silence is a set of unstated beliefs that managers often implicitly hold about employees and about the nature of management. One such belief is that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy. Recent works have emphasized that an economic paradigm currently dominates the thinking of many managers. This paradigm assumes that individuals are self-interested and effort-averse and can be expected to act in ways to maximize their individual utilities rather than the organization's performance. A related belief is that top management, not those below, always knows best about issues of organizational importance. A third erroneous belief that tends to be held by managers in organizations characterized by silence is that unity, agreement and consensus are signs of organizational health, while disagreement and dissent should be avoided.

**Fears and Silence**

These managerial fears and beliefs can contribute to silence in many ways. If the unstated belief among top management is that employees are opportunistic and not knowledgeable about what's best for the organization, then they will tend to exclude them from decision-making processes and not solicit much employee feedback. Procedures such as systematic surveying or polling will be rare because there will be a tendency to believe that little of value will be learned from them, and because negative upward feedback would be seen as a challenge to management's control. Excluding employees from decision-making processes and not asking for feedback is also a way to avoid dissent and "bad news."

Managers also tend to enact their implicit beliefs and their fear of feedback in their day-to-day behavior toward employees. For example, if
employees express concerns about a proposed organizational change, managers may assume that the employees are resisting the change because it is personally threatening to them or because they do not understand it, not because they are truly concerned that the change might be bad for the organization. Managers may also convey, consciously or unconsciously, annoyance or even hostility toward messengers of unwanted news, and are unlikely to engage in much informal feedback seeking from subordinates. When they do seek feedback, managers will tend to approach those who are likely to share their perspectives and who are thus unlikely to provide negative feedback.

These practices and behaviors not only inhibit upward information flow, but they actually create a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” If an organization’s top-level managers believe that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy, they’re likely to act in ways that implicitly and explicitly discourage upward communication. Well-meaning employees, who feel shut out of decision making processes and unable to express their views, may respond by becoming less committed to the organization and less trusting. Managers’ pessimistic beliefs can thereby become reality.

**Incubating Silence**

Although silence-fostering beliefs are not prevalent in all organizations, the works of several scholars suggest that they exist to some extent in most organizations. Several factors may affect the degree to which such beliefs are held, and the likelihood that conditions will be ripe for organizational silence.

Silence-fostering beliefs may be more likely to become entrenched when the composition of the top management team is stable over time. The longer top managers have been together, the more deeply held their shared assumptions will tend to be and the less likely they will be to question those assumptions.

The similarity or dissimilarity of the demographic profile (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age) of the top management team in comparison to that of employees lower in the organizational hierarchy may also influence the prevalence of silence. Research on diversity has shown that people are more likely to trust people who are similar to themselves. Hence, managers may be more uncertain about how to interpret “bad news” when it comes from someone who they do not know well or who is not similar to themselves, and may be more likely to view it with suspicion.

The cultural background of the top management team may affect the beliefs that its members hold about employees. For example, if the top management team comprises individuals with cultural backgrounds reflecting high-power distance, these managers may be especially likely to feel threatened by the communication of negative feedback by subordinates. High-power distance cultures are ones in which there is a strong acceptance of, and respect for, authority and hierarchy, and where employees do not generally question or challenge their bosses.

Organizational and environmental variables are also likely to affect whether collective silence develops. When there is heavy strategic emphasis on control, management may view negative feedback as more threatening and dissent as more destructive. This logic would suggest that a context conducive to silence is more likely to emerge in organizations pursuing a low-cost strategy, and also within highly competitive environments characterized by a diminishing resource base.

High levels of vertical differentiation, or the existence of a lot of levels in the organizational hierarchy, are also likely to reinforce silence. Within tall organizational structures, top management will probably be less likely to interact with, relate to, and hence trust, lower level employees. In addition, firms that bring in top managers from the outside instead of promoting from within may be more likely to create a gap between top management and the rest of the organization.

**Maintaining Silence**

To fully understand how organizational structures and practices lead to a climate of organizational silence, or in other words, to shared perceptions that speaking up is dangerous and/or futile, we build on theories of social information processing and symbolic interactionism. These perspectives suggest that climate originates from a process of collective sensemaking, whereby employees, together, try to derive meaning about their workplace.
We believe, therefore, that a climate of silence is rooted not only in objective features of the workplace, but also in social interactions that contribute to sensemaking processes. When organizational decision-making is highly centralized and there are few channels for upward communication, workers are likely to collectively conclude that management does not think employee opinions are important. And when management responds to employees' opinions with resistance or denial, employees are most likely to converge on an interpretation that speaking up is risky or not worth the effort.

Common perceptions and attitudes are most likely to develop and become reinforced to the extent that members of a social unit have opportunities to interact and communicate with one another. As a result, several factors that facilitate contact and communication—and hence the development of common perceptions—can increase the likelihood of a strong climate of silence developing. One of these factors is similarity, since individuals are more likely to interact with those who are like themselves. Shared perceptions are also more likely to develop within organizations with relatively stable membership. Workflow interdependence also contributes to the collective sensemaking process. When employees must coordinate their activities with one another, there is greater necessity for communication and thus, a greater opportunity for them to share their perceptions and experiences.

The sensemaking process that we have described has a strong tendency to give rise to biased and often inaccurate perceptions. Employees make sense of managerial actions based on limited, and often distorted, information, much of it second-hand. Employees can also form exaggerated perceptions of the riskiness and futility of speaking up. For example, if a member of the organization voices dissent, and soon thereafter fails to receive an expected promotion, some employees may reach the conclusion that the promotion was lost because this person expressed an unpopular opinion. As this information passes through the grapevine, the widespread perception that those who express negative views are punished may soon arise. Similarly, if a few employees provide input on a particular policy change and that input is ignored, they may conclude that all input is ignored even if this is not the case.

**Breaking the Silence**

A troubling aspect of the dynamics that create and maintain silence is that they are hidden from view and often unrecognized. Management may see that employees are not engaged, but may assume that it is because they are self-interested or not motivated. In addition, within organizations plagued by silence, problems may accumulate to the point that they can no longer be hidden from important stakeholders such as owners or creditors. At this point, these constituencies may conclude that the organization suffers from "poor management" and top managers may lose their jobs. Yet the reasons for the organization's problems may be misunderstood.

So how can employees and managers break the climate of silence? It may not be easy. The behavioral cycles that maintain organizational silence will be hard to break in part because they are not subject to direct observation or discussion. What's more, once people start distrusting a system, it is extremely hard to restore their faith. Even if management eventually realizes that it needs accurate internal feedback and tries to elicit it, employees may tend to be cynical about this change.

Yet we do believe that silence can be prevented, and that organizations can break down walls of silence that have developed over time. In terms of prevention, managers must work hard to counteract the natural human tendency to avoid negative feedback. They must not only seek out honest feedback, on a regular basis, they must also be careful to not "shoot the messenger" when they receive bad news. Managers must also work hard to build an open and trusting climate within their organizations, one in which employees know that their input is valued and that it is safe to speak up. If employees sense that those above them do not want to hear about potential problems and issues of concern, they will not talk about them. Managers must recognize this dynamic and convince employees that they do want input.

Moving from an entrenched climate of silence to a climate of open communication will be more difficult, but not impossible. One way to create such a change is to bring in new top managers. This will not only enable the organization to break from its past, but will signal to employees that there is a commitment to changing the status quo. It will also be important for managers to send consistent messages indicating that they want to hear employee's concerns, and that there are no negative repercussions for employees who talk about organizational problems. These messages must, of course, be backed up by action.

To prevent silence from characterizing their organizations, leaders should not only permit, but reward, employees who come forward with sensitive or risky information, and should create formal mechanisms through which employees can speak up anonymously if they wish to do so. Not doing so means risking the discovery that the story of the CEO's new clothes is more than a fairy tale.

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