



CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FACTORS AFFECTING ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

Modelo conceitual de fatores que afetam o silêncio organizacional

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ABSTRACT

Employee silence is widespread in modern organizations and has become a critical issue for organization management. Employee silence refers to the deliberate concealment of information, opinions, suggestions, or concerns related to potentially important organizational issues and brings unfortunate consequences to the organization. The aim of the current research is to design and develop a model that can provide appropriate measures to reduce it depending on the type of organizational silence. The purpose of this study is the factors affecting organizational silence and identifying the factors that affect organizational silence. Organizational silence is divided into three types: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence. The reasons for creating these three types of organizational silence and its consequences show that these reasons can be divided into three groups: individual factors, organizational factors, and communication factors. The results of this research can help managers to adopt different methods to increase the voice of employees, depending on the type of organizational silence.

Keywords: Organizational Silence, Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence, Prosocial Silence, Employee Voice, Decreasing Silence

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MODELO CONCEITUAL DE FATORES QUE AFETAM O SILÊNCIO ORGANIZACIONAL

Conceptual model of factors affecting organizational silence

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RESUMO

O silêncio dos funcionários é generalizado em organizações modernas e se tornou uma questão crítica para a gestão da organização. O silêncio dos funcionários se refere à ocultação deliberada de informações, opiniões, sugestões ou preocupações relacionadas a questões organizacionais potencialmente importantes e traz consequências infelizes para a organização. O objetivo da pesquisa atual é projetar e desenvolver um modelo que possa fornecer medidas apropriadas para reduzi-lo, dependendo do tipo de silêncio organizacional. O objetivo deste estudo são os fatores que afetam o silêncio organizacional e identificar os fatores que afetam o silêncio organizacional. O silêncio organizacional é dividido em três tipos: silêncio aquiescente, silêncio defensivo e silêncio pró-social. As razões para a criação desses três tipos de silêncio organizacional e suas consequências mostram que essas razões podem ser divididas em três grupos: fatores individuais, fatores organizacionais e fatores de comunicação. Os resultados desta pesquisa podem ajudar os gerentes a adotar diferentes métodos para aumentar a voz dos funcionários, dependendo do tipo de silêncio organizacional.

Palavras-chave: Silêncio Organizacional, Silêncio Aquiescente, Silêncio Defensivo, Silêncio Pró-social, Voz do Funcionário, Silêncio Decrescent

INTRODUCTION

Organizational silence is a common problem in organizations. This concept is rooted in the works of Albert Hirschman (1970), whose “*exit, voice, and loyalty*” framework provided a foundational understanding of why silence may occur in organizations and its implications. Hirschman defined voice as “an attempt to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs”. This work contains perhaps the earliest conceptualization of organizational silence that equates it with loyalty, suggesting that employees may stay and suffer in silence, convinced that the situation will improve (Brinsfield, 2014). In the same year, Rosen and Tesser (1970) introduced the concept of the “mum effect”, defining it as the general unwillingness of individuals to communicate negative information because of the discomfort associated with being the bearer of bad news. Another early conceptualization by Noelle-Neumann (1974) was the “spiral of silence”, which offered an understanding of how silence can develop and persist through conformity to public opinion, often driven by fear of isolation or feelings of self-doubt.

However, the term “organizational silence” was first introduced in the seminal work of Morrison and Milliken (2000), who conceptualized it as a collective-level phenomenon in which employees refuse to voice their opinions and concerns about organizational problems. Building on the work of Morrison and Milliken, Pinder and Harlos (2001) introduced the concept of employee silence, defining it as “the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual’s behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstance to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress” (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). What distinguishes the concept of employee silence from organizational silence is that the former is an individual-level phenomenon, while the latter is a collective-level phenomenon. Later, Van Dyne et al. (2003) expanded on these arguments, proposing three different forms of employee silence (acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial). According to Van Dyne et al., acquiescent silence is based on feelings of resignation and inability to make a difference; defensive silence is based on fear of the consequences of speaking up; and prosocial silence is based on feelings cooperation or altruism with the intention of benefiting the organization.

Silence is not an observable behavior, but it is one of the most common responses of employees when faced with work-related problems. The results of a survey showed that 85% of employees felt unable to voice their opinions or concerns on work-related problems on at least one occasion (Milliken et al., 2003). However, organizational silence does not just mean not speaking up, but can manifest itself in various forms, such as not listening (Tourish and Robson, 2006), not writing/documenting (Ryan and Oestreich, 1998), neglect (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001), and disengaged work behaviors (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Vakola and Bouradas, 2005). Research has shown that organizational silence could promote dysfunctional outcomes such as illegal behaviors and unethical practices (Premeaux, 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003), can negatively impact employee productivity (Bordbar et al., 2019), and can contribute to organizational cynicism and intention to leave work (Çaylak and Altunas, 2017; Lee et al., 2023).

Organizational silence can also have detrimental effects on decision-making and processes of change by blocking alternative views, negative feedback, and accurate information (Zarei Metin et al., 2010). Although organizational silence is a widely observed phenomenon in organizations, it has been the subject of limited empirical research (Vakola and Bouradas, 2005). Recent studies show that expecting employees to work silently and without criticism can lead to psychological withdrawal and even turnover (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Organizational silence is a dysfunctional process that drains resources and energy. It manifests in various ways, including a lack of collective input during meetings, minimal engagement, and generally low levels of collective voice (Liu et al., 2023). It hinders innovation by suppressing the flow of ideas, feedback, and constructive criticism. When employees choose not to share their insights or challenge the status quo, organizations lose out on crucial opportunities to innovate and improve. This silence can be particularly demoralizing for passionate employees who are invested in the organization’s success, as they may feel unable to contribute meaningfully to innovation initiatives. Over time, this can lead to disengagement and disillusionment, further stifling the organization’s potential for growth and creativity (Morrison, and Milliken, 2000). Silence is common in organizations that do not encourage participation, sharing, and teamwork,

and do not practice participative management. Many other factors such as lack of opportunity to voice one's opinion, fear of damaging relationships, and lack of formal communication channels (Dastamalchian et al., 2020).

In this research, we attempt to provide a review of factors affecting organizational silence. Our choice is driven by the alarming situation observed across all organizational levels and the limited number of studies that address this issue. This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the dimensions of organizational silence?
- What are the reasons behind organizational silence?
- What are the consequences of organizational silence and how can it be broken?

The following is a list of definitions for organizational/employee silence:

- Morrison and Milliken (2000) define organizational silence as “the phenomenon where employees withhold their opinions, concerns, or ideas about work-related issues, often due to fear of negative consequences or the belief that their input will be ignored.”

- Pinder and Harlos (2001) define employee silence as “the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress”.

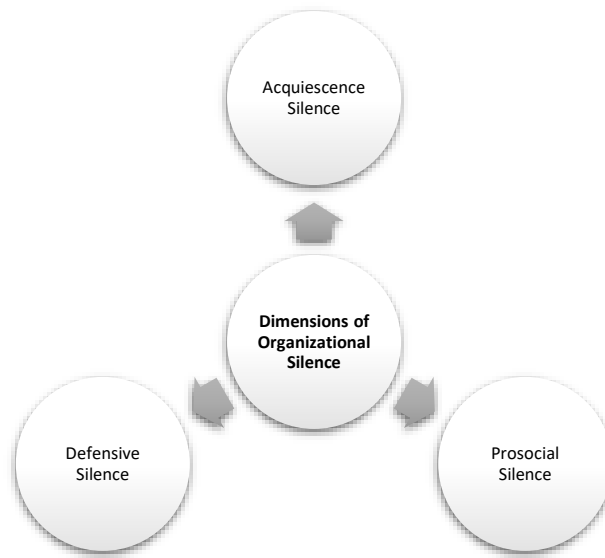
- Van Dyne et al. (2003) define employee silence as the “deliberate abstention from manifestation of ideas, knowledge and opinions”. They further distinguish between three types of silence: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence.

These definitions suggest that organizational silence happens when employees do not voice their concerns or ideas due to perceived risks or a lack of a supportive environment, which can impede organizational learning and improvement.

1 DIMENSIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

The literature has been mainly focused on three dimensions of organizational silence: acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Dimensions of organizational silence



1.1 Acquiescent silence

Acquiescent silence is characterized by passive compliance, where employees choose to withhold their opinions, concerns, or ideas due to a sense of futility or resignation. This form of silence occurs when employees believe that speaking up would be futile or result in negative consequences, leading them to suppress their voice and disengage from active participation. Acquiescent silence can be detrimental to organizations as it stifles innovation, hinders problem-solving, and perpetuates a culture of disengagement and low morale. The prevalence of this type of silence is often rooted in organizational structures that discourage open communication, either through implicit power dynamics or a lack of effective channels for employee feedback (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003).

1.2 Defensive silence

Defensive silence is another dimension of organizational silence characterized by self-protective behavior, where employees deliberately withhold information, concerns, or suggestions to avoid potential negative repercussions, such as conflict, criticism, or harm to their professional standing. This form of silence is motivated by fear, anxiety, or a desire to protect oneself from perceived threats within the organizational environment. Defensive silence can lead to significant issues within organizations, as it impedes the flow of critical information, obstructs problem identification and resolution, and fosters a climate of mistrust and apprehension. When employees engage in defensive silence, it often indicates underlying issues in the organizational culture, such as a lack of psychological safety or a punitive approach to mistakes and dissent (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin, 2003; Edmondson, 1999).

1.3 Prosocial silence

Prosocial silence is a positive dimension of organizational silence, where employees withhold information, concerns, or suggestions out of a sense of altruism, loyalty, or a desire to protect others within the organization. Unlike acquiescent or defensive silence, prosocial silence is motivated by concern for the well-being of colleagues, the organization, or its stakeholders. Employees may choose to remain silent to avoid burdening others with additional stress or to protect sensitive information that could harm the organization if disclosed. While prosocial silence stems from positive intentions, it can still have unintended negative consequences, such as the suppression of valuable ideas or the delay of necessary interventions. Balancing prosocial silence with the need for open communication is crucial for fostering a healthy organizational environment (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Morrison, 2014; Detert & Treviño, 2010).

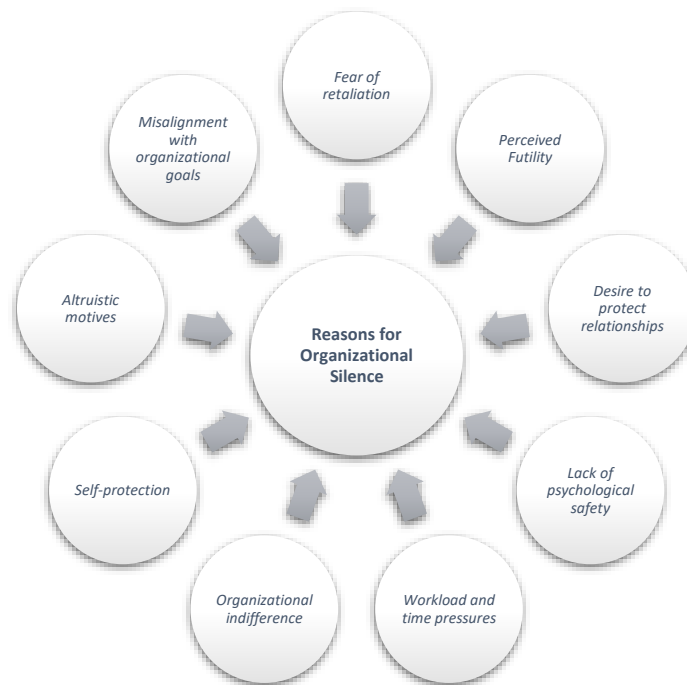
2 REASONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

Organizational silence can arise for various reasons, each with distinct implications for organizational dynamics. Below is a list of the most common reasons for organizational silence:

- *Fear of retaliation*: Employees may remain silent due to a fear of negative consequences, such as job loss, demotion, or other forms of retaliation. This fear is often heightened in organizations where dissent is punished or where there is a history of punitive actions against employees who voice concerns (Milliken et al., 2003).
- *Perceived Futility*: Employees might withhold their opinions because they believe that speaking up will not result in any meaningful change. This sense of futility can arise from past experiences where their input was ignored or when organizational structures do not facilitate effective communication (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

- *Desire to protect relationships*: Some employees choose to remain silent to avoid damaging relationships with colleagues or superiors. They may worry that voicing concerns could lead to conflicts or be perceived as criticism, harming their social standing or rapport within the organization (Van Dyne et al., 2003).
- *Lack of psychological safety*: Organizational silence often occurs in environments where employees do not feel safe to speak up. A lack of psychological safety means employees fear embarrassment, rejection, or being judged negatively if they express their views (Edmondson, 1999).
- *Cultural norms*: In some organizations, the culture itself may discourage open communication. Silence may be a norm, especially in hierarchical or collectivist cultures where respect for authority and group harmony are prioritized over individual expression (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).
- *Workload and time pressures*: Employees might choose silence because they are overwhelmed with their workloads or feel they do not have the time to address issues properly. The pressure to meet deadlines can lead to prioritizing immediate tasks over long-term organizational improvements (Detert and Burris, 2007).
- *Organizational indifference*: When employees perceive that management is indifferent to their concerns or input, they may decide that voicing their thoughts is not worth the effort. This indifference can be signaled through a lack of follow-up on raised issues or a lack of recognition for contributions (Morrison, 2014).
- *Self-protection*: Employees may remain silent to protect themselves from potential exposure to risk or blame, especially in situations where there is uncertainty or when dealing with sensitive issues. This self-protective silence is often linked to a desire to avoid involvement in complex problems (Milliken et al., 2003).
- *Altruistic motives*: In some cases, employees stay silent out of a desire to protect others, such as colleagues or the organization as a whole. This prosocial silence is motivated by a belief that speaking up could cause harm or unnecessary stress (Van Dyne et al., 2003).
- *Misalignment with organizational goals*: Employees might remain silent when they perceive a misalignment between their personal values or goals and those of the organization. This dissonance can lead to disengagement and a reluctance to contribute ideas or feedback (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Figure 2 - Reasons for organizational silence



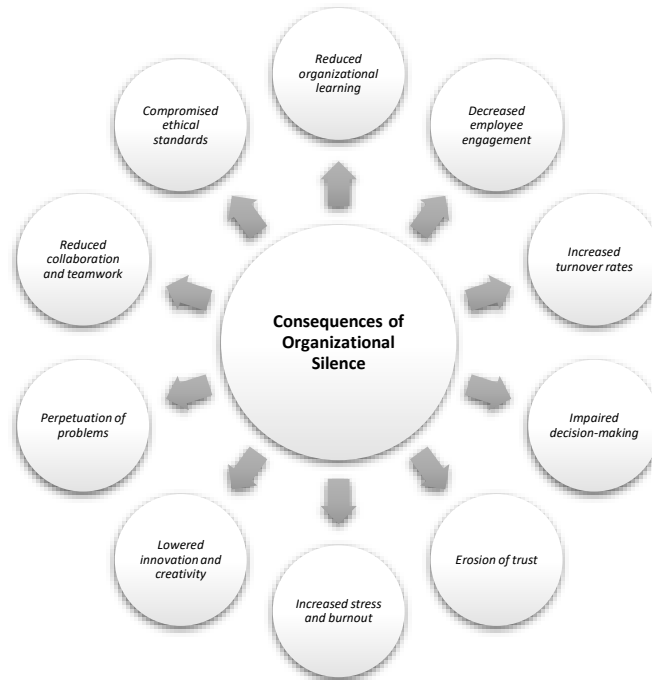
3 CONSEQUENCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

Organizational silence can have a range of negative consequences, affecting both the organization as a whole and individual employees. These include:

- *Reduced organizational learning:* When employees do not share their ideas, feedback, or concerns, the organization loses valuable insights that could drive improvement and innovation. Organizational silence stifles learning and adaptation, leading to stagnation and an inability to respond effectively to changes in the external environment (Edmondson, 1999).
- *Decreased employee engagement:* Employees who feel that their voice is not heard or valued are likely to become disengaged. This disengagement can manifest as lower job satisfaction, reduced commitment to the organization, and a decline in productivity. Over time, disengaged employees may withdraw from active participation or leave the organization altogether (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).
- *Increased turnover rates:* Organizational silence can contribute to higher employee turnover rates. When employees feel that their contributions are ignored or that the organizational culture is not conducive to open communication, they may seek employment elsewhere. High turnover can lead to increased recruitment and training costs and loss of institutional knowledge (Milliken et al., 2003).
- *Impaired decision-making:* Silence in an organization leads to decision-making processes that are based on incomplete or inaccurate information. When employees withhold critical information, decision-makers may fail to identify risks, miss opportunities, or make suboptimal choices that negatively affect the organization's performance (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).
- *Erosion of trust:* Organizational silence can erode trust between employees and management. When employees believe that speaking up will not lead to positive change or that their input is not valued, trust in leadership diminishes. This erosion of trust can further exacerbate communication barriers and contribute to a toxic organizational culture (Detert and Burris, 2007).
- *Increased stress and burnout:* Employees who remain silent about their concerns, workload, or issues with colleagues may experience increased stress and burnout. The pressure to suppress their true feelings or thoughts can lead to emotional exhaustion, reduced well-being, and ultimately, higher rates of absenteeism and mental health issues (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).
- *Lowered innovation and creativity:* Organizational silence stifles creativity and innovation, as employees may withhold new ideas or suggestions for fear of negative consequences or because they believe their ideas will not be valued. This can prevent the organization from capitalizing on potential opportunities for growth and improvement (Van Dyne et al., 2003).
- *Perpetuation of problems:* Silence allows existing problems to persist, as issues that are not discussed or addressed can fester and worsen over time. This can lead to a deterioration in organizational performance, quality of products or services, and customer satisfaction (Milliken et al., 2003).
- *Reduced collaboration and teamwork:* In an environment where silence is prevalent, collaboration and teamwork may suffer. Employees may be reluctant to share information, provide feedback, or offer support to colleagues, leading to reduced cohesion and effectiveness in teams (Edmondson, 1999).
- *Compromised ethical standards:* Organizational silence can lead to the erosion of ethical standards, as employees may fail to report unethical behavior, misconduct, or violations of policies. This can create a culture of complicity where unethical practices are tolerated or even normalized (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

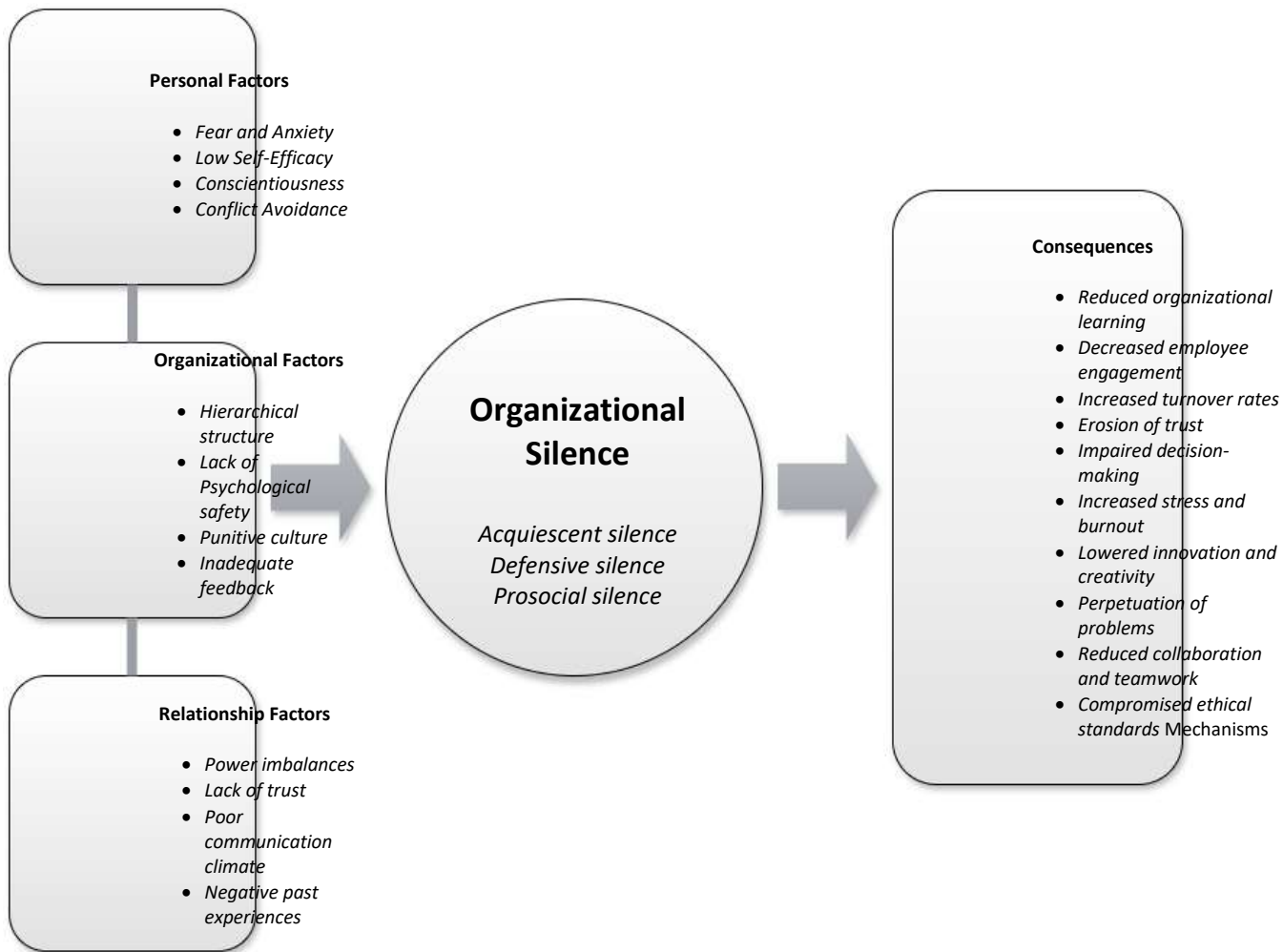
Figure 3 - Consequences of organizational silence

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FACTORS AFFECTING ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE
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Based on this background, the following conceptual model is proposed for organizational silence, consisting of a set of personal, organizational, and relationship factors that contribute to silence and its consequences.

Figure 4 - The proposed conceptual model



CONCLUSION

Despite the pervasiveness of organizational silence and its detrimental effects, there has been limited research on this important issue. The present research examined the different types of organizational silence as well as the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. Below is a list of suggestions for overcoming organizational silence and encouraging employees to voice their ideas, opinions, and concerns:

- **Fostering psychological safety:** Creating an environment where employees feel safe to express their thoughts without fear of negative consequences is crucial. Psychological safety can be fostered by encouraging open dialogue, showing appreciation for contributions, and ensuring that speaking up is not met with retaliation.
- **Implementing open communication channels:** Providing multiple, accessible channels for communication, such as suggestion boxes, anonymous surveys, or open-door policies, can encourage employees to voice their concerns and ideas. These channels should be easy to use and regularly monitored.
- **Leading by example:** Leaders and managers should model the behavior they want to see by being open to feedback, acknowledging their own mistakes, and actively seeking input from employees. When leaders demonstrate that they value employee voice, others are more likely to follow suit.

- Providing training on communication skills: Training programs that enhance employees' communication skills, including how to give and receive feedback effectively, can empower them to speak up. Training should also cover conflict resolution, assertiveness, and how to engage in constructive dialogue.
- Recognizing and rewarding contributions: Recognizing and rewarding employees who speak up can reinforce the importance of voice within the organization. Rewards can be formal (e.g., bonuses, promotions) or informal (e.g., public acknowledgment, praise).
- Addressing and acting on feedback: When employees see that their feedback leads to action or change, they are more likely to continue speaking up. Organizations should establish clear processes for responding to employee input and communicate how feedback has influenced decisions.
- Building trust: Trust between employees and management is essential for encouraging voice. Building trust requires transparency, consistency in actions, and honesty in communication. Managers should be approachable and willing to listen.
- Reduce power imbalances: Flattening hierarchical structures or reducing power differentials can help create an environment where employees feel more comfortable speaking up. Encouraging collaboration and participation at all levels can reduce the fear of challenging authority.
- Create a feedback-friendly culture: Cultivating a culture that values continuous feedback—both positive and constructive—encourages employees to share their ideas and concerns. Regular feedback loops and open forums for discussion can support this culture.
- Addressing the root causes of silence: Organizations should conduct regular assessments to identify the reasons behind silence, such as fear of retaliation or perceived futility. Once identified, targeted interventions can be developed to address these root causes.

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