

# AMA QUARTERLY

WINTER 2015-16 • VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 4

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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# OVERCOMING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

## Creating Voice for 2016 and Beyond

BY ROB BOGOSIAN, EdD

Leadership complexity is rapidly increasing. This past year was replete with corporate challenges and wreckages—the Volkswagen emissions crisis, a continuation of General Motors' ignition defects crisis, Honda Motor Co.'s air bag crisis, and the exposure of a brutal Amazon workplace.

At the root of each of these scenarios is a "Culture of Silence," in which employees willfully withhold important work-related information for reasons that involve you, the leader.

As a leader, you must be able to shape and sustain a healthy culture and productive relationships and enable employees to stay fired up and committed to you and the company. A "Culture of Voice"—the opposite of a Culture of Silence—exists when employees know that their voice has merit and that they can contribute openly and honestly in order to be successful. When your employees are silent, when you aren't hearing any ideas

or complaints, it might mean they are busy and content. But it might also mean that critical knowledge which could improve processes, stimulate innovation, or even prevent fatal mishaps is blocked. Worst-case scenario, employee silence could threaten your organization's survival.

The history of the Culture of Silence traces back to the Titanic. In Senate testimony given after the disaster, the Titanic's owner, Joseph Bruce Ismay, admitted the company's senior leaders hadn't paid much attention to safety. The color of the first-class carpet was discussed for three hours; the lifeboat capacity issue



was discussed for 15 minutes. Some engineers long suspected the ship could sink under certain circumstances. Why hadn't those engineers sounded a forceful warning?

The Senate testimonials reveal the engineers were put off by the Titanic leaders' attitudes and believed it would be futile to voice their concerns. The Titanic, GM, and Honda catastrophes all are the result of the phenomenon called "organizational silence." According to Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison and Frances J. Milliken in "Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World" (*Academy of Management Review*, October 2000), silent employees reflect a work environment, a culture, in which important information—relevant knowledge or an innovative idea—is willfully withheld. Although these are extreme, well-publicized examples, a Culture of Silence can exist in any organization, big or small. How is a Culture of Silence created? How do you know if you are operating in a Culture of Silence, and what can you do as a leader to eradicate it?

Silence is primarily caused by leader-employee interactions, especially when the employee experiences the leader's actions as egregious (such as berating in public or taking credit for

one's ideas). Employees question their personal value system, experience self-doubt, and eventually give up and acquiesce due to external forces requiring them to remain on the job ("I need this job because I'm the primary breadwinner").

Discretionary effort is one area of consequence in a Culture of Silence that should concern every leader. Discretionary effort is the amount of extra performance given by employees above what their job requires for success. The amount of employee discretionary effort shrinks when there is a perception of egregious action on the part of the leader.

## CAUSES AND SIGNS OF SILENCE

Employee silence is either offensive ("I'm not going to speak up to help you, I don't have your back because I don't think you have mine") or defensive ("I would be crazy to speak up. They shoot the messenger here," or "It's futile to speak up, so why bother?"). What's more, if you as a leader are genuinely trying to do your best for the company, it's not likely that you'll be able to recognize whether you're unwittingly sending a message, through your behaviors, that employees should keep their heads down and mouths shut.

Ultimately, a Culture of Silence boils down to how employees receive and perceive a leader's actions and the organizational processes and symbols that have been put in place as a result. The place to start understanding employee silence is with your own actions and the beliefs and values that drive them.

Think of the perception of leadership behavior as a hierarchy of observable behaviors, values, and [underlying] beliefs, as shown in the figure below.

### The Perception of Leadership Behavior



Your belief system explains how you see the world and what you believe to be true about it. This system drives your values, which are the basis for your observable behavior. Your behavior impacts how your associates experience, perceive, and brand your leadership.

You may value control because you believe it's your responsibility, as a leader, to keep others' work in check to ensure the organization meets its goals. As a result, you may be less inclined to accept alternate views presented by employees. You may believe that "giving employees an inch means they will most likely take a mile," and you are also likely to behave in ways that reflect those values. You may require frequent status reports, hold daily update meetings, or retain ultimate decision-making control. To carry the example further, status reports may, in this scenario, become an organizational symbol that reinforces employee silence in your workplace.

The issue isn't whether status reports are good or bad. The issue is the underlying belief that drives your need for status reports and frequent check-ins with associates. This belief, if unchecked, can drive behaviors that have undesirable and unanticipated consequences for your employees—such as feeling micromanaged.

Consider the story of one senior-level manager at a global manufacturing firm who believed that driving results and controlling projects were part of her job. She often boasted about her work ethic and "drive for results." However, her

employees had been burning out and were resentful about the lack of autonomy and overt micromanagement.

This leader discovered her beliefs, values, and behaviors actually stemmed from being the oldest child growing up in a household with two working parents. The responsibility for her siblings had rested on her shoulders, and she had worked very hard to keep everything together for them. She learned at a young age that control was her saving grace and kept her siblings safe, and she brought that [formed] perspective into her adult life and work.

Within a few weeks of this realization, and without deliberate intent on her part, the manager's behaviors began to change, and her employees [slowly] began to speak up more than they had in the past. Within a few months, productivity was improving at a faster pace than before. As soon as she understood the connection between her beliefs and her controlling behaviors, she explored ways to separate the behaviors that worked in the past from those in her present work life that had become a potential liability. This transition takes persistence, a desire for self-reflection, and openness to insights and learning.

If you value structure and control, and your employees crave that direction, so much the better. But if you value structure and control, and your employees are motivated by autonomy, your desire for structure and control, left unchecked and unexamined, could create tension and unresolved conflict. You can alter your behaviors when and if you receive feedback from those with whom you work. But you're unlikely to receive feedback if you have fostered employee silence.

## RECOGNIZING SILENCE

How can you tell if your employees are silent? Start with some heavy self-reflection and ask yourself the following questions (and have other managers throughout the organization do the same). Your responses may indicate signs of silence.

- How many employees, within the past month, presented a solution to a problem when you didn't have a solution to offer?  
How did you respond?  
How did they respond to you?
- In how many staff meetings, within the past six months, did you get the "bovine stare"—a blank look—from the group when you asked people to give you their opinions and views?  
How did you respond?  
How did they respond to you?
- Who were the employees, within the past week, to call you or show up at your office (unsolicited) with a new idea?  
How did you respond?  
How did they respond to you?
- Within the past week, who were the employees that openly disagreed with you? What are their positions/roles in the company?  
How did you respond?  
How did they respond to you?

Your answers to these questions may indicate you are operating in a Culture of Silence. Organizations that have a Culture of Voice tend to embrace and encourage innovation and change and successfully implement ideas, products, and services.

Take the third question, for example. Suppose a direct report came to you this past week with an idea for changing a procurement process. Suppose you didn't like the idea and considered it half-baked. To be nice, you thanked the individual for his or her input and said that you would look into the idea, even though you had no intention of doing so. The good news is that your employee was willing to come to you with an idea. The bad news is that by leaving it hanging, you've sent an implicit message that the employee's idea had little merit and really wasn't worth your time. Consequently, the next time that employee has an idea, he or she may be reluctant to bring it to you. You have inadvertently seeded a Culture of Silence.

Lastly, employees will voice contrary views, including open disagreement, only when they are certain there is no risk of retaliation. Research shows that a leader's openness to different experiences is correlated to his or her attitude toward divergent thinking. Openness is a personality dimension that includes curiosity, imagination, and a tolerance for strange situations, which can foster a Culture of Voice.

## ACHIEVING A CULTURE OF VOICE

For employees, a Culture of Voice means there is no risk associated with open disclosure. One significant benefit of this culture is that knowledge transfer accelerates, resulting in increased knowledge capital. When there is risk, it is usually the result of seeing or hearing that a colleague paid a price for presenting a solution or an idea upward in the organization. Unfortunately, you may be guilty by association (with the management rank).

Either way, you can combat this cultural reality by removing all negative responses in your control when knowledge is presented to you. A negative response is one that reduces the likelihood that others will voice their views. Like it or not, your responses register with the associate culture and are interpreted and socialized in a nanosecond. These are the stories your employees tell about you that shape the culture and your leadership brand.

Here are five ways to move to a Culture of Voice:

**Build up ideas rather than tear them down.** Treat every idea, even the ones you perceive as half-baked, as the next best idea. Ask yourself, "What do I like about this idea?" Use that positive component to build up the idea. State your dislikes as concerns, and ask the idea generator how he or she will address each of your concerns about the idea. The build-up process signals to other employees that it is safe to offer ideas and information, even though it may not be strong yet.

**Embrace divergent ideas.** When the minority view holder scans the group environment and determines that his view or

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idea is divergent, he is unlikely to express it. To make it safe for the minority view holder to disclose, ask the group, "Who sees this problem differently?" You should allow for approximately 30 seconds of silence, which will seem like an eternity. If there is a minority view within the group, this pause will help uncover it. If you make a habit of this practice, you will help your organization move closer to a Culture of Voice. Resist the temptation of comfort in conformity. As the leader, you should be in constant pursuit of nonconforming ideas and reward those who are brave enough to disclose.

**Create a safe environment in meetings.** The next time you get the bovine stare from team members, ask, "What does the silence mean?" Wait 30 seconds before moving on. If you get no response, ask the same question in a one-on-one meeting with a direct report. Eventually you will find out how you may be contributing to the silence or the root cause of the silence issue.

**Listen more than you tell.** Practice drawing out of others rather than telling them what and how to do things. Remember the "20/80 rule": talk and tell approximately 20% of the time and listen and draw out 80% of the time. The amount of information you hear and learn may surprise you.

**Measure your culture.** Silence is measurable and should be assessed annually to determine its existence in your organization. People don't go to the doctor when they're healthy. But most would agree that annual checkups are important to ensure there is nothing troubling under the radar. You should explicitly test the culture and how things actually work in your office. You may not need this test. But then again, you may not know how much you needed it until after you do it.

In 2015, we saw a number of organizations suffer from undetected Cultures of Silence, only to realize it after it was too late. Make 2016 the year of the Culture of Voice. Start with an examination of your own leadership practices and change the ones that could contribute to a Culture of Silence. Creating a Culture of Voice for 2016 and beyond protects your department and company from the perils of silence, and it can make you a stellar leader. Demonstrate that every employee's voice has merit, build up ideas, and embrace divergent views to achieve a Culture of Voice. [AQ](#)

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