# Chapter One
## Cultures Of silence, Cultures of Voice, and the high-influence leader

When your employees are silent—when you aren't hearing any ideas or complaints—it might mean that they're busy and happy.   But it might also mean that some critical communication channels—the ones that move information that would improve processes and foster innovation—are blocked. It may mean that your organization suffers from having a culture of silence, which can lead to breakdowns in customer relationships, a loss of talented employees, and even disastrous product or service failures. It is every leader's obligation to understand the phenomenon of silence in the workplace, the causes, and consequences.

We begin with a set of cases that describe the lived experiences of silence in various organizations and industries.  Our research shows that cultures of silence are not found in any one organization type or industry. Rather, the silence phenomenon is prevalent across organizations, industries, and national cultures, and is mostly created by leader-employee interactions.   As you read each case, you will gain   a sense of the leader-employee interactions that resulted in a culture of silence. Then, you can begin to reflect on your own leader practices to assess the extent to which they may be eliciting silence or encouraging voice.

**The cases:**

*On April 15, 1912, the glorious S.S. Titanic struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage, killing 1517 of the 2223 people who had been on board. Incredibly, the Titanic had just 20 lifeboats, enough to*

*accommodate only 42 percent of the passengers and crew. Perhaps more incredibly, that was legal; the number of lifeboats that a ship was required to have (and their capacities) was based on the gross register*

*tonnage of a ship rather than on the number of people who would be aboard.*

*In the Senate testimony given after the disaster, Joseph Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line and Titanic's owner, admitted that the company's senior leaders hadn't paid much attention to the issue. He stated that in production meetings, "We discussed the colors of the first class carpet for three hours and the lifeboat capacity issue for 15 minutes" (Titanic Disaster, United States Inquiry Report).*

*This despite the fact that some engineers had long suspected the ship could sink under certain circumstances. Why hadn't they sounded a forceful warning? Examination of the Senate testimonials reveals that engineers were put off by White Star Line leaders' attitudes. Given the time that Ismay and his team had spent discussing Titanic's appearance and comfort compared to the time they spent examining the ship's safety risks, perhaps the engineers felt their warnings would be futile. It seems certain the approach that leadership took contributed to the engineers' reticence.*

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*On April 20, 2010, a British Petroleum oil well in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, killing 11 workers and spilling millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. British Petroleum had permission from the federal Minerals Management Service to drill for oil "without first getting required permits from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that assesses threats to endangered species — and despite strong warnings from scientists at that agency about the impact the drilling was likely to have on the gulf."[1] According to the National Wildlife Federation, "More than 8,000 birds, sea turtles, and marine mammals were found injured or dead in the six months after the spill. The long-term damage caused by the oil and the nearly two million gallons of chemical dispersants used on the spill may not be known for years."[2]*

*Scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, along with a cadre of concerned environmentalists, frequently warned of*

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[1] U.S. Said to Allow Drilling Without Needed Permits By IAN URBINA

[2] Retrieved July 15, 2014, from https://www.nwf.org/What-We-Do/Protect-Habitat/Gulf-Restoration/Oil-Spill/Effects-on-Wildlife.aspx

*the dangers of drilling in the region. Their actions were futile. Senior-level managers from the Minerals Management Service gave BP permission to drill anyway, an action that ultimately resulted in a disaster that is said to have reached epic proportions.*

<p align="center">***</p>

*Spring 2014: In a GM-funded report by former U.S. Attorney Anton Valukas, Chief Executive Officer Mary Barra acknowledges that the auto-maker's decade-plus failure to recall cars that had defective ignition switches (resulting in at least a dozen deaths) reflects "a pattern of incompetence and neglect." According to the Wall Street Journal,[3] Valukas reported a "troubling disavowal of responsibility" at GM, and Barra was cited for describing a behavior called the "GM Nod," or a practice whereby employees seem to agree on a course of action but then fail to act.*

*Other published articles from the same period in 2014 revealed a list of words that GM senior executives had instructed employees to avoid via a 2008 presentation designed to train employees how to communicate with one another about potential safety issues. These words included: "Titanic," "powder keg," "failure," and "serious." Employees were also provided with guidance about appropriate substitutions. Instead of "defect," for example, they were told to say that something "does not perform to design." Instead of "problem," they were told to sub in a word like "issue" or "matter."*

*An article by Peter Valdes-Dapena, published by CNN Money on May 17, 2014, reported that "National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Acting Administrator David Friedman criticized GM for the presentation during a press conference Friday [May 16th]. Friedman said that, in telling employees to avoid certain language when writing about safety issues, GM was discouraging open and free discussion of potential problems."*

The Titanic, the BP oil spill, and the 2014 revelations about GM's ignition switch fiasco are extreme examples. But a culture of silence does at least some damage in any organization where it thrives. It causes managers to ignore valuable input from third parties. It causes them to

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3    Bennett, J. & Lublin, J. S. (2014). GM Recall Probe to Blame Cultural Failings. Wall Street Journal.

marginalize internal knowledge. It compels employees to stop short of expending any discretionary effort. Reduced to its essentials, it prevents the flow of potentially critical information in all sorts of organizations on a daily basis, increasing the risk of poor decision making and any negative results that could ensue.

What are the root causes of a culture of silence? Is your organization vulnerable? And are you, as a manager, inadvertently fostering these "silent" behaviors that could one day cause a very loud negative event?

By contrast, what conditions foster cultures of voice in which employees speak freely and offer a bounty of discretionary effort, going out of their way to ensure that important information gets where it needs to go, and where the company—*their* company—is stronger because of their efforts? How can you ensure that your organization encourages a culture of voice?

This book seeks to answer all of those questions. In the coming chapters, we'll uncover the causes of cultures of silence and their antidotes. We'll help you figure out whether your organization has such a culture. We'll show you the kinds of leadership practices that encourage cultures of voice and help you determine which of those practices will work best for you and for your company. We'll also share a number of ideas and exercises to help you build a strong culture of voice and sustain it over the long term.

# Three primary causes of employee silence

Our research shows that a culture of silence and its flip side—the infinitely more desirable culture of voice— share three primary causes:

1. Leaders' and managers' underlying **beliefs** about their roles and responsibilities, about how they ought to present themselves, and about employee mindsets and tendencies. ("A leader should know what is best   for the company." "Organizational conformity is a sign of strength."  "Conflict and disagreement are a sign of weakness or lack of commitment on the leader's part." "A leader's job is to facilitate others' work." "Disagreement is a sign of creativity and strength." "Leaders have to protect their people.")

2. The **values** that those beliefs compel  (integrity, achievement, timeliness, order, collaboration, transparency).

3. The **behaviors** that manifest themselves in a manager's style, stemming largely from his or her beliefs and values. (For example, controlling the decisions and problem-solving processes or communicating on a (perceived) "need-to-know" basis.)

In practice, these three "causes" are actually both causes and results. They feed on one another, and as one grows in strength, they spread through an organization until they create either a culture of silence or   a culture of voice. Importantly, though, there are few absolute "right" or "wrong" beliefs, values, and behaviors that cause either a culture of silence or a culture of voice.

Leadership styles tend to be dichotomous and fall into two categories, those that focus on the work and those that focus on the people. Work-focused leadership styles tend to be autocratic, task-oriented, and use a centralized decision-making method. People-oriented leaders are more considerate of their associates, share in decision making, and provide support to associates (Bass, 1985).

These dichotomous styles can affect a leader's behaviors in different ways. The people-oriented, or "democratic-style," leader seeks input, offers relevant information, makes the ultimate decisions to facilitate progress, and offers encouragement and praise to associates. The authoritarian-style leader is inclined to determine and announce all policies affecting group members and tends to dictate   processes.

One would think that we're leading up to say that the people-oriented style is preferable and leads to a culture of voice and that the work-focused style leads inevitably to a culture of silence. But that's not the case! Neither style is all good or all   bad.

It's clear that a leader must choose or adapt elements of one or another management style according to a number of variables, such as task complexity, the requirements of the business, the risk associated with any given tasks or projects, and the employee's ability and experience. The key is to figure out which style is your "default" style and what the implications are of that style on the people you're leading. How does it all add up?

## Beliefs, values, and behaviors from the leader's point of View

Beliefs, values, and behaviors —what might these look like in practice, from the leader's point of view? Consider this hypothetical scenario:

> The new department head believes fervently that it
> is her job to provide seamless solutions for the rest of the
> organization. To do so, she assumes it is her job to

determine what those solutions ought to be and then direct her employees to complete tasks to develop and maintain them. That's what they're paying her the big bucks for—to be the leader.

## Beliefs

She believes that "*if you give them an inch, they'll take a mile*," and so she has made it clear that she wants to see people working at their desks by 8:30 a.m. each day and that she doesn't want them to decorate their offices and cubicles with a lot of clutter about their home lives. She prefers that her staff maintain a professional attitude at all times and keep their personal lives to themselves.

## Values

Valuing structure and control, she thinks that running her department properly means all of her employees show that they are "team players" and that they are "on task" at all times. She sets deadlines accordingly and holds staff meetings at which she checks the "punch list" and assigns next-stage projects. She is mindful of distractions and worries a lot when conversations at meetings get off point. She is fond of saying, "Let's take that offline," meaning that whatever that ancillary topic is, she doesn't want it to slow down the meeting and prefers to discuss it privately or with a smaller group at another time.

## Behaviors

She has told her staff that her door "is always open," and she means it. But in order to see her, staff members must generally schedule an appointment with her assistant. Also, she spends most lunch times meeting with other executives in the managers' lunchroom,

feeling that it is important for these individuals to get to know her and see her as a responsive colleague. She parks in a special section of the company lot reserved for managers. She assumes that her staff is happy; not many of them schedule appointments to voice concerns. Things seem to hum along as they should.

This executive thinks she is acting in the best interests of the company. But it's likely that she is inadvertently fostering a culture of silence. Her employees may be keeping their mouths shut about their ideas, or concerns, for fear of seeming as if they're not team players. They may be quiet because they perceive her autocratic approach as abusive. They may sense that she has drawn a line in the sand that she doesn't want them to cross. They may not want to "stand out," believing, because of this manager's behavior, that their best bet for survival in the company is to conform to the group and not make waves.

Now consider an alternate scenario:

**Beliefs**

The new head of the department believes fervently that it is her job to lead her staff by facilitating the process of developing an optimal solution. She schedules meetings to brainstorm ideas, makes the ultimate decision about which course of action to pursue, and then works with her staff to develop a reasonable timetable for executing their plan. She holds them to these timetables; the ability to set and stick to a timetable is reflected in performance reviews.

**Values**

Valuing teamwork, she eats lunch with other executives; valuing inclusion, she knows that it is important to know her colleagues and the people on the "next level and beyond" in the organization. But on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she eats lunch in

the department's conference room with anyone on her staff who wants to join.

**Behaviors**

She has appointed a project manager to oversee progress and ensure that the work being done on new initiatives doesn't compromise the department's daily operations. She checks in with this project manager regularly and helps that person adjust timetables as needed based on any new information that has come  to her attention.

She parks in the same spot she's always parked in— long habit has her parking at the far end of the lot— and she usually spends the first 20 minutes of her day walking around the department, checking in, informally and randomly, with her staff.

It's far more likely that the conditions present in that second scenario foster a culture of voice. The staff members in this department have a higher probability of feeling valued and significant and have confidence that their boss relies on their contribution to the organization at large. This boss is also task-oriented and attentive to detail and deadline, but her behaviors are more balanced than those of the executive in the first example.

That's not to say that manager's lunchrooms and reserved parking spaces are necessarily evil harbingers or symptoms of a culture of silence. They're not. But all organizational symbolism (such as reserved parking, offices or open floor plan, executive lounges, and so forth) is related to leaders' perceptions and aspirations for their organization's culture and is clearly keyed into senior leaders' beliefs and resulting expectations of themselves and their staff members.

# Beliefs, values, and Behaviors from the employee's point of View

Now consider a set of case examples that describe in detail how employees experience the phenomenon of silence. We've used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the managers profiled below, and we have edited some of the quotes for purposes of brevity and clarity. But the details are real. Bear in mind that these employees you're about to hear from have had different motivations for their silence. Some may feel a need to protect themselves. Some may be responding to a particular "trigger event," and some may be reacting to perceived group dynamics. Some have chosen silence as a means of retaliation against an action they felt was unjust.

Also bear in mind that *none of these employees have insight into the beliefs or values that are driving their bosses' behaviors*. They may have made assumptions based on incomplete and inaccurate views of their bosses' values and beliefs. Their own motivations (fear, a sense of futility) may be clouding their ability to think objectively.

**Lee**

Lee was an executive in a global financial services organization. She has an MBA and is an award-winning sportsperson.

> *"The new boss came on board, and I didn't speak up when this person was basically requiring us to hire certain people and fire others. The people that this person wanted us to fire hadn't done anything wrong— they were never on probation. It was like this person came in and wanted to bring in his/her own people. I kept silent because it was clear who was in charge, and this person had been verbally abusive. No one else seemed concerned that this person was torpedoing people and forcing them to leave."*

*"I remember this person made me fire some employees. I was in his office, and I was very upset (about this), crying. This person said, 'Don't take it personally, or you will kill yourself; this is what corporations do,' or something like that. I remember walking out of this person's office thinking, 'This is NOT what corporations do, and if you had to do this, there had to be      a better way.' I hated it [firing someone], and I lost sleep for weeks. It was absolutely horrible because you know you have someone's livelihood in your hands."*

*"I began to feel like I could fight back and persevere, but then I realized that life is too short, and I couldn't stand to come to work any longer."*

Lee left her job shortly thereafter and took a position with another firm.

> Lee's silence was defensive. Associates affected by trigger events often cannot accept or adjust to the powerlessness and threatening environment created by a new manager's power exhibition. Those who cannot make sense of the conditions that elicited their silence ultimately leave their companies because they see no other choice. The Society for Human Resource Management estimates that it costs companies approximately 22 percent of annual salary to replace a minimum-wage employee. The replacement cost percentage rises for positions higher in the hierarchical structure.

**Isaac**

Isaac is a bright, upwardly mobile senior-level leader with a promising future. As a manager in a financial organization on the brink of a strong growth trajectory, Isaac's role was a critical link to capital markets. Isaac had military experience and graduated from a top-ranked college in   the United States. The military's strong ethics and values were a large part of Isaac's character: "In the military, you are taught that all you have is your integrity and honesty and to follow orders." Isaac's military training influenced his relationship with the boss: "I put a lot of trust in my boss — they know best, and I should try to be supportive. I worked with the boss, and I knew his style. I was accustomed to him, so I was used to this kind of stress."

Isaac was asked to make a presentation to a capital markets group that would essentially secure the funding that the company needed to grow. There was a lot resting on this presentation for Isaac, and he felt some pressure to perform. Isaac was asked to present an inflated analysis and an embellished financial conclusion that would satisfy the capital markets group and secure the required capital for growth: "The day before this meeting, a Director gave me a projection number to present which was grossly overstated. I didn't know where that number came from, but I didn't think it was truthful." Isaac was told to present the incorrect numbers to the meeting participants, and as a result, he was caught between a proverbial rock and hard place: "I felt trapped like I didn't have a choice." So, he remained silent about the truth for fear of losing his job.

Isaac assessed the risk of voicing the truth about financial projections to the meeting participants and remaining silent: "If I called them on it, it would be over because I would have been let go." Isaac felt pressured to collude with his superiors because if he disclosed the truth in the group setting, the firm's capital access would have been jeopardized: "I felt trapped to this [false] number but assumed that they wouldn't hold me to it." Isaac felt there was a lot riding on his silence and feared that without the capital injection, peers and subordinates could lose their jobs: "I felt responsible for whether or not the company would get the access to capital, the responsibility for the company, and to the people who could lose their jobs. I had to figure this out." Isaac made every effort to find a way to substantiate the "inflated" number.

Upon reflection, Isaac described this trigger event that elicited his silence as a turning point for him and a "good life lesson" linked to his core human values: "It was a good life lesson for me – to stand your ground." But he didn't. "I'm smarter now, and I would have told the truth or not attended any meeting where I had to stretch the truth." Isaac also altered his views about following orders and trusting authority: "After this experience, my whole approach is very different — you have to earn my loyalty. I don't give it freely anymore."

Isaac's silence was a result of decreased psychological safety. Associate effort contracts as a result of trigger events that elicit silence. Associates often feel threatened and conflicted about their personal values and contrary views. They responded to the threat by doing only what was essential in their current job.

Much has been researched and written about on the subject of leadership and the characteristics that make good leaders. However, there is not as much research on bad leadership. In all the study cases, silence was elicited by the actions of a leader mostly in a negative context and mostly when unhealthy power was asserted over the manager's subordinate.

The underlying message in most cases was one of power over subordinates with a common message experienced as, "Do as you are told." As a result, individuals describe feelings of betrayal, broken trust, experiencing maniacal behavior, shock, and disbelief.

## Alex

Alex is an information technology manager in a higher education institution, a leader between 35-45 years of age. In her words:

*"I had always given ideas. I was always vocal and making suggestions. My colleagues began to rely on my contributions. I brought a work issue to my boss on the side because she asked me not to discuss things in front of the group. So, I explained the issue and how I would go about solving it. She said, 'Okay, will you write it up for me? It's a really good idea.' So, I write it up, and in the next big staff meeting, she announces that she has an idea to solve the XYZ problem, and guess whose idea she presents? Mine! Next, she took the idea to her boss and several levels above, and this great idea now becomes her idea. My boss never gave me credit. I've been told in the past not to refute in public anything my boss says. So, in that instant, I decided to remain silentalways."*

*"In fact, I disengaged completely. I'll do what I am told to do. I will do it to the best of my ability and not violate my personal*

*standards of work, but in terms of loyalty to the organization, commitment to the organization, to the manager, nothing."*

*"I thought this person demonstrated a lack of integrity and also just being lazy. This boss was using position and authority to say, 'You can't speak up about this.' My idea was stolen from me, and it damages the relationship because at this point, there is no trust, and we can't have a relationship."*

Alex's silence was offensive. It was the result of her perception of the leader's action. The autocratic leader can shut down idea generation and as a result, have trouble gaining acceptance from others. When employees' attempts to voice concerns about significant work-related issues have negative reactions from superiors, they usually conclude that it is too risky to communicate bad information upward in the organization. This conclusion is socialized among the employee community and can result in a culture of silence.

**Monica**

Monica is a human resources expert in the field of development. She is an MBA and has worked in large global organizations for most of her career.

*"Organizational offsite meetings are usually a time when teams assemble out of the day-to-day work setting to focus on a particular issue. Offsite sessions usually combine business and social dynamics and create a comfortable atmosphere where participants can speak their minds. But when I spoke up, asking for clarification on the rationale behind a decision that had been made by the senior team, my boss took me aside later and reprimanded me for speaking up."*

*"My boss told me I should have just done what I was told to do. The thing is, I'm not the type of a person to just do something without asking why."*

*"It was like I had broken some kind of code. I asked him if we could discuss the situation and if I could try to remedy it, but he wouldn't engage in the conversation. I felt as if I was no longer trusted. He communicated with me less; there was no more information or idea seeking with me. He just began to go around me, avoid me, and I felt betrayed, like I was on a black list."*

*"I felt a sense of loss. I used to be involved, and after this, our relationship went downhill, like I wasn't trusted anymore. It was like grieving the loss of someone; I was so sad. I began to doubt my capability and the choice to speak up. I wondered if I was really not good enough that someone (manager) has to tell me what to do all the time? I became much more guarded after that incident, and I am not a guarded person."*

> Monica's silence was the result of defensiveness. Aggressive and/or autocratic leadership behaviors affect employee's global feelings of self-worth (Crocker & Major, 1989). Managers reflect upon and begin to doubt their belief systems and personal values, particularly when the leader expresses negative judgment about the employee's actions.
>
> When leaders attempt to gain acceptance of their ideas that are in conflict with associates' values, associates are often rendered powerless by the autocratic leader. The associate often rejects the leader's ideas and experiences them in direct conflict with their personal values. The conflict often becomes a source of psychological distress and self-doubt (Maier and Solem, 1952).

These four cases are among a larger set from Dr. Bogosian's silence research. In all cases, every research participant described a growing sense of self-doubt. They began to second-guess themselves and question their ability, significance, and self-worth. This self-doubt disrupted their ability to contribute to the organization with confidence.

Feelings of fear or futility play a central role in an employee's decision to remain silent[4]. Technically, this sort of circumstance is called

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4          (Morrison & Rothman, 2009)

"Procedural Injustice" (Tyler, 1989). It's characterized as denied voice and denied decision control, and it breeds resentment against those who are "blameworthy" (p.103). The abusive leadership behavior that instills fear "most commonly occurs in the form of public ridicule, angry outbursts, taking credit for subordinates' success, and scapegoating" (p. 262). Abused subordinates report greater levels of psychological distress and intentions to quit their jobs (Tepper & Lockhart, 2007).   The consequences of leader inaction can lead to employees feeling a sense of futility. This then leads to a culture of silence. Consider how futility led to a culture of silence in the case   below:
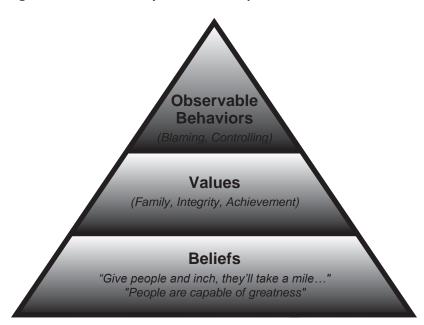
*A chemist at a state crime laboratory allegedly altered test results tainting the reliability of evidence leading to convictions and jailing   of thousands of people. Several of her peers supposedly knew that something was amiss about her behaviors— she was processing three times the number of samples than  her colleagues— yet chose not to approach management. Why? Because one of them had tried to communicate with management and had been rebuffed. Specifically, he was told that this was not his job — back off or else. Based on that rebuff experience, employees quickly learned that any attempt to communicate this type of important work-related information was futile. The result was employee  silence.*

Leader behaviors such as those described in these cases are antecedents to organizational cultures of silence that can be characterized by the belief that speaking up about work-related issues are both futile and dangerous (Morrison and Milliken,  2000).

# Stepping back

Now that you've seen both sides of the coin (silence and voice), it's time to turn the lens on yourself. Think of the "delivery" of leadership as a hierarchy of observable behaviors, values, and (underlying) beliefs, as shown in Diagram 1.0. We believe that sustainable behavior change is unlikely without careful self-reflection and insights at each of three levels in the hierarchy shown below. As you read the next section, consider your own values and underlying beliefs and how your employees may experience them at work.

**Diagram 1.0 The Delivery of   Leadership**



Your belief system explains how you see the world and what you believe to be true about it. Your belief system drives your values, which are the basis for your observable behaviors. Your behaviors impact how your associates experience you at work. Over time, if other leaders share your belief system and management style, you will begin to put in place a web of organizational symbols that reflect and bolster your beliefs and your  style.

For example, take "control" as a behavior. High control is said to decrease the acceptance and openness to opposing or alternate views. It is also proposed that tall hierarchies put distance between management and employees that can foster beliefs among management that employees are unreliable and untrustworthy. If you believe that giving employees an inch means they will most likely take a mile, you are probably inclined to behave in ways that reflect this belief. This belief is manifested in espoused values of structure, control, and accountability. Living these values will be manifested in observable behaviors that represent your values and underlying beliefs such as the need to see frequent daily activities like status reports and daily update meetings.

Status reports may become an organizational symbol that reinforces the culture 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 your associates. This belief, if unchecked, can drive behaviors that have undesirable and or unanticipated consequences for your employees—like feeling micro-managed.

Consider: A senior-level manager in a global manufacturer we interviewed in the course of this research explained that after several coaching meetings, she had begun to understand the root cause of her need to drive results and control all production projects closely and how to achieve a more balanced approach to her leadership. As a result, within a few weeks (weeks!), her employees began to speak up more than they had in the past, and overall, productivity was improving at a faster pace than before.

On the surface, driving results and controlling projects seemed like part of her job. However, her employees were burning out and resentful of the lack of autonomy and overt micromanagement. This leader discovered that her beliefs, values, and behaviors actually stemmed from being the oldest child growing up in a household of dysfunctional parents. The responsibility for her siblings rested on her shoulders, and she worked very hard to keep everything together for them. She learned at a young age that control was her saving grace, and it kept her siblings safe. She brought that perspective to work.

As soon as she understood the root cause of her controlling behavior, however, she felt free to explore ways to separate the behaviors that worked in the past from those in her current work life that had become a potential liability.

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, those two values, 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 are unlikely to receive feedback if you have fostered a culture of silence, however unwittingly.

Now that you have read about several manager-employee interactions and their unintended consequences, you should have a sense of how cultures of silence are created. We now explore the concept of High-Influence Leadership®. We consider High-Influence Leadership® practices to be the antidote to leadership behaviors that may cause cultures of silence.

# high-influence Leadership®

A High-Influence Leader is one who: (1) constantly learns and involves followers in the quest for excellence on an individual level and an organizational level (competitive superiority), (2) believes that followers have something to contribute, (3) encourages followers to learn and grow in their current role and beyond, (4) creates a level playing field for the purposes of innovating, gaining, and sustaining competitive advantage, and (5) encourages voice and minimizes silence in the workplace.

Research studies suggest that leaders often attribute poor performance to associates, and associates often attribute performance problems to their company and their leaders (Weiner, 1986). In addition, studies suggest that leaders often make attributions that maximize their (own) rewards and outcomes (Dossett & Greenberg, 1981). These attribution dynamics suggest that leaders and followers tend to self-protect. Self-protection mechanisms can lead to misunderstood motives that can result in a culture of silence.

High-Influence Leaders (HIL), on the other hand, think differently. When they experience an undesirable result at work, they ask themselves, "What part did I play in that result?" They hesitate to attribute negative results to others, and they avoid self-serving biases. High-Influence Leaders have a curious versus confirming learning orientation— they ask and listen more than they tell. They believe that most people are capable of succeeding, seek out and reward minority viewpoints, stimulate thinking rather than shut it down, and self-reflect and view feedback as a gift rather than a threat. As you think about the characteristics of the High-Influence Leader, consider the two following cases.

Ken is the CEO of a successful, New England-based investment company. A seasoned investment executive, he is constantly in tune with his influence on every aspect of the   business.

*"The [outside] investment world in which we operate is volatile. We are experts in our field. However, sometimes conflict is pushed to the limit due to outside pressures. We must remain calm, level-headed, and avoid over-reacting to current market conditions. This means that everyone involved in the business, whether Investments or Marketing and Sales, must have a voice and be willing to listen to others involved, even when their views are different. This is a major part of my role. I see myself as the neutralizer, the person who has to ensure that everyone is heard whether we like what we hear or not. I can't possibly have all the answers, and I don't. I work very hard at being accessible. I'm on the floor every chance I get so people have a chance to interact with me and vice versa. We are all on the same team, and we all play a big part in the company's success. If I don't set the example for a culture of voice and entrepreneurialism, who will?"*

Bill, former COO emeritus of a major food manufacturer, was most proud of his company's record on recognition. According to Bill, this was the most important driver of the company's employee   commitment.

*"In a production environment, senior management must be seen as part of, not separate from, the line workers. I used to regularly walk the production facility and actually work on the line. No one in the company was more important than anyone else. I didn't think there was a better way for folks to connect with me and feel like they could have a voice. We were not big on hierarchical decision making, and we actually worked hard to decentralize it. We wanted upward communication, and we felt the best way to get that dynamic was to have the right leaders encouraging voice upward in the hierarchy."*

These two leaders exemplify characteristics of a High-Influence Leader. They value humility and accessibility as methods of encouraging voice. Along with voice, they respect and believe in the contributions of others and see it as an asset to be treasured. In addition, both leaders believed that (appropriate) autonomy is a key success factor of their organizations.

Leaders have the ability to encourage levels of autonomy among their employee base or create levels of dependency (see diagram 1.1 below). The HIL enables appropriate levels of autonomy. They generally believe that employees are capable and can achieve success with coaching (not punishing), support, guidance, and feedback, assuming that employees are correctly placed in their roles and have the necessary resources to complete the job. The HIL encourages the well-placed employee to succeed, and when appropriate, provides decision-making latitude. The low influence leader may create a cycle of dependency when they micromanage or take back work at particular times prior to completion. If this take-back behavior becomes a pattern, employees quickly realize that they should only take tasks to a certain point, at which time they should hand the unfinished task back to the leader. The leader may assume the employee doesn't have initiative. The employee assumes that the leader wants it their way only and stops the process when they think they cannot or should not go further. Soon, there is a cycle of dependency that can lead to false, self-serving attribution by the leader. The diagram below illustrates both dependency and autonomy characteristics.

**Diagram 1.1: The Dependency-Autonomy Continuum**



Importantly, when we talk about "autonomy" and "dependency" here, we're not at all talking about the strict and completely necessary protocols that some companies must work under. Biotech firms, or organizations that investigate criminal activities, for example, have to follow strict protocols and processes to meet regulatory requirements,

and/or to ensure safety. However, these companies can also have healthy cultures of voice. In fact, without cultures of voice, they are often at greater risk of a serious crisis.

Now that you have a better understanding of the primary causes of employee silence, it's time to reflect on the extent to which you may be creating a culture of voice or silence. In the next chapter, we'll describe a few ways to self-reflect; the exercises will help you understand your role in breaking corporate silence