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SILENCE AND BREAKING THE SILENCE IN AN ORGANIZATION

The purpose of this article is to present the phenomenon of silence in an organization. Silence is understood as a decision not to speak out in the face of irregularities in an organization or a need for improvements in that organization. Two types of silence are considered: silence as an effect of socially shared beliefs and silence as a tactic. In the article I also consider the issue of breaking the silence. The postulate of breaking the silence is consistent with the assignment of value to the involvement of the employee in the decision making process. Silence limits participation, creativity, and the multiplicity of voices and hinders changes in the organization.

Keywords: silence, voice, organization, breaking the silence.

INTRODUCTION

Silence is a decision not to speak up in the face of irregularities taking place in the organization. Silence can also refer to situations in which there is a possibility of making improvements in the functioning of the organization. A potential voice in matters important for the organization in the form of a suggestion, an expression of concern, or a communication of information relating to the current problems would be directed to the persons who are authorized to introduce such changes, and refraining from speaking up would refer first of all to upward communication (Morrison, 2014). The concept of silence was introduced by Morrison and Milliken in their paper titled “Organizational Silence as a Bar-

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rier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World.” This concept was inspired by reflections concerning upward communication (Kassing 2002; Detert & Edmonson, 2011), the study of speaking out as a defining feature of procedural justice (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), the study of whistle-blowing, the MUM effect, self-censorship (Bar-Tal, 2013b; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006), and issue selling. Whistle-blowers are persons who break the silence while other observers of unjust, illegal, or immoral behaviors do not share their observations (Miceli & Near, 1989). Their behavior is particularly important in the context of immoral behavior on the part of the superiors, and the risk involved in signaling results in only few people deciding to commit such an act of disobedience toward the authorities (Bochiaro, Zimabrd, & Van Lange, 2012). The MUM effect refers to reserve in conveying negative information and manifests itself in putting off, transforming, or avoiding confrontation with the person to whom feedback is to be delivered (Lee, 1993). This partly results from the fear of the negative emotions that can be evoked in the person receiving the information (Sutton, 2010). Issue selling refers to the efforts undertaken in the organization in order to attract attention to the problems or events that can be important for performance (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2001).

The purpose of the paper is to present two types of silence in the organization, referred to after Fivush (2010) as *being silenced* and *being silent*. Being silenced is the effect of the socially shared beliefs with regard to what can be talked about and what problems should not be discussed. The decision to be silent is taken automatically and is an effect of the socialization process. Being silent, by contrast, is a sign of tactical activity and a result of the calculation of the gains and losses that speaking out would involve. The paper also deals with the issue of breaking the silence. Finally, a summary is offered in which a suggestion is made to refer to the concept of shared reality and in which the need is stressed to recognize the dangers standing in the way of effectively breaking the silence.

SILENCE AS AN EFFECT OF SOCIALLY SHARED BELIEFS: “BEING SILENCED”

Robyn Fivush (2010) distinguishes between being silenced and being silent. While being silent means a cautious decision not to speak out without violating one’s integrity and ego, being silenced could be a sign of losing power and a sense of inferiority. In the latter case, power relations designate direct opposi-

tion of silence and voice (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). However, being silenced is not always connected with a sense of inferiority. Pinder and Harlos (2001) indicate the existence of sociocultural silence, which is a manifestation of the norms in force in a given society. Norms along with socialization practices are the tools of social control. This sociocultural aspect of silence is present in studies on its correlations with power distance and individualism (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van der Vegt, 2005). For instance, a newly employed person in a North American organization communicates more openly with his or her superiors when seeking information than the newly employed staff of firms located in Hongkong, a country of lower individualism and greater power distance (Morrison, Chen, & Salgado, 2001).

Sharing with other employees the conviction that speaking out in the organization is counterproductive results in acquiescent silence, whose essence is submissiveness and resignation (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Detert and Edmondson (2011) concentrate on revealing the psychological mechanism of silence which they consider to be "implicit voice theories." They define these theories as socially shared beliefs concerning the possible risks of speaking up in front of one's superiors and attribute to them the features that are characteristic for cognitive schemas. This kind of organized representation of stimuli includes knowledge about the causes and effects of phenomena related to voice, and its function is to maintain the sense of psychological control over events, self-protection, protection of the group, and maintaining relations with others. Generally, they are activated automatically below the threshold of consciousness and enable quick decision making. Introspective availability is then low, and spontaneous expression of the contents of the decisions cannot be expected. They are formulated on the basis of personal experience and under the influence of others.

In their study, Detert and Edmondson (2011) showed that implicit voice theories are activated by the signals provided by the work environment (largely, their source is the superiors' attitude) and form an interpretative framework for the current situation, justifying withdrawal from active engagement in the form of verbalizing one's opinions and observations. Reluctance to confront superiors and make remarks that could cause embarrassment as well as a fear of exclusion are often motivated by the hidden belief that speaking up is improper. The authors conclude that what really determines the subordinates' behavior results to a greater extent from the beliefs about the superiors than from the behavior of the bosses. However, the authors do not state that the bosses' actual behavior has no influence on the subordinates' reaction, but they suggest that reprimand, discontent, or other negative behaviors in response to the suggestion made by a subor-

dinate need not take place for the silence resulting from hidden beliefs to be maintained. Just like the need to save face grounded in implicit knowledge about the desired behavior in the social context dictates “proper reactions” (Goffman, 2006), the implicit voice theories determine the readiness to express thoughts. This explains why many superiors are surprised that the subordinates share their thoughts with them reluctantly, often led by the conviction that those thoughts could be regarded as criticism (Adamska, 2004).

The argument for the automatic induction of silence in the organization is supported by the analysis of the role of emotions in organizational behavior. Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, and Smith-Crowe (2014) pointed out that the understanding of how the employee experiences emotions allows to outline a credible picture of social relations in the organization and to define more precisely the character of participation in institutional life. The authors concentrate on shame. They define it as the experience of negative judgment resulting from the anticipated or real deprecating behavior of one’s coworkers or superiors in reaction to failure to meet the standards in performing a task. Shame signals that the social relations are endangered and activates the fundamental motive to maintain them by blocking the readiness to openly express thoughts and opinions. The psychological mechanisms responsible for silence can be then activated automatically and stem from the socially shared beliefs.

SILENCE AS A TACTIC: BEING SILENT

Silence can have a tactical character as a manifestation of political pragmatism with intuitive attributes (Tetlock, 2002). It occurs in socially ambiguous situations, when the situational identity of the interlocutors has not been established yet or when the character of the situation is changing (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). The analysis of silence in the organization understood as a tactic has been supported by Creed (2003) in his research on the efforts of gay and lesbian Protestant pastors, who regard voice and silence as tools, to maintain sexual identity. To explain this phenomenon, the author refers to the notion of tempered radicalism. It relates to the behavior of persons devoted to their institution and simultaneously accepting values different from those that are widely shared in the organization (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Based on the interviews conducted, Creed concludes that silence as a manifestation of tempered radicalism makes it possible to maintain one’s own identity without assuming a clear-cut attitude toward the dominant narratives in social relations. This kind of tactic can, in the

long run, cause evolutionary changes without resorting to organized and overt actions (Creed, DeJordy, & Loc, 2010).

The understanding of silence as a kind of tactic that makes it possible to maintain relations can be found in Lee's reflections on the phenomenon of negative feedback associated with using politeness strategies (Lee, 1993). Employees do not express their opinions directly but hide them behind polite forms of speaking, and the higher is the level of dependence as well as social and power distance, the less probable open articulation of opinion becomes (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although politeness strategies are often automatically activated forms of self-limitation in conversations acquired through socialization, they can also be consciously used tactics. People often apply the indirect forms of communication because they are not sure whether the interlocutor will be competing or cooperating (Lee & Pinker, 2010). They use a strategy that optimizes the effects of the conversation.

Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, and Edmondson (2009) stress that the decision to speak out made consciously, based on the consideration of pros and cons, takes place when there is enough time to make a decision and when it is associated with strong motivation to consider various options – as, for instance, in the context of selling strategic issues or making superiors' improper behavior public (whistle blowing). The authors maintain that, in everyday work circumstances, it is automatic processes that tend to control the decision to refrain from revealing one's attitude, observations, or criticism in the presence of those occupying higher managerial positions.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

According to the participation approach to management, influencing the organizational reality through the employees' involvement in decision making, offering solutions to the existing problems, or sharing innovative ideas to improve performance results in an increase in goal achievement efficacy. This approach stems from the assumption that changes are unavoidable and that competition and technological progress will make it necessary to implement them based on the knowledge possessed by both the managers and the employees (Spencer, 1989). Silence understood as resignation from having influence on the direction of organizational changes hinders pluralism in the organization and leads to the preservation of the status quo. It can also be dangerous, especially when the moral standards are violated or when operating outside the procedures puts

people's health and life in danger. This is why Morrison (2011) considers silence to be failure in speaking out. Multiple studies indicate the necessity of speaking out because silence has a negative effect both on individuals and on the productivity of the organization (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Cinar, Karacioglu, & Alliogulari, 2013; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Hays-Thomas, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Perlow & Repenning, 2009; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Tahmasebi, Sobhanipour, & Aghaziarati, 2013; Tagirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Vakola & Bourades, 2005).

Silence is an obstacle to innovation, as it results in maintaining the current practices unchanged (Morrison, 2011; Knoll & van Dick, 2013). Silence may contribute to: physical suffering and sexual harassment in the army (Klammer, Skarlicki, & Barclay, 2001), abuses in educational institutions (Bogart & Stein, 1987), police violence and corruption (Rothwell & Baldwin, 2007), or wrong medical decisions (Gibson & Singh, 2003). Silence is connected with the feeling of humiliation and anger; it is a source of stress and disturbs relations with others by lowering creativity and productivity (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Studies indicate that silence is associated with cynicism and depression (Jack, 1991; Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Intensive silence lowers work satisfaction and engagement (Vacola & Bourades, 2005) and increases the willingness to leave the organization (Knoll & von Dick, 2013). Silence affects the process of individual and group learning and lowers the effectiveness of decision making (Hays-Thomas, 2003).

For all these reasons, researchers have made numerous attempts to define the factors that modify silence. They concentrated on management styles, the personality of superiors and subordinates, as well as group and organizational climate (Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2011; Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014; Islam & Zyphur, 2005; Morrison, 2014; Perlow & Repenning, 2009; Tangirala, Kamdar, Venkataramani, & Parke, 2013; Timming & Johnston, 2015; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Particular attention was paid to the relations of employees with their immediate superiors. The results of the research show that voice is present if the direct supervisor's behavior is perceived as a signal encouraging this kind of activity. For instance, the way supervisors formulate goals as well as administer and control the process of their implementation substantially modifies silence (Donaghey et al., 2011). Silence intensifies with the managers' low self-efficacy (Fast et al., 2014). Research on inclusive leadership, whose essence is communicational openness and accessibility, also shows that willingness to speak out is connected with the quality of the relations between employees and their superiors (Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012). An important fac-

tor shaping these relations is superiors' self-consciousness, particularly the awareness of their own cognitive limitations and of the effect of their behavior on the subordinates (Sutton, 2010).

The efforts to break the silence also require reflecting on what motivates employees to keep silence tactically. Silence may be caused by the need to act effectively and/or the need to maintain good relations (Perlow & Repenning, 2009). Prosocial silence is an intentional and proactive behavior and can be illustrated by a situation in which employees, motivated by the interest of the group and organization, do not reveal information or opinions (Van Dyne et al., 2003). If silence is motivated by a fear of negative consequences, then different managerial interventions are required to urge voice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). This kind of silence, called quiescent silence, means active avoidance, which may, for instance, consist in hiding failures to avoid punishment. Still another interpretation should be applied to silence that has a conciliatory character (acquiescent silence): it is passive and stems from a lack of commitment (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Breaking the silence may sometimes result in voice that is not always constructive. Maynes and Podsakoff (2014) distinguish four types of voice behavior: supportive, constructive, defensive, and destructive. The first of these refers to voluntarily expressed support for the current policy of the organization, its goals and procedures, or their defense in the face of unjustified criticism. Constructive voice promotes progress and introducing innovative solutions or using the existing procedures and methods to solve recurring problems. Defensive voice is connected with the situation of change and is raised in defense of the status quo to oppose the proposed changes. Speaking out in a destructive way means nit-picking, complaining, or condemning real or imagined irregularities. Empirically confirmed, the differentiation of voice is a proof that it is necessary to analyze it not only in the context of the positive, prosocial intentions connected with willingness to introduce changes but also as a manifestation of defending the status quo or unjustified criticism. Similarly, Morrison (2014) admits that declaratively prosocial voice (intended to benefit the organization) may actually be guided by opportunistic intentions.

An essential condition for breaking the silence is the activation of formal paths for upwards communication. However, not differentiating between silence as an effect of socially shared beliefs (being silenced) and silence as a tactic (being silent) could lead to wrong attributions and incorrect organizational decisions. Morrison and Milliken (2000) underline that the factors responsible for the active or passive attitude of some employees in the face of organizational problems can differ from those that cause the silence of others. A modification of

implicit voice theories is possible through conscious and consistent actions according to norms and practices which oppose the beliefs that keeping silence is necessary. Apart from the quality of superior–subordinate relations, what is important is group actions that stimulate reflection (team reflexivity). The subject of the reflection is the previously committed errors, and the dynamics of the group is considered as one of the causes behind these errors (Kahneman & Lovallo, 2002; Kahneman, 2012; Schippers, Homan, & Van Knippenberg, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Silence is an event that creates social reality, reproducing the existing social relations. It is a refusal to participate in the realization of the values that are considered important. Silence is resignation from influence in a situation regarded as undesirable. As a social act, silence in the organization is a manifestation of a lack of faith in the possibility of change, and the lack of faith results in a reluctance to make remedial efforts. The justification of this reluctance is the prediction of the negative reaction of others (rejection), which can result either in exclusion from the group (criticism affects their interests) or in a limitation of access to the organizational resources (promotion, pay rises), or in both simultaneously. The lack of faith in the possibility of change can refer to the current situation and future events (fixed beliefs concerning the social order) or only to the current situation without excluding possible changes in the future. In the latter case, silence can be an indication of a tactical attitude.

The absence of reaction to irregularities in the organization can stem from the “process of learning” which behaviors are rewarded and which are punished. Silence becomes a way to gain acceptance from the group and superiors and also to achieve personal and organizational goals. Breaking the silence that results from socially shared beliefs has a different character than when it is a conscious tactical decision. Organizing formal channels of information and a greater transparency of procedures enhancing the sense of fair treatment can significantly lower the level of tactical silence, but they can influence the silence rooted in socially shared meanings only to a lesser degree. Their element is a world view in which one should protect one’s own interests by allying with similar others. Coalitions are formed and then defended against external threats (Bar-Tal, 2013a). The immediate superior may play a special role in breaking this kind of silence, with his or her inclusive management style and communicational openness.

“Being silenced,” which means silence resulting from automatic processes, can be interpreted using the concept of shared reality. It is based on the assumption about matching the message to the supposed knowledge and attitude of the recipient (Higgins, 1992, 1999). If a person expects only a possibility of communicating with the group, then the effect of matching takes place even when the act of communication does not actually occur – that is, the content of the potential message will be remembered according to the recipient’s imagined attitude (Higgins, Echterhoff, Crespillo, & Kopietz, 2007). Thus, sharing beliefs about the surrounding reality can take place without an awareness of the process that leads to this phenomenon, and it means not only shared knowledge about reality but also its assessment. If “being silenced” can be explained on the basis of the concept of shared reality, then it can simultaneously indicate the ways of breaking the silence. Echterhoff, Kopietz, and Higgins (2013) underline the importance of feedback to the limiting of stereotypes and to the individualization of personal views. By contrast, being silent is tactical and aimed at achieving organizational (prosocial silence) or personal (opportunistic silence) purposes. It stems from proactive orientation rather than – as is the case with “being silenced” – from a fear of the negative consequences of speaking up or from disbelief that voice can bring any changes. Therefore, intervention aimed at breaking tactical silence has to take its proactive aspect into account.

Breaking the silence is supposed to lead to voice on matters important for the organization, with its good kept in mind. This presupposes creating conditions in which the employees will not only be convinced of their right to speak up but will also feel that the organization supports their autonomous actions. The research conducted by Adamska (2015) shows that the higher the feeling of autonomy, the lower is the tendency to be silent. The authors of the self-determination theory – Stone, Deci, and Ryan (2009) – postulate that what stands in the way of the development of an autonomous individual in an organization is obstacles in the form of pressure to attain short-term achievements and to make progress. These may turn into “accountabalism.” It is the term coined by David Weinberger to refer to the tendency to hold the managers responsible for the creation of rule-governed and controlled environment. Silence can be limited in an environment where long-term goals are important and where employees feel that they are cooperating for the benefit of the organization rather than competing with one another.

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