Guest Editors’ Introduction
Speaking Up, Remaining Silent: The Dynamics of Voice and Silence in Organizations

Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison and Frances J. Milliken
Stern School of Business, New York University

Within organizations, people often have to make decisions about whether to speak up or remain silent – whether to share or withhold their ideas, opinions, and concerns. In many cases, they choose the safe response of silence, withholding input that could be valuable to others or thoughts that they wish they could express. Researchers have referred to this as employee silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). There are many different types of issues that people in organizations are silent about and many reasons why people may elect to be silent. An employee may keep quiet about unethical practices that he or she has observed, for example, out of fear of being punished. Members of a group may choose to not express dissenting opinions in the interest of maintaining consensus and cohesiveness in the group. Thus, silence can be caused by fear, by the desire to avoid conveying bad news or unwelcome ideas, and also by normative and social pressures that exist in groups.

This special issue of the Journal of Management Studies is devoted to papers that, in one way or another, focus on the question of when and how people in organizational settings will choose voice and how and when they will choose silence. Our goal in organizing this special issue was to see if we could bring together some of the best current work being done on voice and silence in organizations. Our hope is that by presenting these works together in one place, we will be better able to ‘see the whole’ and build towards a richer understanding of the phenomena of employee voice and silence. We are extremely grateful to the Journal of Management Studies and to Blackwell Publishing for providing us with the opportunity to accomplish this goal.

Address for reprints: Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, Stern School of Business, New York University, 77 West 7th Street, New York, NY 10012, USA (emorriso@stern.nyu.edu).

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003. Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.
A review of the current management literature prior to the creation of this special issue reveals a variety of works focused on the different ways in which employees can speak up at work. These works include research on employee voice, issue selling, whistle-blowing, championing, dissent, and boat-rocking (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Miceli and Near, 1992; Parker, 1993, Saunders et al., 1992; Sprague and Rudd, 1988; Withey and Cooper, 1989). Each of these streams of research, in one way or another, helps us to understand the forces that can encourage an employee to inform organizational decision makers about problems, strategic issues, new ideas, and ethical breaches. However, each focuses on a somewhat different form of speaking up, and there is little in the way of an over-arching framework for integrating the various perspectives.

Research on silence within organizations is more recent and more sparse. Indeed, we are aware of only two papers in the management literature, both conceptual, that deal directly with the phenomenon of silence within organizations. In the first, Morrison and Milliken (2000) explained how organizational forces often create climates of silence, where there is widespread withholding of input by employees, who collectively perceive speaking up as dangerous or futile. In a second important paper, Pinder and Harlos (2001) focused on employees’ decisions about whether to speak up about a perceived injustice, defining silence as the withholding of genuine expressions about one’s organizational circumstances to persons capable of effecting change.

The seven papers in this special issue range from ones focused primarily on voice to ones focused primarily on silence to papers focused on comparing and integrating the two. They provide insight into forces that encourage and discourage voice and silence, as well as insight into some of the individual and organizational consequences of silence and voice. The papers also focus on the different forms that silence and voice take within organizations.

The first paper, by Linn Van Dyne, Soon Ang and Isabel Botero, helps to organize and expand our understanding of voice and silence and the relationship between them. Although silence and voice are often viewed as polar opposites, Van Dyne, Ang and Botero argue that they are in fact separate, multidimensional constructs, each with a variety of forms and motives. In a detailed analysis, the authors identify and discuss three types of silence and three parallel types of voice: disengaged behaviour based on resignation, self-protective behaviour based on fear, and other-oriented behaviour based on cooperation. In offering a 2 × 3 typology of voice and silence, they highlight the complexities of these behaviours, and the different forms that they can take. As well, in introducing the notions of prosocial silence and acquiescent and defensive voice, the authors enable us to broaden and alter some of our assumptions about the motives behind voice and silence.

In addition to teasing apart distinct forms of voice and silence, Van Dyne and colleagues build on their conceptual framework to develop predictions about how accurately observers can make attributions about the motives behind voice and
silence. They propose that, because the behavioural cues provided by silence are more ambiguous, observers are more likely to misattribute its motives. As a result, employees may be more likely to suffer inappropriate consequences when they are silent.

The second paper in the special issue, by Frances Bowen and Kate Blackmon, is also conceptual. Building upon Noelle-Neumann's (1974) idea of 'spirals of silence', which has been used to explain how public opinions form, the authors propose that employees' decisions about whether and how to speak up about an issue will be significantly influenced by their perceptions of what their co-workers think. Fearing isolation, employees will not be open and honest about their opinions when they perceive that they hold a minority viewpoint. Both silence and voice, then, become self-reinforcing and collective.

This idea in itself is an important one, suggesting that, over time, what people perceive to be majority opinions will tend to gain dominance whereas supposed minority opinions will weaken. Yet the authors take this idea an important step further by applying it to the case of invisible minorities in organizations, namely gay and lesbian employees. They propose that when a gay or lesbian employee feels that he or she cannot fully express his or her personal identity because it is not acceptable to do so, over time, this may lead to an inability or reluctance to express ideas and opinions more generally, setting in motion a secondary spiral of silence, where silence about personal identity escalates to silence on other issues. This dynamic has implications not just for individuals, but also for the effectiveness of workgroups. Especially useful in Bowen and Blackmon's analysis is the idea that voice and silence are determined by an interaction between personal characteristics of the employee (e.g., sexual orientation) and the context within which that employee operates (e.g., climate of opinion).

The paper by Amy Edmondson provides an examination of speaking up in the context of inter-disciplinary action teams, specifically, 16 operating room teams learning how to use a new technology for cardiac surgery. Edmondson investigates how the actions of team leaders can encourage or discourage speaking up, and examines how speaking up affects the likelihood of successful implementation of a new technology.

Analyses of the qualitative data show the importance of leaders creating a climate in which people feel comfortable raising problems. Leaders who were effective in doing this removed status barriers and motivated others to expend effort on speaking up. In so doing, they created a climate of psychological safety in the group that made it acceptable to raise concerns or problems. Edmondson's data also point to the dangers of employees remaining silent when they have concerns. Speaking up enabled successful implementation of new practices, whereas reluctance to speak up inhibited implementation. Although few empirical studies have looked at outcomes associated with voice and silence, we can see from this work how speaking up is a critical aspect of the team learning process.

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
Frances Milliken, Elizabeth Morrison, and Patricia Hewlin present the results of an interview-based study focused on identifying the types of issues that employees feel uncomfortable raising at work and the underlying thought processes that drive decisions to remain silent in the face of problems or concerns. Their work is aimed at better understanding the implicit theories that employees hold about speaking up and remaining silent.

The results show that a majority of the respondents had been in situations where they felt unable to speak up about an issue of concern. These decisions to remain silent spanned across a variety of issues: performance problems, pay inequity, ethical concerns, and so forth. Further, the results provide insight into why individuals had sometimes chosen to be silent. In deciding whether or not to speak up about their concerns, it appears that respondents focused on potential negative outcomes or risks that they associated with speaking up, and their responses suggest that the desire to avoid these negative outcomes played an important role in their decisions to remain silent. In particular, the results of Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin’s study suggest that fear plays an important role in motivating silence. Respondents were fearful of being labelled negatively, damaging important relationships, not being listened to, and being punished. From these results, Milliken and colleagues offer a model of how the perceived social and relational implications of speaking up about problems contribute to on-going silence.

Whereas most work to date on employee voice has looked at factors that affect whether an employee speaks up with concerns, ideas or opinions, Sandy Piderit and Susan Ashford provide an interesting look at factors that affect the choice of how to do so. Combining qualitative and quantitative data, the authors provide a rich view of how female mangers decide the best way in which to speak up about the treatment of women, an issue that is a sensitive one in many organizations.

When female managers were asked what advice they would give to other women in regard to raising gender equity issues, four themes emerged. Respondents highlighted the importance of involving others, appropriately framing the issue, paying attention to one’s demeanour, and appropriate timing. In the second part of the study, the authors examined how women choose different combinations of tactics for selling gender equity issues. They found four clusters of tactics, each reflecting a different approach to issue selling.

An important insight that stems from the Piderit and Ashford study is that speaking up is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but rather, one that takes many forms, some more assertive than others. Although the study supports previous work in suggesting that women do raise gender issues, it also suggests that they generally do so tentatively and with caution.

In a paper that broadens existing views of what it means to voice or be silent, Doug Creed provides a thought-provoking analysis of the identity struggles facing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) ministers. These individuals must decide whether and how to disclose versus silence their self identity, and they must
live with the consequences of those choices. In his analysis, Creed draws upon the notion of tempered radicals, defined as individuals who wish to be effective contributing members of an organization, yet hold identities or values that are in some way at odds with the dominant organizational culture (Meyerson, 2001). In so doing, he positions silence and voice as aspects of both self-disclosure and change agency.

Creed conducted in-depth interviews with 37 GLBT Protestant ministers, which enabled him to conduct a grounded inquiry into the role of voice and silence in their careers. From his data, Creed identifies nine different ways in which voice and silence have been intertwined in his respondents’ lives, each supported by rich quotes. From these quotes, one can see the pain associated with silencing core aspects of one’s identity, yet at the same time, the pain and risk associated with voicing. One can also see how silence and voice are often complex and intermingled, with elements ranging from subversive to acquiescent.

Self-monitoring describes the extent to which people observe, regulate, and control the public image that they display (Snyder, 1979). In their article, Sonya Premeaux and Arthur Bedeian identify this characteristic as an important variable for understanding employee voice. In contrast to existing works that have focused on main effects, they proposed that self-monitoring interacts with various individual and contextual-level variables in determining whether or not an employee is likely to engage in speaking up. Their results support this idea. Specifically, they found that internal locus of control and self-esteem are positively related to speaking up for employees who are low self-monitors, but negatively related to speaking up for employees who are high self-monitors. Similarly, they found that perceived top management openness and trust in supervisor are positively related to speaking up for low self-monitors, but negatively related for high self-monitors.

These results provide a complex picture of some of the variables that drive and inhibit employee voice. They also suggest that high and low self-monitors may attend to different information when deciding whether to speak up with ideas and concerns, and that they may use voice in fundamentally different ways. Low self-monitors, for example, may see speaking up as a way to express their attitudes and opinions in an honest manner. High self-monitors, on the other hand, may see speaking up as an opportunity to win favour from others by expressing views that cast them in a favourable light. This possibility raises some interesting questions about the meaning of voice and the difficulties of determining its motives.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue help to organize our current understanding of voice and silence in organizations, and also provide new insights into these phenomena. The articles here also raise some intriguing questions that we hope will guide future research. As well, they suggest that an understanding of the forces that motivate silence and voice is critically important for organizations that wish to create environments where people feel comfortable expressing their concerns, ideas and identities.

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
REFERENCES


