





## Organizational silence (Basic concepts and its effects)

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Submitted:10/10/2022

Accepted:01/11/2022

Published:04/12/2022

### Abstract:

This study aims to shed light on one of the most important contemporary issues, which is what is known as “organizational silence”. Where we will address through our research paper the concept of organizational silence, its three dimensions, the factors causing it, its effects, as well as how to break the climate of silence for the success of the organization. This study concluded that: it is necessary to establish an appropriate climate that encourages communication between employees to express their opinions.

**Key words:** Organizational silence, Acquiescent silence, Defensive silence, Pro-social silence.

**JEL Classification Codes:** J53, L2, M12.

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## **Introduction :**

In order to be successful, especially in light of high expectations of the clients and quality-based changes have increased, requires organizations to have modern, competitive and dynamic management structure to achieve organizational goals.

Usually, committed employees provide ideas, information and opinions for constructive methods on job progress and working organizations while in other times, they remain silent and retain their ideas. In this vein, the managers make all efforts to make them more committed by strengthening effective communication and share information.

However, many employees choose organizational silence, which is prevalent in organizations that fail to encourage collaboration, sharing, and teamwork and that do not practice participatory management. This may be related to many factors such as the lack of opportunity for voice, the fear of damaging relationships and without official communication channels since employees tend to communicate, express their ideas, problems and job difficulties so unofficial communication channels are created which yield to organizational rumors.

Organizational silence may take various forms, such as acquiescent silence, defensive silence and pro-social silence, that can have detrimental effects on the quality of top leaders' decisions and processes of change by blocking alternative views and negative feedback, that's why we chose to study this topic after the alarming situation observed at the level of organizations and the lack of specialized and targeted studies dealing with this issue from a scientific point of view has reinforced this choice.

This paper sought answers to the following research questions:

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

## 1. Definition of organizational silence:

When the literature is reviewed, organizational silence studies have focused on three dimensions of silence. This dimension is the acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence:

The initial definition of organizational silence gets it with "loyalty" and the assumption that there is nothing wrong if worries are not voiced.

But today, researchers show that the silence of the organization can have several meanings, which we will discuss through the following definitions:

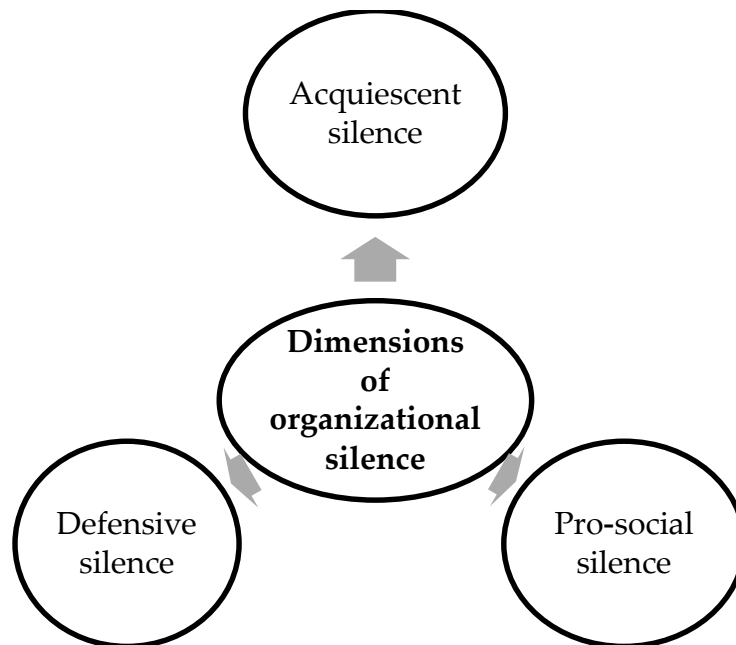
- Hirschman (1970) was the first who tries to define organizational silence: "Organizational silence is described as refusing individuals to show beliefs, ideas, information, or concerns that begin at the individual level and may affect members of the organization". (Sadeghi & Razavi, 2020)
- Pinder and Harlos (2001) described organizational silence as "withholding genuine expression about behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluations of organizational circumstances to people who seem capable of changing the situation". (Y. Alqarni, 2020)
- Dyne et al. (2003) stated that: "organizational silence is deliberate abstention from manifestation of ideas, knowledge and opinions". According to Van Dyne et al. when the employees have some useful ideas concerning their work or organization they can either share them in order to contribute to improvement of the organization or avoid from sharing them due to a fear of disfavor or as a reaction. (Baran & Giderler, 2017)

These three definitions imply that organizational silence is: employees withholding their opinions and provide information about work that contribute to improving performance or making the required change, that is for fear of any negative reaction from managers and in order to preserve their professional stability.

## 2. Dimensions of organizational silence:

When the literature is reviewed, organizational silence studies have focused on three dimensions of silence. This dimension is the acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence:

**Figure 1: dimensions of organizational silence**



Source: designed by the authors

In the following, we will explain each dimension of organizational silence separately:

### 2.1. Acquiescent silence:

Acquiescent silence is defined as an employee who holds opinions, ideas and information related to their work, based on resignation. Employees in Acquiescent silence, which agreed to the condition of the organization, assess itself in a kind of "trust and bear their destiny". Employees are not reluctant to make any efforts to change the conditions and to speak, in other words, employees are attracting themselves and are happy by continuing the status quo. Therefore, the acquiescent silence is passive

behavior. Employees show passive behavior intentionally and enter into unrelated behavior.

Employees in acquiescent silence behavior, and agreement on organizational conditions, do not realize too many alternatives to change. Employees have received a situation in despair and who has given up improving conditions that cause dissatisfaction. Because employees choose silence with the idea that the speech is a futile effort. Part of the acquiescent silence is employee compliance too. (Acaray & Akturan, 2015)

### **2.2. Defensive silence:**

When individuals are faced with stressors or external threats, they can deliberately try to protect themselves from them. One protection mechanism that may be silent defensively. Van Dyne, ANG, and Botero (2003) defined defensive silence as a conscious decision where a person "holds back ideas, information, or opinions that are relevant as a form of self-protection, based on fear". In other words, defensive silence is a response to behavior towards negative emotions in fear, and can be seen as a coping attempt to neutralize the situation and to restore individual welfare. Defensive silence is thus a conscious and active strategy to withstand relevant input. Individuals potentially speak, but after considering estimating costs and benefits, they feel safer to remain silent. Fear experiences make alternatives talk less attractive, and often produce decisions to withstand relevant inputs. In short, defensive silence can be described as a fear-based coping strategy that triggers an employee to hold his mind or input relevant as a form of self-protection. (Guo, Decoster, & T. Babalola, 2018)

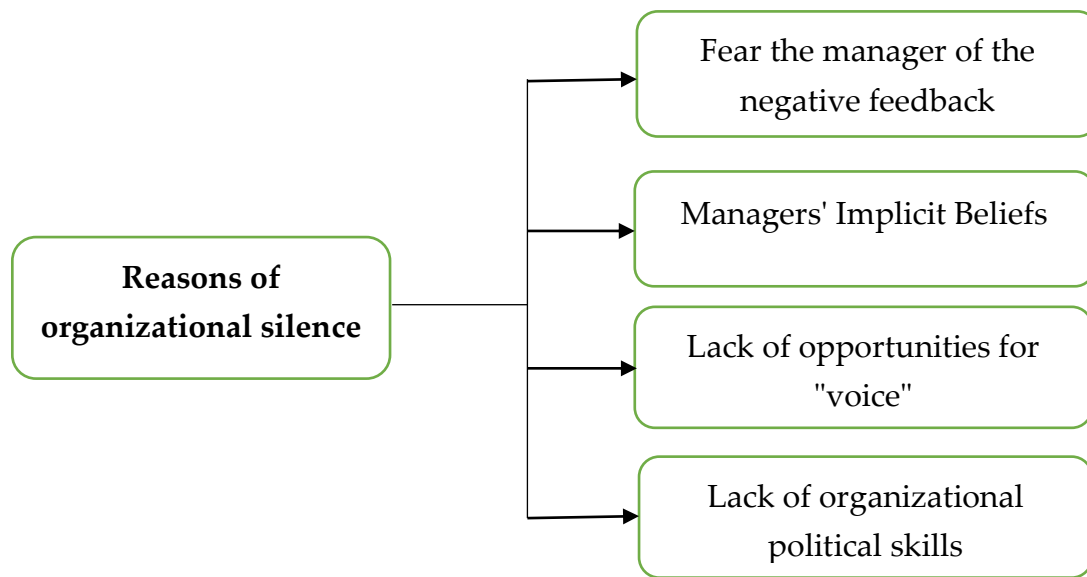
### **2.3. Pro-social silence:**

The purpose of silence is to maintain individual relationships with others. In other words, the reason for silence is to prevent or block information or ideas that consider other people's feelings. This type of silence is based on many cooperation and altruism shown by employees to others. (Abied & Aly Khalil, 2019)

### 3. Reasons of organizational silence:

Organizational silence broadest sense materially includes any situation where the information is not transmitted from the sender to the receiver and it is an inefficient process that wastes cost and efforts this is due to several factors, which can be categorized as follows:

**Figure 2: reasons of organizational silence**



Source: designed by the authors

Figure 2 provides an overview of the organizational conditions under which organizational silence is most likely to develop; we begin by explaining these factors:

- Fear the manager of the negative feedback of one important factor that we believe facilitating the creation of the climate of silence in the organization is the main fear of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. There is strong evidence that people often feel threatened by negative feedback, whether this information is about them personally or about the actions they identify. Therefore, people try to avoid receiving negative feedback, and when they receive it, they can try to ignore the message, ignore it as inaccurate, or attack source credibility. Argyris and Schon (1978) suggested that fear of this feedback

might be very strong among managers. They argue that many managers feel strong needs to avoid shame, threats, and feelings of vulnerability or inability. Therefore, they will tend to avoid any information that might suggest weakness or that might raise questions about the current action.

- Managers' Implicit Beliefs are another important factor that we believe in the root of the silence of the organization is a set of beliefs that managers often implicitly adhered to employees and about the nature of management. One such belief is that employees are selfish and cannot be trusted. In recent works scholars have emphasized that the economic paradigm currently dominates in business schools in the United States and, therefore, in thinking many managers. This paradigm, reminiscent of what McGregor (1960), "The ory X", take as an initial assumption that selfish individuals and act by maximizing their individual utilities. In this paradigm, employees are also viewed as an effort to avoid, and be debated that they cannot be trusted to act for the best interests of the organization without some form of incentive or sanctions. (Morrison & J. Milliken, 2017)
- Lack of opportunities for "voice": macro level, organizational structural characteristics often do not allow political space to voice. Where there are no safes, political rooms for voice, silence can occur. Where can we discuss organizational ethical issues? Most organizations are not democracy. Even when organizations encourage management and participatory decision making, participation is focused and controlled from above. For example, upper level management can encourage participation of more efficient ways to achieve peak management goals. The agenda is often not too open for participatory formulations. In addition, relatively few organizations have a participative or democratic assembly or congress in which organizational employees, members and other stakeholders can formulate the agenda and participate in making decisions about important issues including ethical problems.

- Lack of organizational political skills: Many of us do not understand or have political skills that are useful for the effectiveness of organizational ethics. There are at least five sets of methods that can be effective and relatively safe: coercion methods, Win-Win methods, dialogical methods, third party methods, and social movement methods. While the theoretical dialogical method is better, often political-economic reality in such a way that the strong people involved in unethical behavior do not want and cannot even be involved in dialogue about unethical and corrupt behavior. Next, they have the power to choose not to discuss the issue. (Beheshtifar, Borhani, & Nekoie.Moghadam, 2012)

#### 4. Effects of organizational silence:

Organizational silence has detrimental effects on both the organization and the employees, and the following will be detailed on both sides:

##### 4.1.Organizational effects:

The silence of employees is very detrimental to organizations that often cause "increasing level of dissatisfaction" among employees, "which manifests itself in absence and turnover and maybe other unwanted behavior". Communication is the key to the success of the organization. If the silence of employees does occur, communication suffers and as a result endangering the overall function of the organization. In an article entitled "Get Talking", Chris Penttila said, "the silence of employees is killing innovation and perpetuating poorly planned projects that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line". This shows how many organizations can suffer only because of the lack of proper communication. In an article titled "Re-create an indifferent employees" Carla Joinson talks about the negative effects of the silence of employees such as monetary losses for the organization. It seems like the silence in the organization caused some employees to be very indifferent. Indifferent employees are those who are "indifferent to their work, employers, and work quality". Indifferent employees cause organizations to lose money and function badly. Unfortunately, when

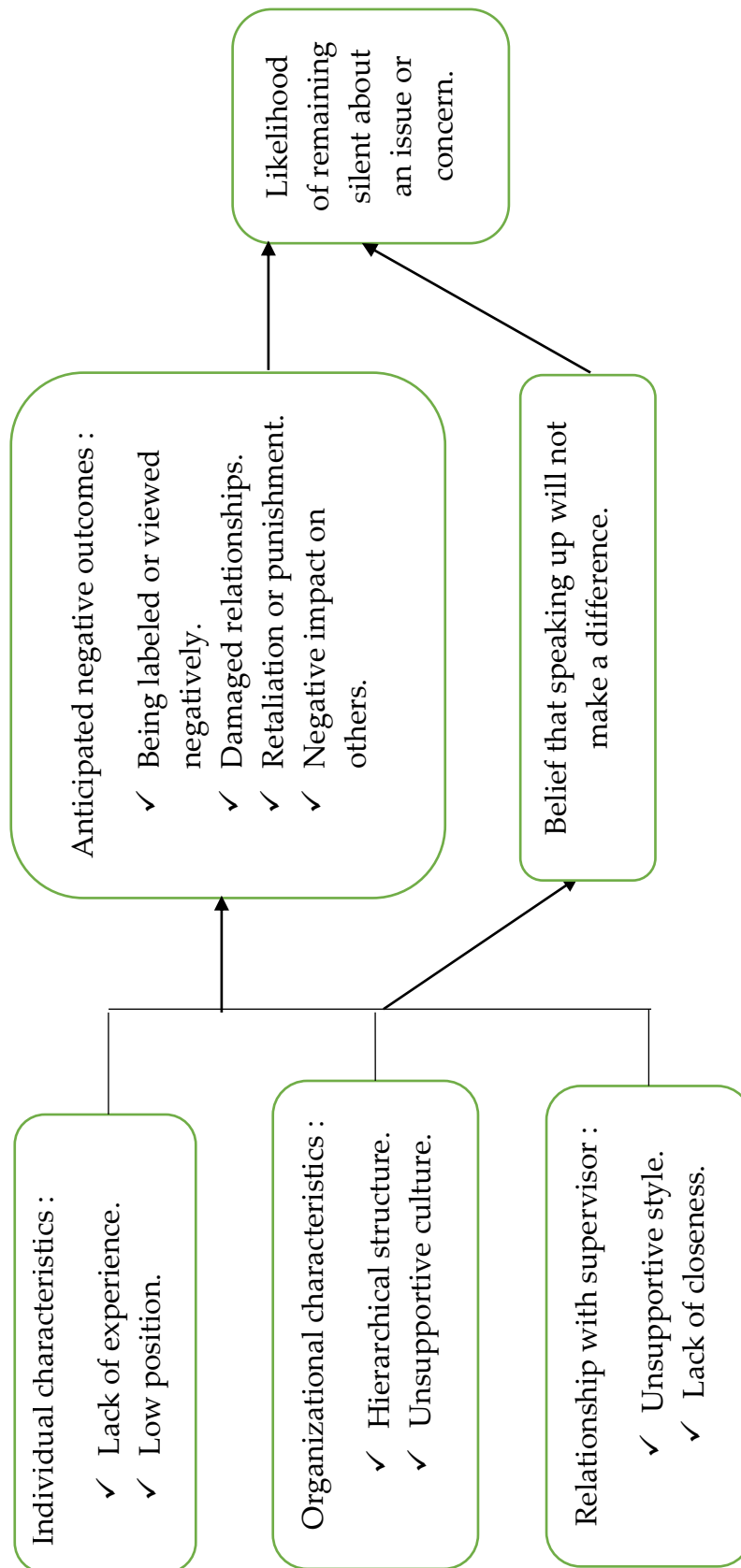
large monetary losses are detected in the organization, managers tend to react by trying to recover losses, facing the fact that employees become indifferent as a result of the silence of employees who are not passenger. More often than not employees who don't share their work also don't talk to the problems they see, leading to the eternal cycle of employee silence. (Bagheri, Zarei, & Aeen, 2012)

#### **4.2.Effects on Employees :**

The silence of the organization can cause several consequences for organizations and employees. Employees believe that they must be punished openly or quietly when they express their opinions about organizational problems and errors. Therefore, they avoid expressing their opinions and remain silent about the progress of the organization. The silence of the organization not only slows the development of the organization but also causes several consequences such as decreasing at the level of employee commitment, causing interior conflicts, reducing the decision-making process, blocking changes and innovation, preventing positive or negative feedback on management. The effect of the silence of the organization is not limited to the organization, because it can negatively affect individual behavior working in the organization. These effects are represented in (1) the individual feeling unappreciated, as he does not contribute in earnest in the issues of the organization, reducing the importance and value of his presence (2) lack of individual abilities to control, reduce motivation in the workplace, reduce motivation and participation in Problems in the organization, and (3) individuals suffer from cognitive dissonance. This is because silence makes it difficult for individuals to achieve a balance between beliefs and behavior. The silence of the organization leads to poor organizational learning, arguing that employees fail to speak with their superiors about work problems, which are often obstacles to organizational learning, because silence prevents organizations to correct errors or learn from them. There is also a relationship between the silence of the organization and withdrawal of work, because the preference for the silence of

employees to speak is a matter of time before making interesting or go decisions. (A. Nafei, 2016)

Figure 3: A model of the choice to remain silent:



Source: Orhan çınar, Fatih karcioglu, Zisan duygu aliogullari, « The relationship between organizational silence and organizational citizenship behavior: a survey study in the province of Erzurum, Turkey”, Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 99 (2013), p: 316.

Figure 3 represents a model of the choice to remain silent:

Through this figure that when a group of characteristics is available: individual characteristics that relate to inefficiency due to lack of experience, which results in several negative results such as weak communication channels, threat of punishment by the supervisor and negative impact on others.

The organizational characteristics are represented in the rigid organizational structure, which reflects part of the organization's culture, which effects the crystallization of silence, and the relationship between the employees and the supervisor, which lacks non-participation in decision-making, and the second leads to the belief that speaking up will not make a difference.

And when all of these elements are present, this creates an climate of organizational silence within the organization.

#### **5. Ways of overcoming to organizational silence:**

How to solve the culture of silence and form a free climate to check the voice of employees is a big challenge to face managers because the effect of the silence of employees is destructive for an organization but changing the organization of one which is characterized by the silence climate may require a revolutionary voice change to the system. Theoretically, senior managers with different assumptions must be able to design various types of organizational systems that, overtime, will successfully bring up honest communication.

But the main question is that what organizations can be done about the silence of the organization? Opportunities to talk are as follows:

- have a voice (can I speak?);
- Train the sound (do I speak?);
- sound content (what should I say?);
- and present a reaction to sound (how do other people respond to what I say)?

And here are several ways to reduce organizational silence:

- Top managers and supervisors must create workplaces where employees will feel safe to express their views and will be encouraged to offer their ideas and suggestions. If employees consider their manager and most importantly as their supervisors because they are not interested in hearing the truth or they will connect the cause they talk to their wrong behavior, they might choose to remain silent.
- Other ways to eliminate the silence of the organization is to create a procedural justice climate. Procedural justice is when the majority of employees in the Working Group feel that their managers make decisions that include employee input, which is ethically, which is consistent from time to time and based on accurate information, pressing any bias, and provides a beneficial context for employees to speak .

Another way to encourage talking behavior is to ensure communication opportunities and create a formal system for transfers or information exchanges, worries or ideas. According to Milliken et al. (2003) "... employees who have ideas or suggestions for improvements that do not feel that they can bring this to the boss they can hand them to the designated person who then presents the idea to be reviewed. This will function to create some potential positive results attached to the part of the ideas for improving the process of the hierarchy to compensate for what is now seen as a result of potentially negatively annoying someone's boss or considered critical". (Shojaie, Matin, & Barani, 2011)

### **Conclusion:**

Although, there exists extensive organizational silence in many organizations and organizational silence has detrimental effect on organizations, there exists insufficient research on this topic. In organizations dominated by organizational silence or silence atmosphere, employees are reluctant to establish official communications, they recourse

to unofficial communication channels especially rumors in organization and express their opinions, ideas, viewpoints and even feeling. On this basis, this study provides important theoretical contributions and offers crucial managerial recommendations that may help managers below:

- Managers should listen to employees' ideas, insights and grievances and do not take against them.
- Organizational silence climate should be changed to supportive one so that employees are encouraged to speak by presenting a suitable rewarding system for creative ideas.
- Programs and activities to replace negative ideas with positive ones should be implemented and prevent them from affecting the behavioral dimension.

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