Breaking Silence in Meetings

Teaching material based on:

The authors consent & encourage other scholars to use this material in their teaching.
Notes on using this teaching material:

We encourage you to use these materials to teach about
- How silence can be perpetuated in organizations, and how it contributes to numerous dysfunctionalities;
- How silence can be broken through an organizational culture of participation and individuals activating their voice;
- The insights are relevant for both leaders and organizational members who want to create and be a part of thriving workplaces.

This material is suited to students of both under- and post-graduate levels, as well as for use in executive education.

Please be in touch if you have any feedback or questions (betina.szkudlarek@sydney.edu.au)
• **Climate of silence**: employees’ collective perceptions that speaking up is futile or dangerous, perhaps discouraged by managerial policies or practices (Morrison & Milliken, 2000)

• **The deaf-ear syndrome**: lack of consultative policies, denial of the problem, and blaming the victim which fosters a climate of silence (Pierce et al., 1998)

• **The spiral of silence**: the gradual suppression of minority voices (Noele-Neumann, 1974)

• **Quiescent silence**: withholding information due to fear of negative consequences of voicing one’s views (Pinder & Harlos, 2001)

• **Acquiescent silence**: being silent due to the belief that one’s voice is unwanted, unappreciated and ultimately futile (Pinder & Harlos, 2001)

• **Prosocial silence**: withholding voice for the benefit of others or the organisation (Van Dyne et al., 2003)

• **Opportunistic silence**: strategically withholding ideas, information, or opinions for self-benefit (Knoll & van Dick, 2013)

• **Inherent inability** to exercise voice (Donaghey et al., 2011)

Our research

- Silence is produced when individual and system factors interact; one should not be overstated over the other
- Semi-structured interviews with tenured academics (professors and associate professors) at BSUX, where dissatisfaction with organisational practices/policies was expressed
- Application of three core domains of institutional theorising of silence: structure, culture, agency

A system perspective on our findings

- **Structure**: A top-down-driven organizational hierarchy with management in the driving seat contributes to a lack of engagement, limited trust, and a restricted sense of community.

- **Culture**: The collective culture of silence is created due to a lack of community, complaining, and fear. Performative acts of moaning and groaning in more informal settings are observed rather than active voiced participation or support of others’ contributions.

• **Opportunism**: silence was employed strategically for personal interests and rewards, outweighing organizational goals
• **Convenience**: participation was withheld for convenience of time and effort
• **Ineptitude**: respondents withheld their views due to self-beliefs of lack of skills to speak up
• **Detachment**: silence reflected lowered expectations from the organization and disengagement


An individual perspective on our findings
Processual Model of Silence

Breaking silence in meetings - How to create a culture of participation

- Rethink meeting structures.
- Reduce time spent on disseminating information.
- Ensure everyone comes prepared to share their views.
- Appoint devil’s advocates to test ideas.
- Use breakout groups to share and synthesize ideas.
- Assign colleagues to propose and lead discussions on relevant topics.
- Allocate workload time for implementing proposed changes.
- Mentor newcomers for active participation.
- Eliminate or reduce excessive policies and procedures that encourage passivity.

Breaking silence in meetings - Commit to meaningful participation

• Take responsibility for your organization.
• Overcome shyness and insecurities.
• Form alliances for a stronger collective voice.
• Stay engaged and committed to organizational improvement.
• Stop outsourcing the responsibility of raising important issues.
• Think long term; small suggestions can have lasting impacts.
• Be courageous; your voice matters.

Exercising voice should not be seen as a sign of bravery. We are all responsible for creating organisations we want to work for.