

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE IN HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATIONS: TURKISH NATIONAL POLICE CASE

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Abstract

As being the main ingredient of organizations, employees possess information, experience, institutional knowledge, and ideas about their organizations. They also encounter many problems at the all stages of their work. Although it is expected from them to report the problems or share the solutions and information they have, they sometimes choose to remain silent. Understanding the employees' perspectives are very important for better understanding the reasons they behave in an undesired manner. This study is aimed at determining what reasons that negatively affect employees' decisions speak up and the extent they feel the given reasons lead them to remain silent. The research showed that administrative and organizational reasons are the most effective reasons impacting employee silence. Reassuring trust from executives by ensuring spaces for employees' vocal participation and rebuilding the communication bridges between managers and subordinates will help increase the performance and efficiency of the organization as a result.

Keywords: Organizational silence, employee silence, employee remain silent questionnaire, whistle-blowing, Turkish National Police

Introduction

Employees in an organization are the main source of critical factors for change, production, innovation, and learning, as well as organizational success and productivity. Although most of the employees have some vital thoughts and ideas about the organization, they prefer to remain silent. Organizations, in today's rapidly changing world, need employees to constantly share their ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences freely (Liu et. al, 2009). Even if, an employee seems to be perceived as an example of loyalty and commitment within the organization when silent, recent research indicates that a climate of silence in organization causes an inability to

achieve the expected benefits of employees' job satisfaction and loyalty (Aylsworth, 2008).

Cakici (2008) believes it is worthy to work on situations of employees who are aware of the issues which are essential for organizational development, but are reluctant to share them with the top executives. Modern managerial approach has been offering plenty of chances for information flow and communication in the form of evaluation meetings, suggestion and complaint mechanisms, face-to-face meetings, and open-door policies within the organization. But having some fears such as being labeled as a potential complainant, losing colleagues' trust and respect, exposure to the loss of the relationship with the institution, losing the job, or risking promotion constrain the flow of information and communication between employees and top executives. Thus, employees choose to remain silent (Cakici, 2008).

Ethics determines the acceptable rules of public-personnel management and enhances the importance of accountability in public administration. Besides, it identifies the limits of personal behaviors and ensures its applicability. Franklin et al. (2004) mention that due to inadequate ethical arrangements; the sense of trust has been declining in public administration. This is also the result of the mutual relation between these arrangements and the desired behavioral change and not ensuring a professional development. In this regard, scientists think that honesty would play a key role on rebuilding trust in the organizational environment.

Kocberber (2008) mentions that, day to day, relations have been changing in organizational culture. In addition to many written professional values, organizational culture requires employees to have more complementary unwritten ones. However, an ethical approach is expected to contribute morally to organizational culture, for some reason, common moral understanding which houses both evil and wrong is mostly dominant.

Relationships between managers and their subordinates are different in hierarchical organizations. Moberg (1994) cites that this relationship is widespread with moral hazards. In organizations where democracy and autonomy are cherished, managers and subordinates may experience conflicts about how to treat each other. Managers anticipate absolute support and devotion from their subordinates. Mutually, subordinates expect to be supported in conflicts and to be esteemed by their managers.

Organizational Silence

Organizational silence, as an important concept, has been mostly discussed in public administration literature only recently (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Cakici, 2008; Ozdemir & Sarioglu Ugur, 2013). Morrison and Milliken (2000) define organizational silence as a typically collective act of employees consciously not sharing their knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and experiences with the management about the issues for

their work or to improve their working environment. Pinder and Harlos (2001) delineate organizational silence as a reaction of employees; although they are normally able to bring and sustain change to workplace, they remain reluctant to share their behavioral, cognitive, or emotional assessments on workplace related issues.

Remaining silent creates negative consequences both for employees and the organization. Remaining silent from the perspective of the organization means not benefitting from the intellectual contributions of employees, problems not being identified, feedback not provided, information not obtained directly, and solutions to problems remaining inadequate. All the ingredients to impede effective decision-making, as well as constraining development, change, and performance enhancement (Morrison & Milliken 2000; Premeaux 2001). From the perspective of the employees, by remaining silent, they are burdened with articulating problems in the workplace themselves. It can also impact commitment, trust, job satisfaction, and lead to a tendency of job resignation. In addition, it will be very hard to remain silent for employees on the issues, especially, if they feel competent in the matter. As a result, they feel demoralized, stressful, and unappreciated (Detert & Edmondson 2005; Milliken & Morrison 2003).

Park and Keil (2009) examine this silence in three dimensions. Firstly, silence can be intentional. Employees remain silent even if they are aware of the problem and know of a better solution. Secondly, silence can be defense mechanism. Employees can remain silent in order to protect their personal interests or not to openly contradict others. Lastly, silence can be a collective decision of employees; a collective reaction of not sharing ideas, thoughts, or knowledge with others.

Bowen and Blackmon (2003), claim that by remaining silent in an organization it not only limits knowledge sharing, collective brainstorming, problem identification, and possible solutions to workplace-related issues, but it can also generate new problems the more widespread and repetitive it becomes. Ellis and Dyne (2009) advise that this behavior needs to be stopped before it becomes endemically cultural and destructive to the organization.

Organizational silence can negatively affect the harvesting of institutional knowledge, evolution, and development. The possibility of being excluding when speaking up may cause employees to stop communicating and giving feedback to their supervisors. Combined with a failure to intellectually support employees will lead to ineffective organizational decisions (Kahveci, 2010: 10).

In his book - *The Elephant in the Room*- Zerubavel (2006) narrates the story of the Emperor's new clothes. Nobody likes them but no one dares to say it to him. Zerubavel hypothesizes that there is a sort of agreement to keep things silent in most levels of society. He feels that his argument relates to

families, organizations, both public and private, and government. Zerubavel argues that there are rules of denial that teach people to ignore the truth, even though it is very apparent. Often because of the rank one holds in his or her organization they are forced into silence. Sometimes silence and denial seem the best options. If this kind of silence and denial settle in an organization combined with the possibility of losing employment for speaking out, it can make it difficult for employees when determining their ethical choices. Thus, Zerubavel (2006) states that silence is most often associated with a group dynamic. It takes more than one person to ignore the "elephant."

Ironically, it can be really hard to speak out or remain silent when seeing a wrongdoing in the working environment. Generally, in case of any wrongdoing, executives expect employees to disclose the situation to them. But, an employee wants to be safe about the reactions of organization authorities when speaking out on any problem. This disclosure is called whistle-blowing. Near and Miceli (1985) define whistle-blowing as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action" (p. 4). Even if an employee observes a situation that needs to be reported, only very few decide to blow the whistle. There are some certain circumstances that employees depends upon when reporting the activity. Firstly, the activity should be perceived to be serious. Secondly, whistleblower should be aware of how to report it. Then, reporting should be effectual and there should be action to cease the wrongdoing. Finally, a whistleblower wants to be sure about the consequences of this reporting, both personally and financially (Near & Miceli, 1985)

Bolt (1990) wrote a play named *A Man for All Seasons* about ethical decisions made by the main character, Sir Thomas More – a scholar and a statesman-. More is placed in a situation where he must make an ethical choice. He is told by the King of England to approve of the king's divorce from his brother's widow but does not believe that a divorce should be allowed. Instead of speaking out against the king, More chose to remain silent, hoping that his life would be spared. But he went to his death refusing to speak on behalf or against the king's request.

Bolt's play relates very well to the argument made by Zerubavel in *The Elephant in the Room*. Everyone in the play notices the "elephant." The king wants the church to bend in his favor, yet More refuses to speak on the subject. He feels as if he is upholding his morals, as long he remains silent. More hopes that his silence will keep the king happy. As the king is More's superior, he feels the pressure to do as the king wishes. Ultimately, because More cannot support the king he is put to death for his silence. This speaks greatly to all of those subordinates put in the position of becoming the

whistleblower. They may be figuratively put to death if they choose to speak out against their employer. They also may be implicated if they choose to remain silent.

In security sector, particularly in police, silence takes a form of remaining hesitant to disclose or ‘blow the whistle’ on the wrongdoing of their colleagues although the potentially damaging affects that the wrongdoing may have (Wright, 2010). This hesitance actually stems from the police culture that consists of wisdom of mission, action, distrust, pessimism, machismo, hesitation, conservatism, isolation and solidarity (Reiner, 2000; Wright, 2010). Wright (2010) claims that isolation and solidarity seem to be more dominant characteristics of the police culture when compared the others.

In his book – *Breaking the Blue Wall: One Man’s War against Police Corruption* - Hopson (2012) told his story by showing a high profile on fighting against corruption when he was a new recruit in New Jersey Police Department (NJPD). He witnessed his training officer’s illegal arrest and made-up report about a citizen. He refused to testify in favor of his colleague about the unlawful arrest. By persisting with his mission of exposing police corruption, he uncovered proof of a secret group named Lords of Discipline within NJPD. Instead of remaining silent, Hopson blew the whistle on that group, which triggered the largest internal investigation in NJPD history.

Methodology

Organizational silence has kept its importance as a contemporary issue. Furthermore, being main ingredients of organizations, employees possess a lot of institutional knowledge, experience, and ideas about their work environment. They also encounter problems at the all stages of their work. Although it is expected from them to report the problems or share the solutions and information they have, some prefer to remain silent. This paper aims to identify the negative reasons affecting employees’ decisions and to what extent these reasons lead them to remain silent.

In an earlier research, Cakici (2008) designed a survey that groups the reasons why employees choose to remain silent at work. The questionnaire consists of five groups of reasons: administrative and organizational reasons (13 items), fears related to work (6 items), lack of experience (4 items), fear of isolation (4 items), and fear of damaging relationships (3 items).

In this study, Cakıcı’s survey (2008) was conducted in a city police department located in eastern Turkey in order to determine the reasons for remaining silent in a hierarchical organization. The unit of analysis is every single police officer in the city police department. The survey was manually distributed to 700 police officers working in the city police department. 570 surveys were collected and an 81.4 % response rate was obtained.

The question of “to what extent do the following reasons affect you to remain silent?” was asked to each respondent. Responses are categorized using a 5-point Likert Scale and ranged as, “Very ineffective” (coded 1), “Ineffective” (coded 2), “Neither effective nor ineffective” (coded 3), “Effective” (coded 4), and “Very effective” (coded 5) for each item.

Five demographic variables; gender, age group, education, length of service, and position were utilized to get more details about the respondents. SPSS.16 statistics software was used to analyze the data and get descriptive and frequency statistics. Reliability analysis was conducted to show whether the instruments utilized in this study are reliable and replicable. Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for the employees remain silent questionnaire and obtained an Alpha score of 0.945.

Findings

Descriptive statistics used to describe some of the features of the respondents who participated in the survey. Table-1 provides more detailed information about the sample and the measures.

The data shows that almost all of the respondents (98.2 %) are male police officers. Most of the respondents are in their twenties (72.1%) and one fourth of them are in their thirties. Police officers’ training in Turkey for high-school graduates is two years in Police Vocational Schools and they earn an associate’s degree diploma at completion. In addition, there are also Police Training Centers where students, who hold Bachelors’ Degrees in any field, are trained for nine months to become a police officer (Ulkemen, Karaca & Tasdoven, 2012). More than half of the respondents have Associate’s Degree and 38.2% of them have their Bachelors’ or Masters degree. 85.3% of the respondents are in the first ten years of their policing career. Few of them (12.8%) passed over the first ten years. Almost all of the respondents are unranked police officers (99.1%).

Table 1. Frequency distribution table of demographics

Variables	Measures	N	%
Gender	Female	10	1,8
	Male	560	98,2
Age Group	20–29	411	72,1
	30–39	143	25,1
	40–49	16	2,8
Education	High School	41	7,2
	Associate’s Degree	311	54,6

	Bachelors' and Up	218	38,2
Length of Service	1–10	486	85,3
	11–20	73	12,8
	21–30	11	1,9
Position	Officer	565	99,1
	Team Leader	4	0,7
	Manager	1	0,2

On the other hand, a frequency distribution table of the reasons of the employees remain silent was generated according to the respondents' answers (see Table 2 above). In order to determine what reasons affect employees to remain silent at work. Reasons were grouped under five factors: administrative and organizational reasons, fears related to work, lack of experience, fear of isolation, and fear of damaging the relationships.

Table 2. Frequency distribution table of the reasons of the employees remain silent by factor

To what extent do the following reasons affect you to remain silent?	Very Ineffective	Ineffective	Neither Effective nor Ineffective	Effective	Very Effective
	%	%	%	%	%
Administrative and organizational Reasons	3,8	7,9	14,0	35,1	39,2
Fears related to work	12,2	13,1	15,8	26,3	32,7
Lack of experience	22,5	17,2	20,5	22,3	17,6
Fear of isolation	11,8	12,2	15,2	32,1	28,8
Fear of damaging the relationships	12,6	13,5	16,8	29,1	27,9

Table 2 shows that respondents are mostly affected by administrative and organizational reasons when remain silent (Very effective 39,2 % and Effective 35,1 %). They believe that executives' behaviors don't encourage the employees to speak up or the executives don't feel necessary to hear about employees' ideas and opinions when solving the organizational problems. After administrative and organizational reasons, respondents choose fears related to work, fear of isolation, and fear of damaging the relationships as having almost equal impacts on their silence. Interestingly, respondents don't think reasons originating from a lack of experience were an effective factor for remaining silent.

In order to look at the specific reasons that lead to silence, Table 3 was formed below. The frequency distribution table of reasons employees remain silent by items shows that the reason of “Executives’ attitude of I know the best” was the most effective one (Very effective 48,2 % and Effective 31,2 %) among thirty given reasons. It was followed by other reasons such as “Executives appear interested in the so-called”, “I don’t trust my executives”, “Employees who speak up are exposed to injustice and ill-treatment”, and “The absence of a mechanism to explicitly speak up”. However, according to the frequency distribution table of reasons employees remain silent, the reason of “Worrying about personal ignorance and inexperience to be understood” was the least effective one (Very ineffective 28,1 % and Ineffective 20,2 %). Some other reasons such as “Lack of experience about speaking up” and “Problems or work related issues are not my business, those are the executive’s concerns” were considered also less effective in comparison.

Table 3. Frequency distribution table of the reasons of the employees remain silent by items

I- ADMINISTRATIVE & ORGANIZATIONAL REASONS	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1- I don't trust my executives	24	4,2	40	7,0	64	11,2	217	38,1	225	39,5
2- Executives appear to be interested in but not	19	3,3	43	7,5	58	10,2	223	39,1	227	39,8
3- Executives don't keep their promises	33	5,8	45	7,9	67	11,8	200	35,1	225	39,5
4- Organizational culture doesn't support employees to speak up	22	3,9	59	10,4	108	18,9	186	32,6	195	34,2
5- Executives don't explicitly support to speak up	25	4,4	42	7,4	72	12,6	210	36,8	221	38,8
6- Executives' attitude of "I know the best"	16	2,8	38	6,7	63	11,1	178	31,2	275	48,2
7- The absence of a mechanism to explicitly speak up	13	2,3	48	8,4	74	13,0	203	35,6	232	40,7
8- The idea that executives will not listen	15	2,6	56	9,8	70	12,3	203	35,6	226	39,6
9- Work / job requirements and principles confirm the belief that there is a discrepancy between the executives and employees	22	3,9	46	8,1	119	20,9	211	37,0	172	30,2
10- The belief of speaking up isn't beneficial	23	4,0	52	9,1	83	14,6	203	35,6	209	36,7
11- The rigidity of the hierarchical (chain of command) structure	29	5,1	35	6,1	88	15,4	194	34	224	39,3
12- Relations are distant	18	3,2	45	7,9	93	16,3	211	37,0	203	35,6
13- Employees who speak up are exposed to injustice and ill-treatment	21	3,7	36	6,3	77	13,5	163	28,6	273	47,9
II. FEARS RELATED TO WORK										
1- Fear of losing employment	79	13,9	90	15,8	92	16,1	140	24,6	169	29,6
2- Fear of changing job location or position	53	9,3	62	10,9	66	11,6	160	28,1	229	40,2
3- Belief of ill-treatment to employee who reports a problem	38	6,7	59	10,4	86	15,1	183	32,1	204	35,8
4- Fear of not being promoted	111	19,5	84	14,7	100	17,5	130	22,8	145	25,4
5- Fear of retaliation from executives / coworkers	56	9,8	71	12,5	96	16,8	156	27,4	191	33,5
6- The idea of increasing the workload	80	14,0	81	14,2	100	17,5	130	22,8	179	31,4
III. LACK OF EXPERIENCE										

1- Lack of experience about speaking up	111	19,5	115	20,2	121	21,2	128	22,5	95	16,7
2- Problems or work-related issues are not my business, those are the executive's concerns	120	21,1	95	16,7	130	22,8	128	22,5	97	17,0
3- Worrying about personal ignorance and inexperience to be understood	160	28,1	115	20,2	107	18,8	111	19,5	77	13,5
4- Lack of authority	121	21,2	66	11,6	110	19,3	140	24,6	133	23,3
IV. FEAR OF ISOLATION										
1-Fear of being viewed or labeled negatively	58	10,2	74	13,0	86	15,1	180	31,6	172	30,2
2-Fear of loss of trust and respect	87	15,3	86	15,1	95	16,7	169	29,6	133	23,3
3- Expecting negative reactions from executives when received negative feedback	51	8,9	50	8,8	80	14,0	199	34,9	190	33,3
4- Fear of being known as a problem maker	72	12,6	68	11,9	85	14,9	184	32,3	161	28,2
V. FEAR OF DAMAGING THE RELATIONSHIPS										
1-Fear of damaging the relationships	78	13,7	83	14,6	97	17,0	183	32,1	129	22,6
2-Fear of losing support	68	11,9	85	14,9	98	17,2	157	27,5	162	28,4
3- Fear of losing executives' satisfaction	70	12,3	63	11,1	93	16,3	158	27,7	186	32,6

Discussion and Conclusion

Employees are an irrevocable ingredient of an organization since they possess information, experience, institutional knowledge, and ideas related to their work. Although it is expected from them to inform executives any work-related problems and organization-based issues, time to time, they choose to remain silent. At this stage, employees' preferences are very important to understand what reasons force them behave in an undesired manner.

In this study, most of the participating respondents felt that the common reasons for employee silence are derived from administrative and organizational factors. They think that their ignorance, being reluctant, or not to speak up about work-related problems and organization-based issues are because of executives' attitudes and behaviors. It is important to highlight the results of this study are consistent with the results of Cakici's (2008) study on the reasons employees remain silent. She concluded that the most common reason for choosing to remain silent is "administrative and organizational reasons".

The study showed that, executives' behaviors could have negative impact on employees expressing themselves. Conversely, it is expected from

executives to be seen as role models for subordinates at the workplace. They are also required to be trusted in doing the right thing and to demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

Effective communication and team-work between managers and employees can only be achieved by trust. Trust lessens operational risk and costs; it also raises employee commitment and productivity (Krot & Lewicka, 2012). Trust generates added value in an organization, increases flow of information, and knowledge construction. Trust also enriches relationships, interaction, and cooperation (Connell et. al, 2003). Thus, being dependable is the most crucial thing for a manager. If employees don't trust their manager, it will be difficult to speak up when issue arise.

Cakici (2008) asserts that the managers hold the key role on employee silence since they determine the policies and organizational decisions. They have the power to establish an internal mechanism in order to remove any administrative and organizational reasons for employee silence allowing employees to speak up explicitly. Redmond et al. (1993) cite that as executive attitude is correlated to subordinate self-efficacy, it can have a positive impact on subordinate productivity in problem-solving conditions. For that reason, executive-subordinate relationships grow in significance when subordinates seek active participation in collective solutions to problems. When this happens, subordinates will have increased trust in the institution and their managers.

Panahi et al. (2012) mention that establishing an appropriate reward system for creative ideas and facilitating development and skill-building training can break employee silence in organizations. Additionally, reorientation of rules, dissemination of collaborative studies, re-structuring the harvesting of institutional knowledge and programs aimed at improving human resources management for executives are very important in minimizing the employee silence. Reassuring trust and rebuilding the communication bridges will help to increase the performance of an organization.

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