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Psychological Safety and Organizational Silence: Mechanisms and Consequences When Voice Is Undervalued

Vernon S. Brown

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Abstract— *Organizations depend on employees to surface problems, errors, and concerns, yet a substantial body of research shows that employees frequently withhold such information. This paper reviews peer-reviewed conceptual and empirical work linking psychological safety to employee voice and organizational silence. The literature indicates that silence is shaped less by a lack of concern than by employees' judgments about whether speaking up is safe and whether it will make a difference. Low psychological safety is associated with withholding concerns, with reduced reporting of and learning from error, and, in safety-critical settings, with silence about operational risk. The review also identifies a second pathway, in which voice is expressed but discounted, and suggests that this pathway may teach employees that speaking up is futile. Brief illustrations from the public investigative records of NASA's Columbia accident and the Boeing 737 MAX show how these patterns can appear in high-consequence organizations, without claiming that psychological safety was measured in either case or that silence caused either outcome. The paper concludes that psychological safety and organizational responsiveness to voice should be studied together and outlines directions for future research.*

Keywords— *psychological safety, organizational silence, employee voice, employee silence, implicit voice theories, error reporting, high-reliability organizations*

INTRODUCTION

Psychological safety has been defined as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). Among the interpersonal risks that matter most to an organization is speaking up: raising a concern, reporting an error, or questioning a decision made by someone with more authority. When employees withhold that kind of input, they deprive the organization of information it may need (Morrison, 2014).

This paper examines the relationship between psychological safety and organizational silence and asks what the peer-reviewed literature suggests happens in organizations where voice is undervalued and psychological safety is low or nearly absent. Rather than restating the general case for dissent, the paper reviews how silence forms, distinguishes silence from voice that is expressed but not heeded, and summarizes the consequences that empirical studies have documented. Public investigative records from NASA and Boeing are introduced briefly in the

discussion as illustrations. They are not offered as evidence that psychological safety was measured in either organization or that silence caused either outcome.

Conceptual Foundations

Edmondson and Lei (2014) describe psychological safety as how people see the likely consequences of interpersonal risk in a setting such as a workplace. They point to it as central to research on voice, teamwork, and learning in teams and organizations. The construct now rests on a substantial empirical base. A meta-analysis by Frazier et al. (2017) pooled 136 independent samples, covering more than 22,000 people in nearly 5,000 groups, and examined what predicts psychological safety and what it predicts in turn, at both the individual and group levels.

Around the time Edmondson (1999) published her study of team psychological safety, Morrison and Milliken (2000) introduced the idea of "organizational silence" (p. 706). They described it as a collective-level phenomenon in which employees across an organization hold back what they know about potential problems. In their model, managers' fear of hearing bad news, together with beliefs many managers hold about employees and disagreement, leads to structures and practices that block information from moving upward. These contribute to "a climate of silence," which they defined as "widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous" (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 708). This is a theoretical model built on propositions rather than a test of them. Its value lies in identifying two distinct beliefs, futility and danger, either of which can sustain silence.

Van Dyne et al. (2003) added a further conceptual refinement. They argued that silence and voice are separate, multidimensional constructs rather than opposite ends of one continuum. They distinguished acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence by the motive behind them, and they proposed that silence is more ambiguous to observers than voice and is therefore more easily misread. Sherf et al. (2021) later provided empirical support for the independence of the two behaviors. In their meta-analysis, voice and silence were largely independent ($M\rho = -.15$). Psychological safety related more strongly to silence than to voice, whereas perceived impact related more strongly to voice than to silence. Silence was also more closely tied to burnout than voice was, and their second study, which followed employees over six months, showed the same pattern. For practice, this implies that an organization cannot conclude from some speaking up that withholding is rare. It also suggests that psychological safety bears most directly on what employees decide not to say.

Why Employees Withhold

Qualitative evidence suggests that withholding is common and that it is driven chiefly by anticipated social costs. Milliken et al. (2003) interviewed 40 employees. Most could recall a time when they had a concern and kept it from their supervisor. The reason given most often was worry about being seen or labeled negatively, which could damage relationships they valued. Kish-Gephart et al. (2009), in an integrative review, examined fear as a discrete emotion and traced how fear experiences give rise to different forms of employee silence.

Silence can also persist without any immediate threat. Across four studies, Detert and Edmondson (2011) identified implicit voice theories, "taken-for-granted beliefs about when and why speaking up at work is risky or inappropriate" (p. 461). Interview data showed that these beliefs held people back even from offering suggestions meant to help the organization, and

survey measures of five such theories added to the explanation of workplace silence. This suggests that silence can outlast the events that created it, because employees may carry learned rules about speaking up from one supervisor or team to the next.

Leaders shape these assessments directly. In a two-phase study in a restaurant chain, with data from 3,149 employees and their 223 managers, Detert and Burris (2007) found that managerial openness was more consistently related to improvement-oriented voice than transformational leadership was, and that the relationship was mediated by employees' perceptions of psychological safety. Leadership behaviors had the strongest effect on the voice of the best-performing employees. Hierarchy compounds the problem. In a survey of 23 neonatal intensive care units, Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found that professional status was positively associated with psychological safety. Leader inclusiveness predicted psychological safety and moderated the link between status and psychological safety, and psychological safety in turn predicted engagement in quality improvement work. Where inclusiveness is absent, the people with the least status may feel the least safe to speak.

WHEN VOICE IS SPOKEN BUT NOT VALUED

Most of the work reviewed above concerns the decision not to speak. A second pathway deserves equal attention, in which voice is expressed but discounted. Burris (2012) found, in one field study and two experiments, that managers rated employees who spoke up in more challenging ways as poorer performers and were less likely to endorse their ideas than the ideas of employees whose voice was supportive. Perceived loyalty and perceived threat mediated these effects. At the meta-analytic level, Chamberlin et al. (2017) found that promotive voice had a positive association with job performance, whereas the opposite was true of prohibitive voice, the form of voice that expresses concern about practices, incidents, or behavior that could harm the organization (Liang et al., 2012).

Prohibitive voice also depends heavily on psychological safety. In a two-wave study of 239 employees, Liang et al. (2012) compared three psychological antecedents of voice. Psychological safety had the strongest link to later prohibitive voice, and felt obligation for constructive change had the strongest link to later promotive voice. This creates a problem. The voice that most depends on psychological safety is also the voice most likely to be received poorly. When concerns are discounted or their speakers are penalized, employees have reason to conclude that speaking up is either futile or dangerous, which are the two beliefs Morrison and Milliken (2000) placed at the center of a climate of silence.

Evidence from healthcare is consistent with this reading. In a cross-sectional survey of 979 doctors and nurses in Swiss hospitals, Schwappach and Richard (2018) found that 19% to 39% of respondents reported withholding voice about patient safety concerns. An encouraging environment was associated with more frequent speaking up and less frequent withholding, and higher resignation was associated with more frequent withholding (OR = 1.5). The authors concluded that a poor climate, especially high resignation, was linked to frequent silence but not to less frequent speaking up. Resignation looks much like the futility belief that Morrison and Milliken (2000) described.

Consequences of Low Psychological Safety

The most consistent consequence documented in the literature is impaired learning. In a study of 51 teams at a manufacturing company, Edmondson (1999) found that team psychological safety was associated with learning behavior, whereas team efficacy was not when psychological safety was controlled, and that learning behavior mediated the relationship between psychological safety and team performance. Error reporting offers a sharper example. Edmondson (1996) studied medication errors among patient care groups in two hospitals and found systematic differences not only in how often errors occurred but in how likely they were to be detected and learned from. Detected error rates were higher, not lower, in units with stronger nurse-manager coaching and better unit relationships, a pattern Edmondson interpreted as reflecting differences in willingness to report. In a low-safety unit, a lower error count may therefore indicate less reporting rather than fewer errors.

Safety-critical operations show the same pattern. Bienefeld and Grote (2012) surveyed 1,751 crew members at an airline with a long-established just culture and crew resource management training. Participants reported remaining silent in half of all the speaking-up situations they had faced. Silence was highest among first officers and pursers and lowest among captains. The reasons given mainly concerned fear of damaging relationships, fear of punishment, and operational pressures. Low psychological safety also has costs for employees themselves. Sherf et al. (2021) found that silence had a stronger association with burnout than voice did, which suggests that withholding concerns carries a personal cost in addition to an organizational one.

These studies are largely correlational, many rely on self-report, and several are confined to single organizations, industries, or countries. They do not establish that low psychological safety causes failure in any particular case. They do, however, converge on a coherent pattern. Where speaking up is perceived as risky or futile, problems are reported less often, learning slows, concerns about harm are withheld disproportionately, and the organization loses information it cannot easily recover.

Discussion: Illustrations From High-Consequence Settings

Two public investigative records illustrate how this pattern can appear in high-consequence organizations. Neither record measured psychological safety, and neither is a peer-reviewed study. Brown (2025) observed that "the catastrophic loss the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) faced in the Challenger and Columbia disasters powerfully demonstrates why psychological safety and open communication in leadership matter" (p. 12). The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB, 2003) listed, among the practices it found detrimental to safety, "organizational barriers which prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled professional differences of opinion" (p. 177). One engineer drafted an email calling the decision not to seek outside imagery of the orbiter "the wrong (and bordering on irresponsible) answer," and invoked NASA's safety posters reading "If it's not safe, say so." He did not send it. According to the Board, he "did not want to jump the chain of command" (CAIB, 2003, p. 157). The episode resembles what Detert and Edmondson (2011) describe as an implicit voice theory, in which a taken-for-granted rule about hierarchy governs speech even when the stated norm invites it.

The Boeing 737 MAX record illustrates the discounted-voice pathway. The final report of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (2020), prepared by the committee's majority staff, described a 2016 internal survey of Boeing's authorized representatives (ARs), Boeing employees who, according to the committee, are meant to act in the interests of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Of those who responded, 39% perceived "undue pressure" and 29% worried about what would happen if they reported it (p. 15). According to the committee majority, two senior program leaders were aware of the survey but "dismissed undue pressure as a significant issue" (p. 70). The same report records that the minutes of a June 2016 review, after discussing failed angle-of-attack or Mach inputs that could result in movement of the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), concluded that other systems would react to such a failure and that "MCAS is small in comparison. No need to redesign to address this" (p. 111). The multinational Joint Authorities Technical Review (JATR, 2019) independently reported "signs of undue pressure" on Boeing engineering unit members performing delegated functions and recommended that they be able to contact FAA technical experts "without fear of reprisal" (p. 28). These are perception data from one group of employees. Even so, the record fits the literature's distinction between voice that is withheld and voice that is raised and then discounted.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In conclusion, employees who stay quiet often do care about the problem. What holds them back is a judgment that speaking up is risky, pointless, or both. The studies reviewed here tie low psychological safety to that judgment, and they tie it to fewer reported errors, slower learning, and, in cockpits and hospital units, unspoken safety concerns. Discounted voice appears to deserve equal weight with withheld voice, because a concern that is raised and dismissed may teach the futility that sustains a climate of silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The scholarly implication is that psychological safety and organizational responsiveness to voice should be studied together. Measuring whether people feel safe to speak, without measuring what happens to what they say, captures only half of the phenomenon.

Future studies are needed in three areas. Longitudinal and multilevel designs are needed to test whether repeated discounting of voice erodes psychological safety over time, as the climate-of-silence model implies. Studies that follow concerns from the point at which they are raised to their resolution or closure would help distinguish silence from voice that is lost along the way. Research in aviation, spaceflight, and other high-reliability settings should examine whether the patterns identified in healthcare and general organizational samples hold where the consequences of silence are most severe.

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V. S. Brown (*vernon [at] psafe.org*) is with the PSafe Project, Honolulu, HI 96818 USA

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