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ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE: A BARRIER TO CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

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We argue that there are powerful forces in many organizations that cause widespread withholding of information about potential problems or issues by employees. We refer to this collective-level phenomenon as "organizational silence." In our model we identify contextual variables that create conditions conducive to silence and explore the collective sensemaking dynamics that can create the shared perception that speaking up is unwise. We also discuss some of the negative consequences of systemic silence, especially for organizations' ability to change and develop in the context of pluralism.

Imagine an organization where the CEO has no clothes. The CEO's lack of clothes is apparent to all who set eyes upon him or her. Yet employees never mention this. Some employees even compliment and praise the CEO's attire. The CEO takes pride and comfort in the fact that subordinates recognize his or her fine taste in clothing and easily dismisses those few troublemakers who look at him or her strangely or who dare to suggest that the CEO's taste in clothing is anything less than impeccable. Yet, behold, these employees are not blind. Behind the safety of closed doors and in veiled whispers, they talk of their leader's lack of clothing. They all clearly know that the CEO is naked, but only the foolish or naive dare to speak of it in public.

Is this a mere fairy tale? We believe that it is not and that far too many organizations are caught in an apparent paradox in which most employees know the truth about certain issues and problems within the organization yet dare not speak that truth to their superiors. This proposition can be supported from sources going back more than 20 years, although there has been little systematic exploration of why the situation occurs. Argyris (1977), for example, discussed the idea that there are powerful games and norms that often prevent employees from saying what they know about technical and pol-

icy issues. Similarly, Redding (1985) argued that many organizations implicitly convey to employees that they should not "rock the boat" by challenging corporate policies or managerial prerogatives. Other scholars likewise have noted that organizations are generally intolerant of dissent and that employees, thus, are reluctant to speak up about problems (Ewing, 1977; Nemeth, 1997; Scott & Hart, 1979; Sprague & Ruud, 1988).

There are also empirical data indicating that employees often feel compelled to remain silent in the face of concerns or problems. It is noteworthy, however, that these data appear in popular rather than academic sources, suggesting that this topic has not received the rigorous research attention that it deserves. For example, in a survey of 845 line managers from diverse organizations reported in *Industry Week*, only 29 percent of first-level supervisors thought that their organization encouraged employees to express opinions openly (Moskal, 1991). In addition, Ryan and Oestreich (1991) conducted interviews with 260 employees from 22 organizations throughout the United States and found that more than 70 percent indicated that they felt afraid to speak up about issues or problems that they encountered at work. The "undiscussables" identified in that study covered a wide range of areas, including decision-making procedures, managerial incompetence, pay inequity, organizational inefficiencies, and poor organizational performance. The two most common reasons that Ryan and Oestreich's (1991) respondents

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gave for not raising these issues were that they feared there would be negative repercussions for speaking up, and they did not believe that speaking up would make a difference.

The possibility that the dominant choice within many organizations is for employees to withhold their opinions and concerns about organizational problems—a collective phenomenon that we have termed *organizational silence*—is one that we believe deserves serious research attention. Many scholars have emphasized the importance of upward information flow for organizational health (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Deming, 1986; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Glauser, 1984; Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992). Scholars also have highlighted the importance of multiple and divergent points of view for effective organizational decision making (e.g., Nemeth, 1997). Thus, it seems paradoxical that so many employees report feeling that they cannot communicate upward about issues and problems. It is also paradoxical that this seems to be occurring at a time when management rhetoric focuses on empowerment and more open lines of communication (e.g., Lawler, 1992; Pfeffer, 1994; Spreitzer, 1995). Scholars have argued, however, that true empowerment is not the norm in most organizations (Foegen, 1999; Moskal, 1991; Pfeffer, 1994).

As we will highlight, organizational silence is a potentially dangerous impediment to organizational change and development and is likely to pose a significant obstacle to the development of truly pluralistic organizations. A pluralistic organization can be defined as one that values and reflects differences among employees and that allows for the expression of multiple perspectives and opinions (Harquail & Cox, 1993). Clearly, if people within an organization feel that they cannot openly express their points of view on critical issues, then such pluralism cannot be attained. Employees may be diverse in terms of their values, beliefs, priorities, and experiences, but because expressed points of view remain largely monolithic, the organization will not be able to benefit from this diversity. Thus, we argue that in order to understand how change and development might unfold within pluralistic settings, we need to understand the organizational forces that often systematically cause employees to feel their opinions are not valued and that thereby discourage

them from speaking up. It is our belief that only by tracing and understanding the causes of organizational silence can we begin to build an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the barriers to pluralism in organizations.

Our objective in this article is to explain both the process by which systemic silence develops within many organizations and the forces that both set this process in motion and reinforce it. We regard silence as a collective-level phenomenon; hence, our model focuses on contextual rather than individual-level variables. By “contextual” we mean factors that lie outside of the individual actor. Our objective is not to explain why a particular employee will choose to speak up or not to speak up but, rather, to explain why the dominant response within many organizations is for employees (*en masse*) to remain silent. We also integrate works from several bodies of literature to highlight the negative implications of organizational silence, particularly in the context of organizational change and the quest for greater pluralism.

Before elaborating our model, we stress that it is important to recognize several theoretical and empirical works in which scholars have identified antecedents to different forms of “speaking up” (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Miceli & Near, 1992; Withey & Cooper, 1989). Specifically, in research building upon Hirschman’s (1970) framework, researchers have proposed and demonstrated that employees may sometimes “voice” in response to dissatisfaction (e.g., Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988; Saunders et al., 1992; Withey & Cooper, 1989). There has also been research on individual and contextual variables that may motivate an employee to try to “sell” an issue to top management (Ashford et al., 1998) or to “blow the whistle” in response to a perceived wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 1992). Research has shown that in order for employees to express their concerns, they must believe that doing so will be both effective and not too personally costly (Ashford et al., 1998; Miceli & Near, 1992; Withey & Cooper, 1989).

We believe that our focus differs from these existing bodies of work in three ways. First, research on employee voice, issue selling, and whistle-blowing has been focused on an individual employee’s decision on whether or not to speak up, whereas our focus is on collective-level dynamics. In addition, existing works (es-

pecially on issue selling and whistle-blowing) have focused on explaining why an employee might violate the norm of silence within an organization and speak up about an issue, rather than why such a norm exists in the first place. Yet, we believe that the forces that motivate a sole individual to speak up may be quite different from the forces that compel all of the rest to remain silent. Another difference between our work and research on voice is that the latter has focused largely on individual-level antecedents (e.g., commitment, satisfaction, risk taking), whereas our focus is on the impact of factors outside of the individual actor. We believe that when an organization is characterized by silence, this is less a product of multiple, unconnected individual choices and more a product of forces within the organization—and forces stemming from management—that systematically reinforce silence. The value of such a perspective is supported by the fact that employee-level variables have explained relatively little variance in employee voice (Withey & Cooper, 1989).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

Figure 1 provides an overview of the organizational conditions under which organizational silence is most likely to develop. Fundamentally, we believe that organizational silence is an outcome that owes its origins to (1) managers' fear of negative feedback and (2) a set of implicit beliefs often held by managers. We begin by explaining these factors, paying particular attention to the role of managerial beliefs. We then discuss the conditions under which these beliefs are most likely to be held by senior management. Next, we discuss how managerial beliefs and fear of feedback tend to give rise to predictable types of organizational structures and policies, as well as to managerial practices, that impede the upward flow of information.

As Figure 1 illustrates, these structures and practices contribute to the development of what we call "a climate of silence": widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous. When such a climate exists, the dominant response within an organization will be silence, rather than voice. However, the likelihood of such a climate emerging and the strength and pervasiveness of that climate will depend on

employees' collective sensemaking activities. Hence, in the final part of this section we focus on this sensemaking process and factors that aid it.

Managers' Fear of Negative Feedback

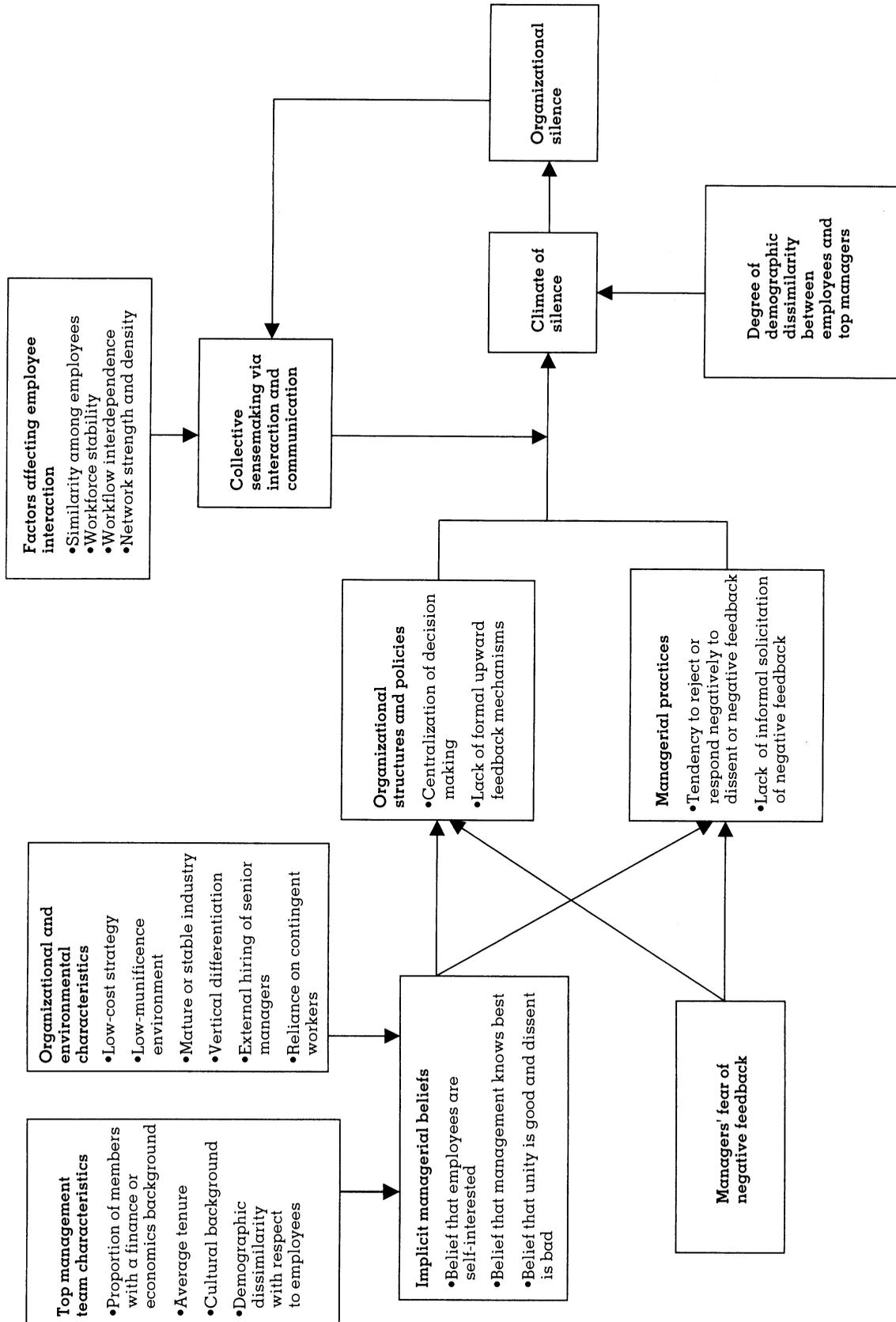
One important factor that we believe facilitates the creation of a climate of silence in organizations is top managers' fear of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. There is strong evidence that people often feel threatened by negative feedback, whether this information is about them personally or about a course of action with which they identify (e.g., Carver, Antonio, & Scheier, 1985; Meyer & Starke, 1982; Sachs, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981). Therefore, people try to avoid receiving negative feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), and when they do receive it, they may try to ignore the message, dismiss it as inaccurate, or attack the credibility of the source (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

Argyris and Schön (1978) suggest that this fear of feedback may be especially strong among managers. They argue that many managers feel a strong need to avoid embarrassment, threat, and feelings of vulnerability or incompetence. Hence, they will tend to avoid any information that might suggest weakness or that might raise questions about current courses of action. There is empirical evidence that managers will be especially likely to avoid negative feedback *from subordinates*. It has been shown that when negative feedback comes from below, rather than from above, it is seen as less accurate and legitimate (Ilgen et al., 1979) and as more threatening to one's power and credibility (Korsgaard, Roberson, & Rymph, 1998).

Managers' Implicit Beliefs

Another important factor that we believe lies at the root of organizational silence is a set of beliefs that managers often implicitly hold about employees and about the nature of management. One such belief is that employees are self-interested and untrustworthy. In recent works scholars (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Pfeffer, 1997) have emphasized that an economic paradigm currently dominates within business schools in the United States and, hence, in the thinking of many managers. This paradigm,

FIGURE 1
Dynamics Giving Rise to Organizational Silence



reminiscent of what McGregor (1960) calls "Theory X," takes as a starting assumption that individuals are self-interested and act in ways to maximize their individual utilities (Williamson, 1996). In this paradigm employees are also viewed as effort averse, and it is argued that they cannot be trusted to act in the best interests of the organization without some form of incentive or sanction (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; McGregor, 1960; Pfeffer, 1997).

We propose that when an organization's top-level managers believe employees are self-interested and untrustworthy, they will then act in ways that implicitly and explicitly discourage upward communication. It is important to note, however, that such beliefs are generally not conscious. In his discussions of organizational learning, Argyris (1977) highlights that the "theories-in-use" that guide managers' actions differ, often in significant ways, from their "espoused theories," or what they *think* drives their behavior. Redding similarly argues that the beliefs underlying managers' actions "usually remain below the surface of consciousness, typically unstated, only rarely being dredged up into the light of day" (1985: 250).

A second unstated belief that we would argue is likely to create conditions conducive to organizational silence is the belief that management knows best about most issues of organizational importance. This idea has been noted in several sources. Ewing (1977) highlights it as the overarching philosophy within most modern organizations. Glauser (1984) also notes the pervasiveness of the belief that managers must direct and control while subordinates must assume the role of unquestioning followers. Argyris (1977, 1991) similarly notes that most managers believe they must appear to be in unilateral control, and Redding points to the implicit belief among managers that "hired hands should put up or shut up" (1985: 250). This belief is related to the economic view of employees. If employees are self-interested and effort averse, then they are unlikely to know (or care) about what is best for the organization.

A third unstated belief that we regard as a factor in creating a climate conducive to widespread silence is the belief that unity, agreement, and consensus are signs of organizational health, whereas disagreement and dissent should be avoided. Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe this belief as part of the "unitary view"

of organizations, which stands in stark contrast to a "pluralistic view," in which dissent is regarded as normal and conflict as potentially healthy. The prevalence of the unitary view of organizations also has been noted in discussions of group decision making, strategy formulation, and innovation (e.g., Cosier & Schwenk, 1990; Janis, 1982; Nemeth, 1997). Enz and Schwenk (1991) have argued that top managers hold firm to the belief that agreement is good, despite research showing that the expression of multiple points of view relates positively to decision quality and to subsequent organizational performance.

Conditions Fostering These Beliefs

A question that obviously arises concerns how pervasive the above beliefs are and the conditions under which they are most prevalent. Although we do not argue that top-level managers of all organizations hold these beliefs, the works of several scholars indicate that they exist to some extent in almost every organization and that they characterize many organizations quite well (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Enz & Schwenk, 1991; Ewing, 1977; Pfeffer, 1997; Redding, 1985). For example, the assumption about employee self-interest is likely to be common because it appears to be rooted in the system of management education currently entrenched in the United States (Pfeffer, 1997). Also, there is evidence that as people progress upward within an organization, they are less likely to identify with subordinates and they come to hold different beliefs and values from those below them (Lieberman, 1956). This decreased ability to identify with subordinates as one climbs the organizational hierarchy might make it easier to make generalizations about employees (e.g., employees are self-interested). Further, the "management knows best" belief may be solidified by the need to justify one's progression. It may be natural to assume that one *must* know best given one's superior position in the organizational hierarchy.

Despite their widespread nature, however, we believe that the managerial beliefs and assumptions we have described will be held more strongly in some organizations than in others. We expect, for example, that these beliefs will be more likely when the top management team is dominated by individuals with economic or

financial backgrounds than when the group is more functionally diverse or composed of individuals with backgrounds in general management. Because the beliefs about employees being self-interested and untrustworthy are rooted in economic models of human behavior, they are more likely to be held by those whose training and job experience have been oriented toward economics or finance (Pfeffer, 1997), and these beliefs are likely to be solidified when one's peers hold them as well.

Further, the more homogeneous the top management team is with respect to functional training and experience, the more cohesive they are likely to be and the more threatened they might be by the idea of dissent (Janis, 1982; Cosier & Schwenk, 1990). We also predict that the impact of functional background will be intensified when the composition of the top management team is stable over time. The longer top managers have been together, the more entrenched their shared assumptions will tend to be and the less likely the members will be to question those assumptions (Wagner, Pfeffer, & O'Reilly, 1984).

Proposition 1: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations in which the top management team is dominated by individuals with economic or financial backgrounds.

Proposition 2: The longer the average tenure of top management team members, the stronger will be the relationship between top management team homogeneity with respect to functional background and the set of beliefs contributing to silence.

The cultural background of the top management team also may affect the beliefs that its members hold about employees. For example, if the top management team is composed of individuals who all come from high power distance cultures, these managers especially will be likely to believe that they know best. In high power distance cultures, individuals are much more likely to believe that the boss is right merely because he or she is the boss (Hofstede, 1980). Further, unity is apt to be even more strongly valued when members of the top management team are from collectivistic cultures,

since such cultures place a premium on harmony (Hofstede, 1980). Hence, the combination of high power distance and collectivism among members of the top management team is particularly likely to associate with silence-fostering beliefs.

Proposition 3: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations in which the top management team is dominated by individuals from high power distance and collectivistic cultures.

We also expect that the similarity or dissimilarity of the demographic profile (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age) of the top management team in comparison to that of lower-level employees might influence the prevalence of silence-creating beliefs. Research on diversity has shown that salient differences often create distrust and fear of the unknown (Cox, 1993). Hence, the greater the demographic dissimilarity between top management and others within the organization, the more likely it is that top management will view employee input with suspicion.

Proposition 4: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common when there is a high level of dissimilarity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age) between top management and lower-level employees.

Organization-level and environmental variables are also likely to affect the likelihood that silence-fostering beliefs will be held by top management. For example, we predict that the beliefs discussed above will be more common—and, hence, silence more likely—within organizations dependent on predictability, control, and efficiency. When there is heavy strategic emphasis on control, managers may view negative feedback as more threatening and dissent as more destructive (Bourgeois, 1985; Miceli & Near, 1992). This logic suggests that a context conducive to silence is more likely to emerge not only in cost-focused organizations but also within highly competitive environments characterized by a diminishing resource base. Research indicates that within such low-munificence environments, there are greater demands for control, less openness to dissenting opinions, and often

a belief at the top that unity of views will improve performance (Bourgeois, 1985; Khandwalla, 1972; Pfeffer & Leblebici, 1973).

Proposition 5: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations with a strategic focus on cost control and in organizations operating in low-munificence environments.

We also predict that the belief structure contributing to organizational silence will be more likely to dominate management thought in more mature and stable industries than in newer and/or volatile industries (e.g., internet, new media). In order to survive, organizations in high-velocity environments need to become adept at considering alternatives and responding to changes in their environments (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lant, Milliken, & Batra, 1992). Thus, in volatile environmental contexts, organizations may be more inclined to value employee ideas, since these ideas may be seen as useful in the search for new strategies (Sprague & Ruud, 1988).

Proposition 6: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations operating in mature and stable industries.

High vertical differentiation is also likely to reinforce silence-creating beliefs. We expect that within tall organizational structures, top managers will be less likely to interact with, relate to, and, hence, trust lower-level employees (Blau & Scott, 1962; Glauser, 1984). In addition, firms that bring in top managers from the outside, instead of promoting from within, may be more likely to create a gap between top management and the rest of the organization. This gap will increase the likelihood that top managers will view employees as untrustworthy or unpredictable and themselves as best equipped to understand and address organizational problems.

Proposition 7: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations with many hierarchical levels and in organizations that hire senior-level managers from the outside, rather than promote from within.

Finally, heavy reliance on contingent workers is likely to foster the managerial belief structure that we argue contributes to organizational silence. Contingent employees may be viewed by managers as especially self-interested, ill informed, and, hence, untrustworthy because of their temporary status within the organization and because their psychological contract with the organization is more transactional than relational (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). Sennett (1998), in fact, argues that one of the consequences of the increasingly temporary nature of employment contracts is that organizations have become more tightly controlled, implying a lack of trust in employees.

Proposition 8: The managerial beliefs contributing to organizational silence will be more common in organizations that rely heavily on contingent workers.

Organizational Structures, Policies, and Practices

In the prior section we discussed some implicit beliefs that we believe set into motion the forces that create organizational silence. In this section we discuss how these beliefs (together with managers' fear of feedback) tend to give rise to structures, policies, and managerial behaviors that, in turn, create an environment in which employees feel uncomfortable speaking up about certain issues. The idea that managers' beliefs and assumptions affect their behavior and choices, and that these then affect employees, is not a new one. Forty years ago McGregor (1960) noted that managerial beliefs can have a powerful impact on how managers treat employees and, consequently, on how employees behave (see also Argyris, 1977; Creed & Miles, 1996; Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Pfeffer, 1997). He argued, for example, that when managers assume that employees dislike work and cannot be trusted to do a good job, they will institute control mechanisms to prevent shirking. Employees, realizing that management does not trust them, become resentful and may seek to find loopholes in the systems—a response that reinforces managers' initial beliefs.

In this section we propose that when the unspoken yet dominant ideology within an organization is that (1) employees are self-interested, (2) management knows best, and (3) disagree-

ment is bad, then management will erect structures and policies that either do not facilitate or that discourage upward information flow. This tendency will be reinforced by managers' desire to avoid any threatening information or feedback. Two common structural features of organizations dominated by these beliefs will be high centralization of decision making and lack of formal upward feedback mechanisms.

If the dominant belief in an organization is that employees are opportunistic and not knowledgeable about what's best for the organization, then it is reasonable for managers not to involve them in decision-making processes (Hall, 1982). Decentralized decision making, as well as other participative forms of management, will be seen by managers as not worth the time and effort they require (McGregor, 1960). Excluding employees from decision making is also a way to avoid dissent and negative feedback and, thus, will also stem from the belief that disagreement is bad and from fear of feedback. Although there may be the appearance of participative decision making (e.g., task forces, committees), we expect true decision-making authority to reside at the top. In fact, we believe that despite discussions of organizations becoming more decentralized, the implicit belief structure that dominates many organizations gives rise to structures that are often quite centralized in reality (Foegen, 1999; Sennett, 1998).

The belief structure that we believe dominates many organizations is also likely to be associated with a lack of mechanisms for soliciting employee feedback after decisions are made. Procedures such as systematic surveying or polling will be unlikely, because there will be a tendency to believe that little of value will be learned from them and because negative upward feedback will be seen as a challenge to management's control. This dynamic may be a form of the threat-rigidity effect described by Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton (1981), whereby management tries to protect itself from a perceived threat by closing itself off from input.

Proposition 9: To the extent that the implicit belief structure of top management is that employees are self-interested, management knows best, and dissent is undesirable, the organization will be more likely to have centralized (nonparticipatory) decision

making and will be less likely to have formal upward feedback mechanisms.

When managers believe that employees are self-interested, opportunistic, and not well informed, and that agreement is preferable to disagreement, they also will tend to enact these beliefs in their day-to-day behavior toward employees. For example, if employees were to express concerns about a proposed organizational change, management would be apt to assume that the employees were resisting the change because it was personally threatening to them or because they did not understand it (Kanter, 1984)—not because they were truly concerned that the change might be bad for the organization. The managers will be likely to either reject or discount opinions and feedback from employees, particularly when those opinions differ from their own views (Ilgen et al., 1979). Management may also convey, consciously or unconsciously, annoyance or even hostility toward messengers of unwanted news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970).

Finally, managers who hold these beliefs are unlikely to engage in much informal feedback seeking from subordinates. Why seek feedback from those who are self-interested and ill informed (Vancouver & Morrison, 1995)? And why seek feedback from subordinates if one wishes to avoid disagreement and negative information (Ashford & Cummings, 1983)? When managers do seek feedback, they will tend to approach those who are likely to share their perspective and who are, thus, unlikely to provide negative feedback. This will not be intentional but will simply reflect the tendency of people to interact with those whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Byrne, 1971; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987) and the tendency to prefer confirmatory feedback (Swann & Read, 1981).

Proposition 10: To the extent that the implicit belief structure of top management is that employees are self-interested, management knows best, and dissent is undesirable, managers within that organization will be more likely to reject or react negatively to input from subordinates and less likely to informally solicit feedback from subordinates.

It is important to point out that the various managerial practices contributing to silence

may operate at multiple organizational levels. Only top management has the authority to impose the company-wide structures and policies that contribute to organizational silence (e.g., centralization). However, managers at all levels may exhibit the day-to-day practices that impede upward communication (negative responses to employee input, lack of feedback seeking). This means that employees will receive cues about the safety of speaking up both from the top as well as from their more immediate supervisors (Ashford et al., 1998).

We expect that in most cases, when cues from the top indicate that the organization is not open to employee input, the attitudes of senior management will trickle down and affect the behavior of middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994) and that they, too, will send cues to those below them that voice is not welcome. Even middle managers who do not really share the implicit beliefs of top managers may end up encouraging silence. Recognizing that top management does not like disagreement or negative feedback, middle managers may filter out certain information from their subordinates before conveying that information upward. Subordinates may conclude from this behavior that the supervisor is not responsive to complaints. In other words, we expect that in most cases consistent cues will come from middle and upper management.

In some cases, however, employees may receive cues that voice is unwelcome only from their more immediate supervisor (Saunders et al., 1992). If a divisional manager discourages and reacts in a hostile way to upward communication, employees within that division will tend to collectively withhold their opinions, regardless of organization-wide policies or practices. Hence, there may be widespread silence at the divisional level that does not characterize the larger organization.

The Creation of Shared Perceptions via Collective Sensemaking

To this point we have discussed the forces that lead many organizations to erect structures and enact practices that impede the upward flow of information—particularly information that indicates problems. To fully understand how these structures and practices lead to widespread withholding of information, or organiza-

tional silence, it is necessary to understand the development of what we term a *climate of silence*. It is also necessary to understand the collective sensemaking process (Weick, 1995) through which this climate emerges.

The term *organizational climate* refers to shared and enduring perceptions of psychologically important aspects of a particular work environment (Ashforth, 1985; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Researchers have emphasized that work settings have numerous climates, each pertaining to a particular type of activity (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). For example, scholars have assessed organizations' climates for customer service (Schneider, 1990), innovation (Scott & Bruce, 1994), and informality (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). In addition, Miceli and Near (1992) have highlighted the importance of a supportive climate for whistle-blowing, although they do not elaborate much on the factors that might create such a climate. Researchers have also emphasized that climate can be a more powerful determinant of behavior than individual needs or motivational states (Schneider & Reichers, 1983).

We define a climate of silence as one characterized by two shared beliefs: (1) speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort, and (2) voicing one's opinions and concerns is dangerous. This perspective mirrors work at the individual level of analysis, which indicates that employees are least likely to engage in activities such as issue selling and whistle-blowing when they judge the efficacy of speaking up as low and the costs of doing so as high (Ashford et al., 1998; Miceli & Near, 1992; Saunders et al., 1992; Withey & Cooper, 1989). In contrast to work at the individual level, however, we focus on how these judgments emerge at a collective level and how they affect aggregate-level voice behavior.

In an effort to reconcile divergent views of climate formation, Schneider and Reichers (1983) proposed an interactionist perspective. In this perspective it is argued that climate originates from a process of collective sensemaking, whereby employees together try to derive meaning about their workplace: its demands, constraints, and outcome contingencies (Weick, 1995). The interactionist view of climate formation builds upon a school of thought known as "symbolic interactionism" (Blumer, 1969). According to this school of thought, meaning is not

a "given" but arises from interactions among people (Ashforth, 1985). It is through social interactions that employees share their perceptions and experiences and derive a common understanding of the meaning of various aspects of their work context (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Because individuals have a strong need to evaluate their beliefs and perceptions (Festinger, 1954), they compare them with those of others. Through this process people "triangulate on a single set of perceptions and meanings" (Ashforth, 1985: 839). This perspective is similar to the notion that reality within organizations is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Building upon these related schools of thought, we argue that a climate of silence is rooted not only in objective features of the workplace but also in social interactions that contribute to a subjective process of sensemaking. The structural features and managerial practices discussed in the prior section are critical, of course, and can be viewed as providing the raw material for silence to develop. When organizational decision making is highly centralized and there are few channels for upward communication, a collective interpretation that is likely to emerge is that managers do not think employee opinions are important (Ashford et al., 1998). When managers respond to employees' opinions with resistance or denial, employees are most likely to converge on an interpretation that speaking up is risky or not worth the effort (Saunders et al., 1992). The more widespread these structures and managerial behaviors, the more vivid and salient they will be and the more likely they will be to foster shared perceptions that speaking up is not welcome. However, the likelihood that these structures and actions will lead to a climate of silence will be greater when the context provides opportunities for employees to form common perceptions. As shown in Figure 1, we propose that a process of collective sensemaking moderates the relationship between organizational structures and managerial practices on the one hand and climate on the other. Hence, to understand how a climate of silence develops within an organization, it is necessary to understand this sensemaking process and the factors that make it more likely to occur.

The literature on symbolic interactionism, as well as the social network literature, indicates that common perceptions and attitudes are most likely to develop and become reinforced to the

extent that members of a social unit have opportunities to interact and communicate with one another (Erickson, 1988; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Meyer, 1994). The more frequent and intense the contact and communication, the more likely it is that "social contagion"—a spreading of attitudes and perceptions from one person to another—will occur (Erickson, 1988; Rice & Aydin, 1991). Social network research has indicated that the following variables facilitate contact and communication and, hence, the development of common perceptions: similarity, stability, workflow interdependence, and informal social networks that are dense and composed of strong ties. Thus, assuming there are structural and managerial factors conducive to organizational silence in place (e.g., centralized decision making, lack of upward feedback mechanisms, defensive reactions to employee input), we expect that similarity, stability, workflow interdependence, and the strength and density of social network ties among mid- to lower-level employees will increase the likelihood of a strong climate of silence developing.

It has been found that individuals are most comfortable and prefer to interact with those whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Byrne, 1971; Ibarra, 1992). Individuals also prefer similar others as referents for validating their beliefs and perceptions (Festinger, 1954). Hence, given an organizational context with few mechanisms for employee voice, there will be a greater likelihood of a climate of silence emerging when there is a high degree of similarity between employees. Similarity between direct coworkers will facilitate social contagion at the workgroup or departmental level, while bases of similarity between individuals working in different areas will foster information sharing and social contagion from one area to another. Shared perceptions are also more likely to develop within organizations with relatively stable membership, since stability implies more opportunities for employees to interact and share their perceptions and a greater likelihood of shared perceptions enduring over time.

Workflow interdependence is another variable that will contribute to the collective sensemaking process, which, in the presence of certain structural features, may give rise to a climate of silence. When employees within a workgroup must coordinate their activities, there is greater necessity for communication

and, thus, a greater opportunity for them to share their perceptions and experiences (Meyer, 1994). Further, when employees must coordinate their activities across workgroups or areas (e.g., cross-functional teams), there is greater opportunity for information to be exchanged and for perceptions to be shared between workgroups. Hence, as employees attempt to make sense of such structural features as top-down decision making and closed feedback channels, they will be more likely to converge on and reinforce the interpretation that the organization is hostile to their input when their work necessitates regular communication, coordination, and teamwork.

In addition to formal structural arrangements, employees are also linked to one another via informal social networks. Ibarra and Andrews (1993) highlight that informal network links are critical channels through which organizationally relevant beliefs and attitudes are communicated. A social network is composed of *strong ties* when the linkages within that network represent frequent and intense contact (Granovetter, 1973). Because strong ties imply more interaction and communication, they imply more opportunity for collective sensemaking and a greater likelihood that employees will develop shared perceptions about the efficacy and risk of speaking up. Network density is also likely to facilitate collective sensemaking. A dense network is one with few missing linkages, implying that a given individual is likely to receive information from many different sources yet largely *the same* information from these different sources (Burt, 1992). The intense and consistent communication that occurs within a dense social network suggests that more collective sensemaking will take place.

Proposition 11: Centralized decision making, lack of upward feedback mechanisms, managerial resistance to employee input, and lack of downward feedback seeking will be more likely to lead to a climate of silence to the extent that mid- to lower-level employees directly interact and communicate among themselves.

Proposition 12: The amount of interaction and communication among mid- to lower-level employees will be positively related to social similarity, workforce stability, workflow inter-

dependence, and the strength and density of the informal social networks connecting those employees.

Distortions in the Sensemaking Process

In the above discussion we elaborated on the collective sensemaking process that can impact the emergence of a climate of silence. An additional point worth highlighting is that this sensemaking process has a strong tendency to give rise to biased and often inaccurate perceptions as employees share and collectively interpret their observations and experiences (Ashforth, 1985). Employees make sense of managerial actions based on limited and often distorted information. Much of this information is secondhand, because people prefer to learn vicariously about the types of behaviors that are dangerous rather than risk finding out firsthand. It is far safer, for example, to believe a colleague who says that speaking up will earn one the reputation of being a "troublemaker" than it is to test the system and risk losing one's accumulated credibility.

Indeed, research indicates that individuals often give more credence to what others seem to believe than what they themselves perceive to be true (Nemeth, 1997). So even if one's personal experience suggests that voice is welcomed, if others seem to regard the organization as unresponsive to voice, then the individual will tend to adopt this view as well. Further, others within the organization choosing to remain silent about issues and problems will reinforce the perception that speaking up is taboo. This is illustrated by the feedback loop in Figure 1.

The process of collective sensemaking is also likely to give rise to exaggerated perceptions of the riskiness and futility of speaking up. Salient events often appear to have a larger causal impact than they actually do (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982). Thus, if a member of the organization voices dissent and soon thereafter fails to receive an expected promotion, some employees may reach the conclusion that the promotion was lost because this person expressed an unpopular opinion. As this information passes through the grapevine, there may soon arise the widespread perception that those who express negative views are punished. Similarly, if a few employees offer input on a particular policy change and that input is ignored, they may conclude that *all* input is ignored, even if this is not

the case. As these employees convey their interpretation to coworkers, the latter, too, may come to believe that voice is not worth the effort, even though they lack any firsthand evidence to support this belief.

Shared beliefs about speaking up being devalued or dangerous are likely to become not only exaggerated but also overgeneralized. That is, silence may at first center on certain issues, but eventually it may spread far beyond those issues, and employees may stop sending any information up the hierarchy. Greenberger and Strasser's (1991) work supports this assertion. They suggest that when people perceive a loss of control in one situation (e.g., a suggestion that they make is ignored), this may carry over and affect their behavior in other situations. Ashforth similarly notes this tendency to overgeneralize, remarking how "a workgroup may come to agree that a seemingly positive overture from their supervisor has an ulterior motive and eventually develop the belief that any overture from any member of management is suspect" (1985: 840). Such overgeneralized beliefs will also be resistant to change, because individuals develop a common stake in their perpetuation (Woodman & King, 1978).

A naive manager, were he or she aware of employees' exaggerated and overgeneralized perceptions about speaking up, might dismiss them as inaccurate. It is well known, however, that perceptions, regardless of whether they are accurate, have a strong impact on subsequent attitudes and behavior, and the impact of perceptions and beliefs is especially strong when they are widely shared and supported by social information from peers (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). The outspoken individual in the example cited above might have lost the promotion for reasons unrelated to the prior expression of dissent. Yet, as long as employees perceive the two events as related, their shared perception that speaking up is dangerous will be reinforced, and they will be more likely to remain silent themselves.

Direct Effects of Demographic Dissimilarity

Demographic dissimilarity between top managers and lower-level employees was a factor that we hypothesized would increase the likelihood of management holding beliefs that contribute to silence. This variable is also likely to contribute more directly to a climate of si-

lence by affecting the perceptions and beliefs of lower-level employees. Research has shown that the common experience of being different from those in positions of power leads to some predictable reactions on the part of those at lower levels in the hierarchy (Ely, 1994). When a large number of employees see that people like themselves are underrepresented at the top, they may be more likely to conclude that the organization does not value the input of people like themselves. This conclusion, in turn, may foster the belief that it is even more risky for them to honestly voice their opinions than it is for employees who are more similar to those at the top.

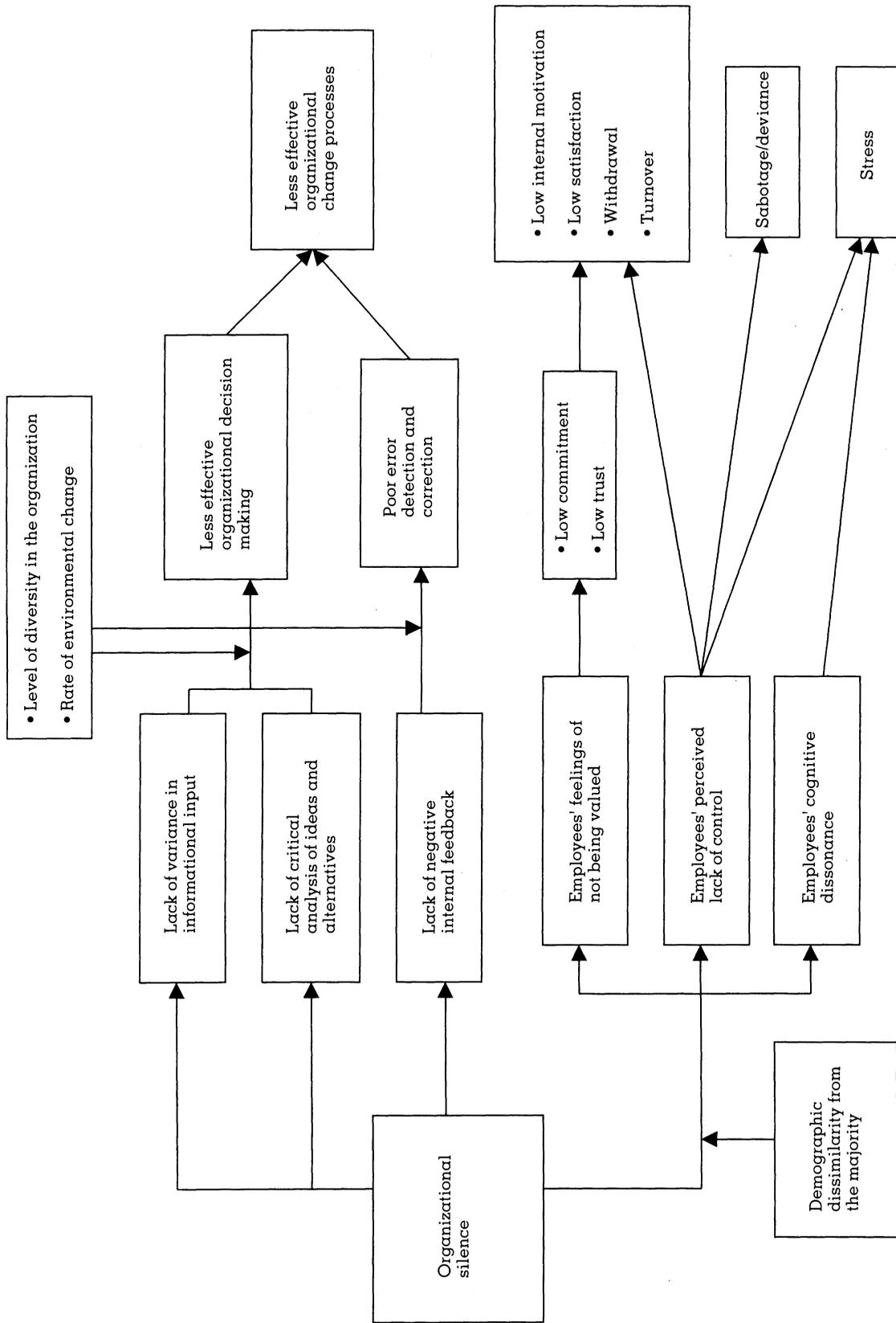
Kanter speculates that people who perceive themselves as having little or no opportunity for advancement will be "less likely to protest directly or seek change" and more likely to "channel grievances into griping and output restrictions rather than direct action" (1977: 247). Our argument is also consistent with the social network literature, which has shown that individuals are more likely to have similar perceptions and attitudes when they hold comparable positions within the organization or view the organization from a similar vantage point (Meyer, 1994; Rice & Aydin, 1991). The "comparable position" in this case is one of exclusion.

Proposition 13: A climate of silence will be more likely when there is a high degree of demographic dissimilarity between top managers and employees below the level of top management.

IMPLICATIONS OF SILENCE FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Thus far, we have presented a model of how silence unfolds within organizations and have identified factors that increase the likelihood it will develop. In this section we briefly turn our attention to the organizational implications of silence. Our objective is not to provide an exhaustive discussion but, rather, to integrate existing research in a way that highlights some of the ways in which silence might affect critical organizational processes and outcomes. We also note how variables such as diversity and demographic dissimilarity might make these negative effects more severe. Figure 2 provides an overview of these ideas.

FIGURE 2
Effects of Organizational Silence



Effects on Organizational Decision Making and Change Processes

One significant effect of organizational silence relates to organizational decision making and change, as highlighted in the top portion of Figure 2. Extensive research on group decision making has shown that decision quality is enhanced when multiple perspectives and alternatives are considered (see Shaw, 1981). Similarly, research on strategy formulation has shown that the existence of multiple and conflicting viewpoints within top management teams has a positive effect on both the quality of organizational decision making and company performance (Bourgeois, 1985; Enz & Schwenk, 1991). Further, it has been argued that innovation requires a context in which employees feel free to deviate—to offer totally novel perspectives or ideas or to question current beliefs and practices (Nemeth, 1997). Together, these research streams suggest that organizational silence will compromise the effectiveness of organizational decision making and change processes by restricting the variance in informational input available to decision makers. In addition, without minority viewpoints there is less likely to be the type of critical analysis necessary for effective decision making, which may also compromise organizational change processes (Nemeth, 1985; Nemeth & Wachter, 1983; Shaw, 1981).

Of course, we are not claiming that unlimited employee input is desirable. Too much input might overload decision-making processes and impede timely and effective decision making (Glauser, 1984). What we do claim though is that most organizations suffer from *too little* employee voice, particularly around problems or decisions that employees perceive to be unwise (Argyris, 1977; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991; Scott & Hart, 1979). When this is the case, the quality of decision making and change initiatives is likely to be lessened.

Another way in which organizational silence is likely to compromise effective organizational change and development is by blocking negative feedback and, hence, an organization's ability to detect and correct errors (Miller, 1972). Without negative feedback, errors tend to persist and may even intensify, because corrective actions are not taken when needed (Argyris &

Schön, 1978; Deming, 1986; March, 1991). Silence implies that an organization will lack the capacity for what Argyris (1977) calls "double-looped learning," which entails a questioning and modification of underlying policies and goals.

To make matters worse, top managers may not recognize that they are lacking important information and may interpret silence as signaling consensus and success. Even if managers directly ask employees for feedback, employees may be careful to filter out negative information. As a result, the internal feedback that management receives may reflect what employees think management wants to hear, rather than accurate or reliable reactions (Zand, 1972).

In a recent study Bies and Tripp (1999) found evidence that fear of repercussions does indeed cause employees to distort the information they provide to their bosses; these authors make the following observation: "Bosses, based on their observations of the employees' 'loyal' and obedient behavior, made inferences that led to a false consciousness and a false consensus as to the level of affection or disaffection with their leadership" (1999: 17). If a manager uses such distorted feedback as a basis for deciding whether to take further action, the organization runs the risk of drifting farther and farther off target (Argyris, 1977; Miller, 1972).

These dynamics are apt to be particularly problematic in organizations in which the espoused goal is to become more pluralistic. Pluralism implies tolerance of multiple and often conflicting viewpoints. Yet, when the system reinforces silence, the diverse viewpoints, opinions, preferences, and goals that may exist within the organization are not likely to be given voice and, hence, will not enter into the processes by which the organization establishes objectives, decides on appropriate courses of action, and attempts to learn from experience. A proposition that we would offer, in fact, is that the negative effects of silence on organizational decision making and change processes will be intensified as the level of diversity within the organization increases. We would also propose that organizational silence will be most detrimental within rapidly changing environments. Within such environments it is virtually impossible for those at the top to have all of the information they need (Duncan & Weiss, 1979).

Effects on Employee Cognitions, Attitudes, and Behavior

If you experience fear every day, it drags you down and you become cowardly.

After my suggestions were ignored, the quality of my work was still there, but I wasn't.

(Ryan & Oestreich, 1991: 7)

The tendency of organizations to discourage employee opinions and feedback is not only likely to compromise organizational decision making and change but is also likely to elicit undesirable reactions from employees. Drawing from a variety of literature, we propose that three destructive outcomes of organizational silence will be employees who feel they are not valued, employees who perceive they lack control, and employees who experience cognitive dissonance. As shown in Figure 2, these three outcomes are likely to lead to a variety of second-order outcomes that, in the aggregate, may undermine organizational effectiveness.

Employees' feelings of not being valued. Research on procedural justice has consistently shown that employees evaluate decision procedures more favorably when those procedures allow for employee input, even when this input does not have much impact on decision outcomes (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Lind, Lissak, & Conlon, 1983; Tyler, Rasinski, & Spodick, 1985). According to Lind and Tyler's (1988) group value model, procedures that allow for employee voice are viewed positively, at least in part, because they signal that employees are valued members of the organization. The model also suggests that employees feel unvalued when they perceive that they and others cannot openly express their viewpoints. Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Davis-LaMastro's (1990) work indicates that these feelings will affect organizational commitment and trust. If employees feel their organization does not value them, they will be less likely to value, identify with, or trust the organization. Outcomes that may follow from diminished commitment and trust are lower internal motivation and satisfaction, psychological withdrawal, and even turnover (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Employees' perceived lack of control. There is evidence from several sources that individuals have a strong need for control over their immediate environment and over decisions that affect them (see Greenberger & Strasser, 1986; Parker,

1993; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). Research on procedural justice indicates that an important way in which employees gain a sense of control over their environment is by expressing their opinions and preferences (Lind & Tyler, 1988). This work further indicates that employees' need for control is unmet when they are denied the opportunity to voice (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Hence, we can expect that when employees are surrounded by social cues that discourage speaking up, they will feel they lack sufficient control over their work environment.

Evidence exists that a felt lack of control has several detrimental effects, including reduced motivation, dissatisfaction, stress-related ailments, physical and psychological withdrawal, and even sabotage or other forms of deviance (see Greenberger & Strasser, 1986; Parker, 1993). Outcomes such as sabotage may reflect "reactance" or an attempt to regain control (Brehm, 1966). If employees feel that they cannot exert control through voice or other constructive means, they might try to demonstrate control in ways that are more destructive for the organization (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Greenberger & Strasser, 1986). Conversely, outcomes such as stress and withdrawal might reflect a learned helplessness response (Seligman, 1975). It is worth noting that these various responses may serve to validate managers' initial assumptions that created a climate of silence in the first place. Employees are apt to appear as either hostile opponents who cannot be trusted or as apathetic observers who are unwilling to contribute much beyond what they are required to contribute. In essence, managers' beliefs may become self-fulfilling (McGregor, 1960; Pfeffer, 1997).

Employees' cognitive dissonance. Organizational silence is also likely to give rise to cognitive dissonance: an aversive state that arises when there is a discrepancy between one's beliefs and one's behavior (Festinger, 1957). Individuals experiencing dissonance are typically motivated to try to restore consistency by changing either their beliefs or their behavior. Yet, in the context of organizational silence, it may be very difficult for employees to reduce dissonance.

Consider a salesperson who is confronted daily with evidence that customers are not satisfied with a particular product. This salesperson may have a very difficult time believing management's pronouncements that the product

is great. But the other option for reducing dissonance—speaking up about the product's flaws—may be highly risky.

In cases such as this, when neither beliefs nor behaviors can be easily changed, the individual may exist in a state of prolonged dissonance, which is likely to give rise to anxiety and stress (Parker, 1993; Pennebaker, 1985). The ability to vent to trusted colleagues might reduce but will not eliminate the dissonance, since there will be a stark contrast between what one expresses behind closed doors and what one expresses (or fails to express) in public (Bies & Tripp, 1999; Morris & Feldman, 1996).

The above dynamics are particularly troubling, because they may disproportionately affect those who differ from the majority and who therefore are most likely to have different perspectives. Not only will such employees feel greater pressure to remain silent (as discussed), but they also may be more likely to experience the negative effects of silence. In other words, we predict that the relationship between silence and the three psychological outcomes will be moderated by demographic dissimilarity (see Figure 2). If this prediction is true, it may be an important factor contributing to systemic, yet unintentional, discrimination in organizations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the call for papers for this special issue of the *Academy of Management Review*, it is argued that "if the expression of opposition is not welcomed in organizations, then new theories and models that allow for the existence and even the encouragement of divergent viewpoints and expressions are needed." Yet this may not be so simple. We have argued that there are powerful forces operating in organizations that can make employees feel that speaking up about issues and problems is futile or, worse yet, dangerous. We see the silence that results as a critical barrier to organizational change and development, as well as a significant demoralizing force. Our focus, thus, has not been on how change and development occur (or should occur) in pluralistic settings but on why organizational change often fails to capitalize on or reflect pluralism. Capitalizing on pluralism requires creating systems that enable employees to voice. Effectively creating systems that encourage voice, however, requires an un-

derstanding of the complex dynamics within many organizational systems that maintain and reinforce silence instead.

Our model indicates that when top management adheres to the assumptions that foster silence, it may be especially difficult for the organization to respond appropriately to the diversity of values, beliefs, and characteristics that increasingly characterize the workforce. The more these differences "pull" the organization in divergent directions, the more the organization will "push" against or resist these forces. This tendency will not be conscious but will be driven by the implicit set of assumptions that govern the organization. If employees are self-interested and dissent bad, then different viewpoints are a threat to be suppressed.

A troubling aspect of the dynamics that create and maintain silence is that they are hidden from view. It is like the tale of the emperor's new clothes. Everyone understands that it is risky to speak the truth, but this fact itself is "undiscussable," and few people know what to do to bring about change. Although the hidden dynamics that create silence can create many problems for the organization, the reasons for these outcomes are unlikely to be understood. Management may see that employees are not engaged but may assume that it is because they are self-interested and opportunistic. In addition, within organizations plagued by silence, problems may accumulate to the point that they can no longer be hidden from the view of important stakeholders, such as owners or creditors. At this point, these constituencies may conclude that the organization suffers from "poor management," and top managers may lose their jobs.

Another troubling issue is the possibility of employees implicitly being blamed for their tendency to remain silent in the face of organizational problems. If the powerful systemic forces that create organizational silence are not recognized, there is the danger of holding employees accountable for something that really stems from the actions of managers. We as researchers may even be guilty of this, particularly when we rely on models of voice that emphasize individual-level determinants. Just as Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, and Werner (1998) argue that it is managers' responsibility to create trust within their institutions, we argue that it is the responsibility of management to break down (or never

erect) the conditions that sustain silence within many organizations, and it is the role of researchers to help them understand how to do this.

We believe, however, that the behavioral cycles that maintain organizational silence will be extremely hard to break. One reason is that these cycles are not subject to direct observation or discussion. Another is that once people start distrusting a system, it is extremely hard to restore their faith (Zand, 1972). Even if managers eventually realize that they need accurate internal feedback and try to elicit it, employees will tend to be cynical about this change (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Cynicism, like distrust, may be difficult to eliminate once it takes root.

Changing an organization from one characterized by a climate of silence to one that encourages voice may require revolutionary change to the system (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Yet, achieving such system-wide change is unusual in the absence of a strong external force. Even organizations faced with information that their performance has declined will not necessarily engage in strategic reorientations (Lant et al., 1992). Top management change will be a necessary but insufficient condition for the organization to break out of a climate of silence. Theoretically, senior managers with different driving assumptions ought to be able to design different types of organizational systems that, over time, will be successful in eliciting honest upward communication. However, it will take enormous time and effort to overcome employees' widely shared and deeply imbedded perceptions that speaking up is unwise. In order to change these perceptions, it may be necessary for top management turnover to be accompanied by substantial turnover at multiple levels throughout the organization.

In conclusion, it has been common for some time now for both scholars and practitioners to espouse goals related to greater empowerment, employee involvement, and pluralism. Yet, in spite of this rhetoric, there seems to be compelling anecdotal evidence (Argyris, 1977; Moskal, 1991; Redding, 1985; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991) that it is common for employees to think that speaking up is useless and even dangerous—beliefs that are clearly at odds with notions of empowerment, involvement, and pluralism. In this article we have tried to shed some light on this paradox. We have tried to explain why, despite

“knowing” that they should encourage upward communication, organizations' dominant tendency may be just the opposite—namely, to create a climate of silence. We have tried to explain why true pluralism, for most organizations, remains elusive. And we have tried to explain why change and development in the context of pluralism require not just alternative models and theories but also a recognition of the forces that may make it difficult, and even impossible in some contexts, to apply those models and theories.

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