

What's Really Silencing Your Employees

by James R. Detert, Ethan R. Burris, and David A. Harrison

Editor's note: This is the final post in a series examining myths about why employees don't speak up, based on the June HBR article, "[Debunking Four Myths About Employee Silence](#)."

Speaking up can be serious business, but it doesn't have to be melodramatic. Indeed, our research shows clearly that most of the time employees have something to say, it's about the everyday flow of operations in firms. This is the world that each employee inhabits and knows intimately: the one where they engage their tasks, their coworkers, their customers, and their boss. In the Cornell National Social Survey (CNSS) responses, we found about 20% say a fear of consequences has led them to withhold suggestions for addressing ordinary problems and making improvements. Such silence on day-to-day issues keeps managers from getting the information they need to prevent bigger problems — performance and otherwise — down the road.

Heroes and villains of voice. Unfortunately however, media reports about whistle-blowing dominate the prevailing understanding of what voice (speaking up) and silence are. The myth about those who speak up in organizations is that they must overcome a legitimate fear of retribution that could threaten to their livelihood, health, or even life — threats stemming from circumstances full of scandalous, self-interested motives on the parts of their bosses. Take the celebrated examples of the last decades of this kind of speaking up: Jeffrey Wigand of Brown & Williamson, Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, Sherron Watkins of Enron and Coleen Rowley of the FBI. The first of these, an executive of a tobacco firm, was mythologized in a major Hollywood movie. The latter three together were selected as Time's People of the Year in 2002. They all faced incredible scrutiny and intimidation after speaking up, both privately and publicly. All instances involved illegal or highly questionable practices at their firms. And, only through their valiant efforts and their willingness to tolerate fear of retribution from their leaders did they persevere to right these wrongdoings. Because of the circumstances surrounding them, such cases attract widespread attention and may serve to build a stereotype among business leaders of whistle-blowing as the only form of "speaking truth to power" for employees.

While they're obviously salient cases, they're also just as obviously extreme cases. The trouble we see is that significant problems arise if managerial attention to speaking up is limited to and filtered through these types of well-publicized whistle-blowing examples.

First, such a myth about heroes and villains can lead to the inaccurate conclusion that no significant communication barriers of any type exist because one's own employees don't have to overcome such immense fears: "Clearly we're not like Enron (or whatever mustache-twirling corporate villain is currently getting tarred with mass attention). Therefore, we don't have a voice problem."

Second, focusing just on media-grabbing scandals can lure leaders to develop

mindsets and practices that may not be relevant for the much more frequent forms of speaking up about business issues — employees raising concerns about customers, markets, operational inefficiencies, and human resource matters, among others. For example, creating channels for anonymous reporting of gross illegalities (e.g., ethics hotlines or anti-retaliation policies or legislation) likely does little to help managers understand who is routinely holding back information in staff meetings about day-to-day operations.

Third, such stereotypes also wrongly suggest that any problems of speaking up are inherent in the *characters* of the employees and bosses involved. Efforts are often spent on selecting and promoting the "right" managers who are open to voice from below, rather than working on behaviors and systems that encourage voice. It's easier to talk about the difficulties that employees have in speaking up or the reticence at the top to act upon problems than it is to point out problems. A classic case of this comes from NASA, where decision-making processes at many points led a team to keep rocket-sealing O-rings that cracked in low temperatures on the space shuttle Challenger.

In short, regular upward input from employees about the myriad of business processes that could be made better is essential for organizations to learn and survive. Yet, the reality about who brings to light problems and opportunities for improvement can be far removed from assumptions based on the stories involving the whistle-blowing heroes noted above. So, what should managers do?

Sweat and vet the small stuff. Legendary college football coach Joe Paterno has many memorable lines, but the one his players and assistant coaches consistently quote when they move onward is "take care of the little things, and the big things will take care of themselves." People are still afraid to bring up the small stuff — because they can still be made to feel stupid, unimportant, or socially isolated for speaking up about day-to-day issues. On the other hand, if you create a climate where your employees have no fear of vetting the little things with you, you're more likely to hear the big things too. So, make — don't just allow — low-stakes opportunities for your team members to tell you about all the little things. For example, in one of the firms we've studied, senior executives have regular but informal "cookie chats" in mid-afternoon with small groups of employees at *their* offices.

Listen to the problems, not the griping. Many of the managers we've interviewed see speaking up as mostly low-level griping. Yet, if everyday voice is seen as employee noise, managers will undoubtedly miss lots of small signals. *Most employees aren't trained in idea presentation*, nor do they think about how to pitch their problem as a generic one instead of as a personal irritation or injustice. How should you respond to Val telling you: "Hector in accounting is a complete jackass; he's always wasting my time by returning my reports and asking for extra explanation for equipment purchases?" Do you chide the messenger for being too sensitive? Do you charge over to Hector's desk and wallop him with accusations about being overly bureaucratic and nitpicky? No, you consider the possibility that maybe there's something outdated about the accounting system that requires excessive detail.

Maybe Val and Hector haven't had a chance to spend enough time together to build the level of trust that keeps both from getting bogged down in paperwork.

Or, maybe Hector *is* a jackass and Val *is* too sensitive. But, ignoring when they speak up won't change their characters. And, pounding a hammer now might keep your employees from telling when there are other, nastier nails sticking out. Tell us how you would handle this or other cases. What are your strategies for responding to employee voice — even about the little things — that separating winning from whining? How do you separate "scary, whistle blowing nightmares" from employees' feelings about day-to-day issues at work? Most importantly, how do you know your subordinates aren't holding back just because you are a highly ethical company with no history of whistle blowing scandals?

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