MANAGING SILENCE IN WORKPLACES

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In memory of

Dr Danny Kane

Economist Extraordinaire

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Preface

This book is the outcome of several years of introspection and exposure to silences in workplaces that I witnessed myself and learned about from others who shared their experiences with me. I was interested in exploring how managers can deal with silence in the workplace. It is a very common experience but I soon learned that most managers are themselves quite silent about it. Many ignored it and those who did acknowledge it dismissed it as 'just an employee who had issues to deal with'. I was sure there was more to it than this and I wanted to explore how silence in the workplace can be appropriately addressed.

I searched in vain for a methodology that would adequately serve the purpose. I needed a framework that could link individuals' workplace decisions to the role managers can play to create environments based on trust and mutual respect, and that contribute to managing change and improving productivity. It was a tall order. It required an investigation into ethical ways to manage silence. It was clear that the solution to managing silence cannot be prescriptive nor descriptive but has to contribute to the manager's toolkit. The solution had to lie in understanding the ethics of silence.

I was fortunate to co-author a book with my friend and colleague Nancy Billias on this subject. The book is based on an interdisciplinary (philosophy and economics) framework that we developed; however, as I began researching how to manage silence in the workplace, it became clear that I would need to move from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinary work. To do justice to the formation of an appropriate management tool, I needed to bring ideas from several disciplines and go beyond to create a comprehensive approach to understanding the management challenges of dealing with silences in workplaces.

Chapters 1–3 are the result of my pursuits in creating a transdisciplinary approach. Chapter 4 explains the several theoretical types of silence that prevail in the workplace. In keeping with the transdisciplinary nature of my exploration, in this chapter I construct the importance of hope to develop the management tool.

Chapter 5 is devoted to measuring silence in the workplace and the measure is then applied to real-world constructs of public agencies and private institutions to examine the relevance of the tool for managers who may wish to use it. As I was interested in treating the management of silence in workplaces in an ethical way, I worked with my colleague Silpi Dhungana Pant to illustrate how it can work without being prescriptive on what managers need to do.

In preparing and writing this book, I was helped by many people. I am grateful to all the leaders, managers and employees at my own workplace, Charles Darwin University (CDU), those at the Institute of Managers and Leaders and fellow NT branch members, as well as fellow Rotarians of the Darwin Sunrise Rotary, who have allowed me insights into silences in their decision-making processes. I am also grateful to the line managers in the public and private sector agencies that allowed me to administer a questionnaire to staff and who encouraged staff to cooperate. It had proved exceedingly difficult to gain access to larger organisations and indeed many small ones, so the fact that we received almost 100% response rates, albeit from small agencies, allowed us to draw valid conclusions.

I have benefited immensely from the knowledge I received from all of them. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of my friends (too many to mention) and family (Jyoti, Alia, Sidharth, Ed, Ila and Ariki) who willingly and sometimes unintentionally shared their own personal experiences with silence. I am grateful for the support I received from the wonderful Roopali Misra and Amander Dimmock who willingly obliged me to bring to life the graphs of my sketches. I am also very much indebted to the wonderful library staff at CDU, Carolyn and Brenda, whose support made my journey into transdisciplinary work so much more rewarding. I finally wish to thank my very dear friend and colleague June Kane for bringing life into the manuscript. Thank you, June, for doing such a wonderful job.

I hope this book will make a small contribution to making workplaces of the present and the future more inclusive of their employees. People are, after all, at the very core of everything we say and do.

Chapter 1

The Silent Killer

Silence is a silent killer of innovation and transformation in organisations, and I was determined to find ways to manage it. It soon became clear that, precisely because this was a silent killer, the focus instead would have to be on risk factors and the perception of risk. Risks are always associated with probabilities, which also imply that not all silence is bad. Not all silence is detrimental to the workplace. Just imagine a workplace where there is zero silence. What a chaos it would be.

Silence does and has to exist, but it must be managed. This means understanding the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of silence. How do we decide how much silence is beneficial for the workplace? What criteria can we use in deciding the extent to which silence might in fact contribute to organisational health? Is employee health the same as organisational health? Once we decide that silence needs to be managed, who will do that and who decides this? Is it the employer or the employee or the environment in which the firm operates? Or is it combination of these? Once decisions are made to manage silence, how do we go about doing that? What is the best way to manage silence? Are there universal laws of managerial behaviour for optimising employee silence in organisations? If so, what are they? If not, why not? These questions are the starting point for this book.

To answer the questions, I had to find a framework that was independent of workplace culture and move away from the idea that employee silence is necessarily a 'problem'. Most current published material considers silence as a problem or simply assigns meaning to silence by describing it. I wanted to get away from the problem-centric notion of silence and go beyond description.

The challenge is not to see silence as a problem to be resolved. As silence is ubiquitous, moreover, how we define it has very significant ramifications for any analysis, since no management solution can be found outside the framework of how silence is conceived by the manager. To address some of the questions, I needed to escape my own bias. Bias is based on judgement and it locks the power of the observer and superimposes a perception. I believe that perceptions based on bias precipitate silences. This makes managing silence much more complex.

The Need to Manage Silence

I wanted to focus on what managers need to know about silence for them to deal with it for the benefit of themselves, individual employees, team members, the organisations they work in and the society at large in which they operate. In short, I wanted to address how managers can enhance their performance by facilitating better 'duty of care' towards their spheres of influence and at the same time contribute to their organisation's obligations for meeting corporate social responsibility (CSR) through better employee engagement.

Managers have a responsibility to their workers and to the companies they represent to reduce or limit the amount of harm caused by what happens in workplaces they oversee. They have a responsibility to keep people safe and protect them from physical, mental and emotional harm (Sherman, 2018).

CEOs and line managers are

> told repeatedly that they have a special obligation to society to use their firms' assets, global reach, and unique skills to address the challenges of poverty, illness, and human rights violations in innovative ways. They are also reminded with equal fervour that if the satisfaction of helping to make a better place were not sufficient incentive, that their firms' commitment to social action will be rewarded by lasting customer loyalty and profits. (Husted & Allen, 2010)

Managing silence in the workplace is also a CSR issue. Although 'CSR requires organizations to adopt a broader view of its responsibilities that includes not only stockholders but many other constituencies as well, including employees, suppliers, customers, the local community, local, state and federal governments, environmental groups, and other special interest groups' (Barnett, n.d.), the focus of this book is concerned with the internal workings of the organisation and how the manager/employee relationship can meet these responsibilities.

Apart from the moral, ethical, legal, social and economic benefits of effective management of silence, managers also have a responsibility to promote employees' welfare because they are, after all, the core of any organisation. The drive is to contribute to a contented workforce, not least to maximise their contributions. This way of thinking places enormous pressure on management to examine the way they treat their workers.

In an era where the only thing constant is change, the new world order of how work is organised is quite different to the one to which we have become accustomed. Part of the reason for transformation in organisations is the rise in the millennial, Generation Z and an increasingly diverse body of workers who are motivated to build their careers and the companies they work for differently. If managers do not recognise these differences and work with diverse employee motivations, the individual, the group, the organisation and society will all pay a high cost.

Employees in modern organisations are also much more aware of and interested in the core values of their managers and leaders. They are also more aware

of the significant contribution a diverse workforce can make in achieving higher productivity and in contributing to innovation and change. How managers and leaders deal with their employees and the way managers treat their employees can consequently either make or break an organisation. There is thus a need to recognise the central feature of the 'way things are done' in an organisation in the past and present. As employees are required to 'work more with less' or urged to 'work more smartly than before', they can feel pressure in aiming for life–work balance. All these forces are at play and contribute to management challenges. By focussing on a summary measure of workers' feelings and concerns that may result in silence in the workplace, it is possible to reduce the costs incurred by managers through their own workplace challenges.

There are still some managers who stick to outdated norms and behaviours in dealing with their employees. Managers used to work, think and react to a 'presupposition of intentional organized and rational order, moving, usually in a linear fashion, inexorably towards some form of goal or mission' (Wilkinson, 2006, p. 23). In today's world, a new form of organisation has taken hold where managers need to focus much more on the process rather than the outcome. If managers consider silence as a process, maybe they can use the ambiguity it causes to their advantage.

Managers need to take advantage of this ambiguity and this is challenging, because the concept itself is ambiguous (Wilkinson, 2006, p. 42). What is ambiguous or not is 'paradigm-dependent' and in a non-paradigmatic world of constant flux, one person's perception of ambiguity is another's clash of values. Contemporary and future workplaces are increasingly becoming ambiguous in the way work is carried out in organisations. With the advent of the digital economy, more organisations are employing workers on a contract basis for their skills and not focussing on their loyalty and values. As a result, enlightened managers are abandoning tried and tested ways and are going back to the basics of their discipline orientations. The basics of any workplace are the people. Without people's ingenuity there is very little innovation and change. Good management is achieved not by following a carrot and stick approach but by building relationships of empathy with the workforce.

In any organisation the majority is silent, so it is important to identify whether that silence is a result of the organisational context. The framework used in the book attempts to do just that. It calls for a framework independent of workplace culture and avoids the perception of employee silence as a 'problem'.

Silence is itself a form of communication, and to explore it, a framework is needed that is devoid of value judgements. The framework has to be based on ethics. For this, it is important first to consider the 'ethics of silence'.

In an earlier book on the ethics of silence, Nancy Billias and I suggested that individuals in several contexts acknowledged the need to pay attention to silence. This is because most of the contributors to the cases in the book, from several countries and walks of life, advocated that the first step to managing silence is to recognise its existence. This applies to workplaces as well. Many managers encounter employee silence. Most do not recognise it. Others ignore it or even deny its existence, especially if they are time-poor. Consider, for example, a meeting you

have attended or chaired, or seen someone else chair. Meetings invariably have an agenda. Some even have allocated time to address the agenda items because time is limited and attendees need to get back to work. Many a manager has told me, 'I need to stop people wasting my time as they tend to go on and on about a topic'.

Most of the meetings I have attended in my working life and in several countries reveal a repetitive pattern where most attention and time is given to those who voice their 'opinions'. Some time will be given to those who create 'noise', but rarely will any time or attention be allocated to those who are silent. They go unnoticed. The concern is that there are unintended consequences of such behaviour on the organisation's ability to cope with change. Ignoring the silent employee has an impact on innovation and productivity.

The consequential effects of such unintended impact are that it does not help anyone. It contributes to the ill health of the individual silent employee, the organisation itself and the society in which the organisation operates. It permeates through to everything that people say and do.

It becomes clear that conscious awareness of silence is the first step in understanding and supporting workplace encounters and interactions. Many refer to this as achieving work/life balance. But raising awareness is not easy. In the context of the contemporary work environment, it can be quite complicated.

People working in organisations face several life/work challenges. Most people would consider that 'life' comes first and then 'work'. Hence, I refer to life/work and not work/life concerns and balances. To complicate matters further, the majority of work environments are competitive. There are even some managers who strategically promote internal competition to get the best out of their workers. These internal and external forces combine to block the individual's awareness of silence in the workplace.

This book begins with the idea that managers need to be consciously aware of the existence of employee silence. It is present everywhere. Bringing it to the conscious mind of the manager is important and powerful for getting the best out of the employee and for the organisation.

Unrecognised silence that is repeatedly ignored over time contributes to death and decay because of the direct and indirect costs of silence in any organisational context.

Costs of Silence

A number of commentators who have explored the meaning of silence also refer to the associated costs of such silence in the workplace. It is important, though, to distinguish between the incidence and impact of the costs of silence. The cost incidence of silence is always on the employee. The impact of the silence and its associated cost borne by the employee is also felt in the radiating zones of influence that person has, not only on self but on the group to which s/he belongs, the organisation in which s/he works and the society in which the organisation operates.

In this book, silence is considered as a form of communication and to ascertain explicitly the costs associated with it, it is necessary to explain why we need

to understand its significance and why the subject is so important. The impact of silence on the individual depends on a concept that circulated in the 1990s in Silicon Valley; the 'drag coefficient' of the employee (Carrigan, n.d.). The drag coefficient of the employee is about making sense of the constraints individual employees face in an organisation and the effect this has on the 'discretionary effort', which is 'the level of effort people could give if they wanted to, … above and beyond the minimum required' (Daniels, n.d.). In other words, the cost impact of silence results from an individual employee's decision not to speak up and is influenced by two forces: the individual drag coefficient and the organisational support for individuals to exercise their discretionary efforts. If managers are not conscious of these factors and ignore the silence of the employee, the cost impact of employee silence is substantial.

A seminal study (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2001) revealed that each time an employee avoids a crucial conversation, it costs the worker's employer US$7,500. In addition, the same study:

> found that one in five employees estimate that their inability to speak up in crucial moments costs their organization more than $50,000; and 40 percent estimate they waste two weeks or more ruminating about the problem.

Moreover, the authors of the study reported, 'the secondary costs are also alarming. Respondents report that these conversation failures had damaging effects on employee morale and engagement, relationships, the corporate culture and project timelines and budgets'.

Another study recognises that:

> ignoring employee silence can lead to a significant loss of creativity and innovation (as employees opt for silence rather than offer suggestions in areas where they could contribute their knowledge) and vital information being wasted, since those working at the coalface are more familiar with the day-to-day problems. In addition, those who are silenced are less likely to identify with the organization's goals, which can result in a rise in employee stress, absenteeism, resignation and even strikes or sabotage. (IESE Business School, 2014)

'There are many tangible and intangible costs of silence in an organization'. Pinder and Harlos (2001) wrote that employee silence can result in litigation, decreased productivity and increased turnover. Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) added to this list the undermining of decision-making processes and error corrections. If not addressed, these issues can lead to tangible costs to the organisation. The cost of employee turnover according to Bousey and Glynn (2012) is 16% of salary for lower-paying jobs. Abbott (2002) found that there was a very strong relationship between higher employee morale, higher job satisfaction and higher profits. The average cost to a business for an employee lawsuit in 2001 was more

than US$130,000 (Sheid & McDonough, 2011). The money spent on such costs could be retained in the organisation to pay for increased resources in departments and research and development. The intangible costs of employee silence include the loss of divergent thoughts, growing ignorance in the organisation, stress, disengagement and sabotage (Bisel et al., 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Intangible costs in the organisation can be just as much of a loss as the tangible ones; the loss of new ideas and customer satisfaction could greatly affect profits. Employee silence has high intangible and tangible costs that need to be addressed for the organization to be effective and profitable (Flanagan-Benedict, 2017).

Apart from the costs of silence to the individual employee, the manager and the organisation, silence also has an impact on innovation and loss in labour productivity. Therefore, not only is managing silence important for individual employee health, it is also vital to managing innovation and productivity. It makes economic sense!

The Significance of Managing Silence in the Workplace

Managing silence is also important for managing innovation. As businesses need to respond to competition on all fronts, they cannot afford to just do more of the same if they are to compete with rapid changes in new product and services development, changes in customer profiles and above all in the innovative practices and policies that others are and will be implementing. Even business environments themselves are changing at a rapid rate. With all these rapid changes taking place on all fronts, levels of stress and anxiety are on the rise. Many recognise the need for innovation not only in output but in the core of the business and management methods:

> Organizational creativity [should be considered] as a subset of the broader domain of innovation. Innovation is then characterized to be a subset of an even broader construct of organizational change. (Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993, p. 293).

These writers present a systems model and suggest that, 'individual, group, and organizational characteristics have an impact on the creative process and situation, resulting in the creative product of the organization' (Woodman et al., 1993, p. 329).

If individuals choose to become silent, there is potentially a loss to the individual, the work group and the organisation in terms of lost opportunity for being creative and innovative. Losses such as these cause employee dissatisfaction, disenchantment with the workplace leading to stress, and anxiety and above all diminished self-worth. If employee silence is not recognised by managers, it contributes to potential losses because employees are not contributing to innovation and productivity improvements. Moreover, silent employees may influence others through their negative attitudes and feelings.

The main management challenge related to innovation is how best employees can contribute to increases in productivity. The essential feature of the manager's

task remains related to value creation. There is increasing recognition that values are created through exchanges. These exchanges are between customers and the providers of products and services. Explicitly the customers and providers are both internal and external to the organisation. Value creation is also influenced by internal and external interactions because of the multitude of layers of engagement that influence the behaviour from the past, the present and the future expectations of the customers and providers of goods and services.

Managers have access to many advisors whose profession is to give insights into how to formulate strategies to implement change management practices, who are the best people to engage in these formulations, and how best to implement them. These advisors, or consultants, may also advise on managing change in times of turbulence. They represent an incredible force; a recent Google search brought up 1,580,000,000 results using the terms 'change management'. One hit describes change management in the following manner:

> Change management is a structured approach for ensuring that changes are thoroughly and smoothly implemented, and that the lasting benefits of change are achieved. The focus is on the wider impacts of change, particularly on people and how they, as individuals and teams, move from the current situation to the new one. (Mind Tools, n.d.)

The emphasis of the structured approach referred to above is to ensure that organisations continue to be internally and externally relevant. Such an approach is a great challenge, particularly in an ever-changing world. The challenges faced by contemporary firms are much more complex than ever before. There is a great sense of ambiguity about the future. It is also raising doubts about the way today's companies need to manage their workforces in dealing with an uncertain future. Managers who are basically creators of ensuring a systematic flow of knowledge and information to accomplish quality outcomes are constantly being challenged to deal with vagueness. Just as every cloud has a silver lining, ingenuity has become the manager's silver lining in the clouds of confusion. They are increasingly called on to manage a multitude of complex changes simultaneously. They often respond by trying new and even untested ways to manage. Some of these responses may include extensive workplace disturbances, including abandoning tried and tested ways of performing their traditional managerial roles.

Many managers continue to engage, and rightly so, with what works best within their contexts of operation. However, they need to recognise that what works best in one context does not necessarily work well in another. This is partly because of the selected process itself and partly because of the way it is managed. One process does not fit all types of organisation all the time. Nor is one process relevant all the time. There is no silver bullet. There is a constant need to revitalise the engagement process. Some managers consider it an additional challenge to deal with shifting contexts in one's own workplaces.

Shifting contexts disrupt the order in the way managers respond to change and, as a result, managers increasingly experiment with their methods, with

mixed results. At one level, there are increases in successes. At another level, they produce disastrous results. The stakes of experimenting with change are high and, as with any risky venture, risks are proportionate to returns. Enlightened organisations and their business advisers are seeing substantial results for successful experiments. The implications for this are huge. The way work is organised and the metrics used for measuring workforce productivity keep changing; workplaces are trying to be more agile. The challenge is to work out a metric for measuring agility in the work force. To do this it is essential to recognise that people are at the core of business activities. But it is not enough to just recognise this; there has to be a shift in paradigms for bringing workforces to the centre stage of concern.

In the context of human resources, there have been three phases for understanding the evolutionary nature of paradigms. These paradigms are based on a distinction between what is considered a source and a resource. This distinction is particularly relevant when firms face production process innovations over time because this is not a new phenomenon. Production process innovations have been a constant pursuit and a continuous quest.

Phase 1 related to when humans were considered as the source of growth. Phase 2 is where humans were regarded as a source as well as resources of growth. The distinction between those was that employees were treated as labour by those who regarded them as a resource but considered the same humans as specific to a production-structure process and relegated them to be a resource input in the production. Take for instance the changes that specified the roles of the women. Earlier frameworks did not permit the recognition of women's contributions. When at last women's contributions were valued, this entered the market valuation and their contributions were recognised. The discussion shifted from not being valued to being valued and even undervalued. Women's participation in the market was treated differently to their contributions at home (the non-market institution). It is here that engagement in the production made her a resource, while her contribution to production was considered as a source. In this phase, when there are changes to the production process because of innovation, there is a distinct shift in job features. This also happened when production systems changed from labour-intensive technologies to capital-intensive technologies or when production processes shifted from the use of one technology to another. Those employees who do not modify their skill sets to match these new job requirements risk losing employment opportunities.

Phase 3 is where most humans are regarded as resources. Again, continuing to use the example of women's participation as an illustration, with increases in participation in the workplace, women are considered as a resource and an input in the production process. By explicitly identifying their roles, the gender gap came to be seen as a real issue of concern. What then comes into the spotlight and an item on the agenda for management to address in workplaces is largely a bounded-rationality construct which is highly influenced by the framework used to define the issue in the first place. There is a need to pay attention to paradigm evolutions and not just to shifts in operational aspects. There is a need for shifts in thinking and to operate in a way that adheres to the core values underpinning CSR.