

Course Name: Organizational Behaviour: Individual Dynamics in Organization

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Lecture – 04

Lecture 58: Can silence be strategic?

Hello students. Namaskar. Welcome back to the course on Organizational Behavior, Individual Dynamics in Organization. Today we move to the fourth lecture of the last module where we look into employee voice and silence. So can silence be strategic? Let's answer this question today in this lecture.

I am Dr. Abraham Cyril Issac. I am a faculty at the School of Business, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.

So, let's start with today's theme. "Managers respond positively to high quality voice from employees."

So have you ever thought of situations where your manager might respond to you in a positive manner or will not respond to one of your colleagues in such a great manner or vice versa. The reverse case might be have you come across situations where your manager or your boss is not so friendly or not so able to open up with you but is too much friendly or too much opened up with such individuals who are able to raise their voice in a very strategic way or raise the voice in a very quality oriented way or they have a very high quality of voice in other words. So, let's understand this. Can voice be strategic or can silence be strategic and make the voice of high quality? So, let's start with asking few questions. Let's introspect within us. Let's take you know a couple of minutes to answer this question. Just when you are going through this question just think of those situations in your workplace that you can relate to that you can build an answer for this question.

So, the first question is employee silence always inherently harmful? You must have come across you know situations of employee silence because you know employee silence what it is, what exactly it means or what are the different factors that influence employee silence which we have discussed in the previous lecture also. So, is employee silence always inherently harmful? You remain silent, it's always good or as what we have concluded in the previous lecture remaining silent leads to burnout so is employee silence always inherently harmful? So always is the key word here. So, are there

situations where you actually tend to remain silent deliberately? Are there situations where you don't want to disclose anything or you want to pause your knowledge sharing for some time? Maybe you are waiting for the right moment, maybe you are waiting for the right context, maybe you are waiting for the right person to arrive. So all these situations you can think of when you are answering this particular question.

The second question I would like to pause here is imagine yourself as an employee, imagine scenarios at your workplace where you think of expressing an idea or opinion. Extending from the previous question, have you thought of some situations where you feel that you know this is not the right situation or right context to express your opinion, you might be termed as rebel or disloyal to the organization itself or have you come across situations where you felt that the situation or the context or the scenario was right and you just jumped in and raise your voice and you were acknowledged and appreciated for the timely intervention. So those situations have actually proved that remaining silent was a strategy and strategic silence has raised the quality of your voice.

Another question I would like to pause here is do you always speak up your mind? If yes, do you always speak it at the moment an idea crosses your mind? So I am trying to make this lecture more interesting by pausing these questions which often have come to your mind but you seldom try to solve it.

So when you are actually looking into situations like this, some thought process or some ideas that come to your mind and suddenly you want to discuss are you a person like that or you have put a pause into that, you have waited for the right moment because you feel that your idea is very valuable, it should not be simply discussed and the relevance should not be fished out or you might think that your idea is not getting the right attention, you have to wait for the moment so have you come across such a situation. Have you ever held a thought in your mind till your manager seems to be in the right state to accept your view? Do you bid your time before you go for making your ideas public? So, this is what I tried to ascertain in the previous statement also but here the right state could be is the manager in the right state of emotion, is the manager in the right zone of acceptance or is the right manager itself right in terms of understanding the nitty-gritties or the nuances of the situation that you are going to discuss? He or she the right person to actually able to comprehend what solution you are going to put up. So, all these questions may have an answer when it comes to strategic silence at workplace. And finally, although some of this might seem obvious on the contrary many a time employees end up giving ideas that are not relevant and are ready to be shared.

So, when you are into such situations still the idea itself is quite stunning, the idea itself is quite revealing that you cannot wait for the right moment and you just put the idea in the meeting and the result is obvious but the thing is you might have come across situations like that too.

So that brings or underscores the relevance of strategic silence at workplace, not silence but strategic silence at workplace. Now what is strategic silence? Strategic silence is the intentional withholding of untimely ideas or concerns. It could be your concern, it could be opinion, it could be anything. When I am talking about idea I am actually addressing a lot of other terms as well. It could be your ideas, it could be your concern, it could be solutions to the problems etc.

In order to raise issues that resonate better with managers when they do speak up. So this is typically strategic silence for all of you. Managers deem employees voice to be of higher quality, the higher quality at least repeated some two three times within this lecture. Higher quality voice means that you are more effective in doing something. It is not simply that you are raising the pitch or the tone and tenor of the voice, it is about the quality of the idea also.

Let us say there is a problem that is hovering around in this organization and the entire organization intellectual capital is behind that to solve it but you have a fantastic idea but you feel that if I state this now it seems like it is a half-baked idea. So, what do you do? You go back, you tend to remain silent at that particular point, you go back again maybe dig into the research literature or maybe talk to people who might have faced such situations in other organizations, talk to your peer, talk to your relatives, talk to your near and dear ones, whatever be the background homework you have to do, you do that. You come up with much more of information and subsequently you put this in the next meeting which is inevitably the voice of high quality. So, I hope when you are talking about high-quality voice this is what you should understand. It is remaining silent and for a purpose.

It is remaining silent maybe to increase the information at your disposal. It is increase the quality of understanding of the particular problem. It is increase maybe the legality of the problem or to have a clear understanding of the context or the bigger background of the problem. So, managers deem employees voice to be of higher quality or more effective when those employees also engage in strategic silence. This is the key.

You do not generally give the clear weighting or clear understanding or weightage to those individuals who always tell something. There are some situations in your organization even if the opinion is not warranted, even if the idea is not called for, there are some individuals who keep on giving their expert opinions, there are some individuals who tend to have an answer for every single email, there are individuals who tend to respond to every single email, there are some individuals who tend to write anything and everything that they know and they are the standalone experts in that area. Please understand those people who do not engage in strategic silence might not have higher

voice quality. This is the organizational input you need to take from this lecture as part of strategic silence.

Now when we are looking into strategic silence, let us increase the level of understanding. Let us go deeper into this. Let us understand different dimensions of strategic silence. When you are looking into strategic silence, the research literature says that it should be understood with respect to three particular dimensions. One is the issue relevance, second is the issue readiness and the third is target responsiveness. Let us break it down.

First one is issue relevance. When you are looking into issue relevance particularly, withholding issues that are not pertinent to the goals of the team or the manager at the present time. So that is where or that is why specifically you are silent because you are having some idea, you are having some thoughts but that is not relevant, that is not pertinent to the goals of the team or the manager or maybe if you state, you think that it is actually counter purpose to what the organization is striving for. So, this is typically what you mean by issue relevance.

Now let us look into issue readiness. Issue readiness is nothing but withholding issues that are not quite ready, not quite ready to be shared at the present time. If you recollect the previous example I gave, you have a solution to a particular problem which the organization was striving to answer. You are trying to articulate the solution to the problem but you feel that there are some problems to solve, there are some dots yet to be connected, there are some information you need, maybe you consult with your friend, maybe you consult with your you know experts who are in such situations or who are who have gone through such you know context or such organizational issues. You go to your experts who are actually from academia, who have the research understanding of the particular problem. So, all this consultancy sort of experience, all these deliberations actually will give you the right understanding and you feel that there is issue readiness now, then you tend to talk. So this is one of the another important dimension of strategic silence which is issue readiness.

The third one is target responsiveness. So, we have seen issue readiness, the third one is target responsiveness. Withholding issues when the manager is not perceived to be in a receptive, cognitive or emotional state at the present time. You feel that your manager is very angry, you feel that he is not able to take your opinion in the right sense or sometimes there are situations, these are all situations we face.

Sometimes there are situations you feel that your manager is brainwashed by somebody, you feel that the manager is not going to accept whatever you say today because he has some resins effect, you pitch some idea recently, it went bad, he is having or she is having some negative you know thoughts about you, he or he is or she is not going to you know

take your opinion however stunning or splendid it is. So those situations warrant the understanding of target responsiveness. So that is the third dimension.

Ladies and gentlemen of dimensions of strategic silence where one is issue relevance, second is issue readiness and the third is target responsiveness. Having understood this let us go to one typical study by Park et al which looks into high frequency of strategic silence, limited consideration of defensive reasons and emphasis on strategic silence over defensive silence. If you recollect we have in detail discussed about defensive silence which is nothing but to again take a recap of what we have discussed in the previous class, consciously silent behavior that occurs when people feel threatened and try to protect themselves from potential harm.

So when we look into situations elaborated by Parke et al (2022), high frequency, this is why I have taken the recent literature because employee silence, employee voice is an evolving subject, a lot of research is happening and there is a wealth of empirical sound empirical research that is happening and that is where I tend to focus my class on. So high frequency of strategic silence consideration approximately 80.1 percent of the survey employees acknowledge considering at least one of the three components of strategic silence and we also have seen that in contrast to strategic silence components. Please recollect what we have discussed in the previous slide, only 17.1 percent of the participants considered aspects related to psychological safety and a mere 5.5 percent considered futility to voice. So, remember our discussions on psychological safety, how we have asserted, I have been very articulate in asserting the importance of psychological safety in the organization and considering that you please understand only 17.1 percent of the participants considered aspects related to psychological safety and a mere 5.5 percent considered futility of voice. When you look into employees and the strategic association with the strategic voice or strategic silence, employees may strategically choose when and how to remain silent emphasizing the importance of context-specific factors in understanding workplace communication dynamics. So you have seen three dimensions in the previous slide, issue relevance, issue readiness, target responsiveness based on that how you remain or how you choose to be silent that becomes critical.

Now when you look into strategic silence at workplace, strategic silence is to be understood as a consciously coordinated action before expressing one's ideas. So, you need to have some consciously coordinated action and that is what strategic silence is which might help employee in many ways and some of the applications will discuss. One is positive managerial response to high quality voice. So, what happens is that managers respond positively to high quality voice from employees, we have already established this unequivocally. This leads to higher performance evaluation and rewards. The moment your manager understands that you are a high performer, your voice is of high quality, you are a person who can bring in niche solutions, you are a person who can bring in key

solutions which nobody else could have brought in this organization, your voice, the quality of your voice is recommended or is appreciated then you are naturally a higher performer. Please understand this, this is all the game of perception, it's all the game of perception. When you look into situations where you can bring in, why some people are inevitable in organization, have you thought about it? Why some individuals are inevitable in the organizational setup? Because they are the people who can bring in solutions to problems which otherwise are unsolvable. So, there are situations where there are some individuals who can bring in high-quality voice, solution is what? Solution is high quality voice, you are remaining strategically silent but then you are bringing in some high quality voice into picture.

There are also situations where strategic silence acts as an enhancing tactic, not as a final tactic but as an enhancing tactic where it translates itself into an effective tactic employed by employees who speak up. So, employees can enhance the perceived quality of their voice, so they know something but they tend to be silent because they can bring in some attention to the particular statement that they are going to make. When it comes to silence, let's start from the literal understanding of this. You know a lecture is delivered, there is a monotonous way, there are some people who deliver it in a very monotonous way, then there are some people who understand the relevance of pause, that is the literal understanding of how beneficial silence is. The pause will actually increase the quality of the delivery or the quality of articulation, there is no doubt about it. But when we take that thing and extrapolate that understanding to the organisational situation along with the theoretical understanding which we have derived from the research articles which we have referred, we can understand one thing, there are certain situations when you should talk, there are certain situations when you should remain silent and the relevance, the strategic relevance of silence comes into picture there. Silence as a strategy comes into action there, so you talk mainly only when the situation is conducive, when there is actually the manager is responsive, when the situation is ready, when there is issue readiness, when there is target responsiveness, unless and until you don't understand the particular situation or the timing to speak up, to have a high-quality voice you might not be able to bring in even the right solution in an effective manner. So, the solution might be right, but the problem is that you are not stating the solution at the right time. Second the solution might be half baked; you can wait for some time and you can bring in the right solution. Third the solution might be right, but the people who are going to hear that might not be the right people.

So please understand all these three situations, all these three situations are relevant and this is what makes silence strategy. That is all from today's class, we will see you in the next class, thank you for listening to me patiently, see you in the next class, take care, bye bye.