



Why Is Everyone Around You So Quiet?

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Are you a superstar manager and is your team always in agreement with you? Do you always come up with the best ideas in meetings that everyone finds brilliant? Most likely, these are signs that your team doesn't feel comfortable disagreeing with you, even when the members have better ideas.

You are not alone. Over the years, various studies have shown that organisations are faced with ironic situations where problems are known and evident to employees, but because of their inability to speak-up to managers, they never surface, and businesses end up suffering.

- In a 1991 research study, 70% of the respondents said that "they felt afraid to speak up about issues or problems that they encountered at work."
- In another 2003 study, 85% of those surveyed said that at least on one occasion, they were

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- unable to raise a concern with their managers even though they felt that the issue was significant.
- In yet another study in the medical field, where not raising issues at the appropriate time can cost lives, 69% of respondents said it was common in their organisations to not speak-up.

Why aren't people expressing disagreement?

Research indicates two primary reasons:

- (1) **Safety**, i.e. people are afraid of the unfavourable consequences of speaking-up, and
- (2) **Futility**, i.e. people think speaking-up would not change anything.

The concerns around safety are not unwarranted. Evidence shows that speaking-up on existing issues may not solve the problem and, in

fact, might have negative career implications for employees.

The sense of futility is driven mostly by unintentional signals that leaders may pass on. Many leaders are aware of the importance of speaking-up and want to encourage it, but their actual actions may relay different messages. For e.g., due to lack of time or being in a rush, they may not give adequate attention to a particular instance of speaking-up, and this may be perceived as a lack of openness.

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What can organisations do about it?

Leadership Connect

Senior leaders have a powerful impact

on creating a safe environment for speaking-up. 'Skip-level' connect is an effective measure in this regard. Leaders need to be mindful that the impact of their direct and indirect behaviours goes beyond their direct reports and also affects the skip-level employees' understanding of the organisational culture. Leaders must use this as an opportunity to pass the correct message down the chain.

Merely having an open-door policy doesn't solve this problem, as the person on one side of the door still looks senior, and another on the other side still has to make an effort to cross the door. What can work for leaders is taking the time to walk through that open door, down the hall, and to the cafeteria, saying to the employees, "Let's talk on your turf, not mine." Leaders should have such open conversations, preferably at informal set-ups, and be more listening and curious.

Organisations can also change how they assess leaders. Their evaluations should not be based on the feedback from direct reports alone, but also on the inputs of skip-level subordinates. It's very common for a leader who looks very open and accessible to direct reports, to look the opposite to distal subordinates.

Culture of Respect

People make perceptions about encouragement to speak-up based on their day to day interactions with senior authorities. When leaders show respect in every direct/indirect interaction with employees, it makes them less fearful and allows them to speak up more. Organisations should cultivate a culture of respect where everyone is treated with respect and dignity on a day-to-day basis. There must be proper training and guidelines around this for managers.

Give Confidence to Managers

Research shows that managers who are insecure about their own managerial skills are most likely to avoid feedback and suggestions, as this reaffirms their insecurities.

Insecure leaders see any such voice as a threat, become defensive towards it, and may also demonstrate unfavourable behaviour against such employees.

Organisations can certainly change this environment by providing safety to insecure leaders. One of the most effective ways is creating a culture where it's okay to make mistakes, risk-taking is encouraged, and there's no finger-pointing when things go wrong. When feedback becomes a norm and leaders are not judged negatively on it, a culture where suggestions are more accepted will flourish.

Obligation and Self Esteem to speak-up

Another research indicates that in addition to enhancing employees' psychological safety, two other factors that increase voice are emphasizing duty for constructive change and organisation-based self-esteem.

By emphasizing that employees can "give back" to the organisation by highlighting inefficient practices and offering suggestions, leaders can increase the chances of people speaking up when they see something wrong or potential for change.

By creating a culture in which employees are treated as an integral part of the organisation and by making them feel their inputs are part of strategic decisions, leaders can boost organisation-based self-esteem.

Make Management Inclusive

One of the reasons that people don't speak-up in organisations is the

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management's belief that they know best about important issues. Organisations can change this by creating an inclusive management model and developing a culture where ideas and suggestions from anyone are welcome, any decision by senior management is open to challenge, and there is transparency in decision-making.

If most decisions are taken behind closed doors without transparency down the chain, organisations should expect employees to feel that their views are insignificant or irrelevant.

Behind all efforts to promote diversity in the workplace are intentions to have diversity in thoughts. An organisation can hire employees from varying backgrounds, but unless they have a voice on the table and can speak-up, it will not benefit from this diversity. 

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About the Author

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