

The Intersection of National Cultural Values and Organizational Cultures of Silence and Voice, and the Moderating Effect of Leadership

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Much has been written separately about organizational cultures of voice and silence and national cultural value orientations, but these two subjects have not been explored together. This article discusses the relationship between two organizational cultural phenomena—cultures of voice and cultures of silence—and two national cultural dimensions—power distance and individualism/collectivism (Hofstede et al., 2010)—and how leader practices can influence these relationships. The relationship between national culture and organizational cultures of voice and silence and the moderating influence of leader practices is shown in Figure 1.

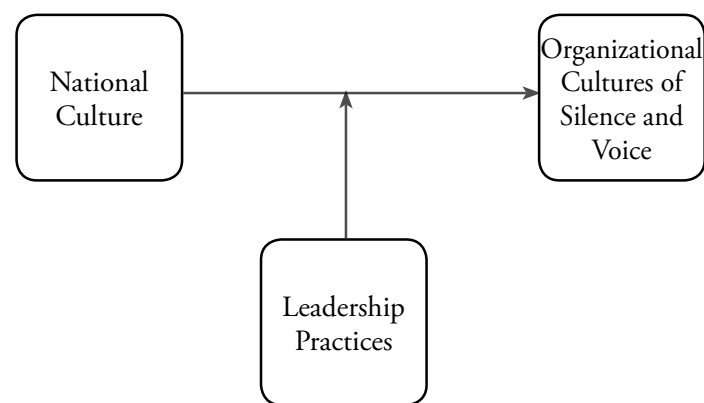


Figure 1. Relationship between National Culture and Organizational Cultures of Voice and Silence and the Moderating Effect of Leadership Practices

The article has three objectives:

1. Introduce the dynamics of organizational cultures of silence and voice.
2. Explore the relationship between the two national culture dimensions (power distance and individualism/collectivism) and two organizational culture phenomena (cultures of silence and cultures of voice).
3. Explore the moderating effect of leadership practices on the relationship between the two national culture dimensions and cultures of silence and voice in organizations.

Cultures of Voice and Silence

Organizational voice and silence are organizational cultural phenomena that impact the flow of valuable information up, down and across company silos for the purposes of problem identification, problem solving, decision making, and idea generation. Multinational corporations can enhance these processes when an organizational culture of voice exists, and cultures of silence are reduced or eliminated.

A culture of silence is characterized as the willful withholding of important work-related information. It is viewed as a choice of the organizational members' decision to remain silent (rather than to speak up) in the context of an organizational prob-

lem that affects the individual employee and the organization where they work. Cultures of silence lead to significant operational, fiduciary, and reputational risks and stifle organizational learning by restricting the amount and flow of information that could affect critical decisions.

For example, in 2015 it was discovered that Volkswagen Corporation altered emission test results in order to sell more diesel cars in the United States than its competitors. When the scandal was revealed, investigators learned that the altered test results were known to staff members who kept quiet for fear of reprisal. In another case, a Wells Fargo sales strategy forced employees to establish phantom bank accounts in order to meet sales targets. When US employees tried to question managers about the unethical practice, they were told to “get with the program” and meet their targets. Employees remained silent thereafter to stay safe in that environment. Another instance is the scandal that rocked the BBC when sexual assault victims revealed their stories after years of silence. One employee who had first reported a sexual harassment incident to BBC management was told to “keep her mouth shut because the [perpetrator] guy is a VIP” (NewsEurope, 2017). These organizations, collectively, paid \$1.4 billion dollars in fines, which illustrates the reputational risks and financial consequences associated with cultures of silence in organizations.

Conversely, a culture of voice is characterized as the willful disclosure of important work-related information. Cultures of voice exist when organizational members feel psychologically safe (Kahn, 1990) to voice their views, opinions, and ideas without fear of reprisal. For example, at Microsoft, service managers routinely exchange ideas and divergent opinions in an effort to reach the best possible product and service solutions. Ideas are rapidly exchanged between members at different organizational levels without hesitation. At Google, employees are encouraged to share knowledge and information in an effort to learn as much as possible from each other. An interview with one Google executive revealed that the organization is familiar with approximately 85% of Google searches seen every day. However, Google employees obsess about the remaining 15% of searches, which is where they spend their time. Google is an organization that is constantly learning and growing, which cannot happen without knowledge sharing.

The Causes of Organizational Silence and Voice

Morrison and Milliken's (2000) theory of organizational silence proposes three levels of management variables that contribute to a culture of silence: implicit managerial beliefs, managers' fear of negative feedback, and managerial practices. First, implicit managerial beliefs are defined as the underlying beliefs that managers hold about their world and, more specifically, employees. For example, managers may believe that if you give people an inch, they will take a mile. Another underlying belief is that managers know what is best for the organization. The belief that organizational conformity and cohesion is a sign of

strength and that conflict and disagreement should be avoided and “managed,” or eliminated, are common beliefs among managers. Second, managers' fear of negative feedback can cause them to reject feedback whether it is about them personally or about an initiative or idea that they endorse or advocate. Third, research shows that managerial practices influence organizational members' decisions to speak up or remain silent (Detert & Trevino, 2010).

Cultures of voice exist when employees are encouraged to share important work-related information. When employees experience knowledge sharing as a valued contribution, they are likely to speak up. Two cultural characteristics encourage voice behaviors: a positive organizational environment for divergent thinking and positive inquiry. When employees offer divergent ideas without negative repercussions, they are inclined to continue the behavior. When employees see that their ideas are met with curiosity more than judgment, they are inclined to continue speaking up.

Types of Organizational Cultures of Silence and Voice

According to Bogosian and Casper (2014), there are four types of cultures of silence: defensive silence, offensive silence, social silence, and futility. Defensive silence is rooted in fear and is used as a way to stay safe in a (perceived) unsafe work environment. Offensive silence occurs when employees provide ideas or solutions and do not receive credit. When this occurs, employees experience a general sense of organizational injustice. They can achieve interactional (interpersonal treatment) justice by withholding future ideas. Employees can also remain silent about important work related issues that could cause harm to a friend at work. This is known as social silence, and it is rooted in affiliation motives. Lastly, when employees' ideas, suggestions, and improvement efforts fall of deaf ears, they can conclude that it is futile to expend any further effort. This phenomenon leads to a sense of futility rooted in cynicism. Employees in this case simply give up. This silence type is known as futility.

The two types of cultures of voice are acquiescent voice and assertive voice. Acquiescent voice occurs when employees speak up in an effort to show collaboration and group agreement. Divergent thinking is suppressed in an effort to get along with other group members. Assertive voice occurs when employees are willing and encouraged to speak up even when their thoughts, views and opinions are in conflict with those of others in the group.

Organizational cultures of silence and voice as well as national cultures are socially constructed. Hofstede's research shows that national cultural values can influence organizational cultural practices. This article focuses the how two national cultural dimensions—power distance and individualism/collectivism— influence organizational culture.

Table 1: Large and Small Power Distance Characteristics in Organizations

Small Power Distance	Large Power Distance
Employees expect to be consulted	Employees expect to be told what to do
Flatter organizations	Many layers between the top and bottom of the organization
Decentralization is popular	Centralization is popular
Status symbols are frowned upon	Status symbols are accepted and popular
Narrow salary range between the top and the bottom or organization hierarchy	Wide salary range between the top and bottom of the organizational hierarchy

Source: Hofstede (2010)

The Relationship between National Cultural Values and Organizational Cultures of Voice and Silence

Hofstede’s (2010) research shows that power distance as well as individualism and collectivism can influence organizational cultures. Organizations operating in large power distance societies are likely to centralize decision making as well as minimize employee engagement and involvement. Employees are told what to do, which discourages voice behaviors, leading to a culture of silence. Organizations operating in small power distance societies are likely to maximize employee engagement and involvement, which encourages voice behaviors leading to a culture of voice. Table 1 shows differences between small and large power distance characteristics in organizations.

Hofstede (2010) defines the cultural dimension related to self and others as individualism and collectivism. According to Hofstede (2010), in individualistic societies, the individual voice is more important than the group voice. In collectivistic societies, the group ideas and viewpoints prevail over individual ideas and viewpoints.

Organizations operating in collectivist societies such as Guatemala, Ecuador, and Panama, for example, favor the group over the individual and are likely to have an acquiescent culture of voice in organizational settings because individual thought is not encouraged unless the group extends permission.

Organizations operating in individualistic societies such as Australia, Great Britain, and the United States, emphasize the individual more than the collective and organizational members are more likely to openly express their views, opinions, and ideas, which can shape an assertive culture of voice.

Table 2 illustrates some common workplace differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies.

The Moderating Effect of Leadership Practices

Although national cultural values influence organizational cultures of voice and silence, leader practices can have a moderating effect on this relationship. For example, a leader can demonstrate a range of behaviors from participative to direc-

Table 2: Collectivistic and Individualistic Workplace Differences

Collectivism	Individualism
Use of the word “I” is avoided.	Use of the word “I” is encouraged.
Only speak up when sanctioned by the group.	Individuals are expected to speak up.
Employees are in-group members and expected to pursue the group’s interest.	Employees are expected to pursue the company’s interests if they coincide with self-interests.
Important decisions tend to be made by group	Important decisions tend to be made by individuals
Direct appraisal of an employee can disrupt harmony.	Managers are trained and expected to provide honest and direct performance feedback.

Source: Hofstede (2010)

Table 3: Leadership Practices Scenarios

Leadership Practices (style)	Large Power Distance	Small Power Distance	Individualism	Collectivism
Participative Leader	May be disruptive to acceptable practices initially. Employees eventually practice voice behaviors leading to a Culture of Voice.	Consistent with acceptable leader practices. Likely to strengthen Culture of Voice.	Consistent with acceptable leader practices. Likely to strengthen Culture of Voice.	Leader may encourage voice at the group level. Risk is associated with lack of divergent thinking could lead to Acquiescent Voice. If the leader practices become the norm, they could lead to a culture of voice.
Directive Leader	Consistent with acceptable leader practices. In this dimension, individual voice is not encouraged which is likely to sustain a Culture of Silence	Disruptive to acceptable leader practices and likely to result in a Culture of Silence.	Disruptive to acceptable leader practices and likely to result in a Culture of Silence.	Consistent with acceptable leader practices. Leader may strengthen Acquiescent Voice.

tive. When leaders demonstrate behaviors that are antithetical to the national cultural values where they work, however, it could result in either a culture of voice or a culture of silence. Table 3 provides an overview of different leadership practices in different national cultural settings and their effects.

Participative and Directive Leadership Styles in Large and Small Power Distance Societies

In large power distance countries such as Malaysia, Guatemala, and Panama, subordinates are more dependent on their managers for decision making. Status symbols differentiating between top management teams (TMT) and employee cultures are pronounced and encouraged. A participative leader operating in a large power distance society may surprise employees at first, but they could eventually feel safe speaking up, assuming they are able and willing to contribute openly, which could lead to a culture of voice. Directive leaders use command, and control decision making practices and centralize decision making. Directive leader practices demonstrated in a large power distance society are more acceptable than participative leader practices. Employees in large power distance societies tend to conclude that those at the top are not interested in their views or opinions, which results in (or sustains) a culture of silence.

Companies operating in small power distance societies such as Austria, Israel, and Denmark tend to encourage and value participative leadership practices where employees are often consulted on organizational issues. The participative leader draws out and encourages divergent views and opinions, which encourages (and strengthens) voice behaviors. As a result, employees are likely to perceive that their voice has merit and speak up more frequently resulting in a culture of voice. However, a directive leader operating in a small power distance society will most likely tell employees what to do and how to do it (i.e. the opposite of a participative style), it could be perceived as threatening and therefore lead to a defensive culture of silence.

Participative and Directive Leadership Styles in Individualistic and Collectivistic Societies

Participative leaders operating in an individualistic society tend to encourage idea generation and give proper credit to employees, which is consistent with acceptable leadership practices and thus results in (and strengthens) organizational cultures of voice. Directive leaders operating in individualistic societies, however, could cause a negative perception among employees who expect to have a voice. Individualistic societies encourage individual ideas, and voice behaviors. If the directive leader

does not yield to acceptable individualistic societal norms, then employees could perceive directive leadership practices as egregious, causing them to withdraw, and thus leading to a culture of silence.

Participative leadership practices in a collectivistic society will encourage individual voice behaviors despite the fact that individual voice is not the norm. These practices could be viewed as counter-cultural at first and cause withdrawal. However, if such participative leader practices become the norm they could eventually encourage more individual-level participation among employees, leading to a culture of voice. Directive leaders operating in a collectivistic society are likely to be perceived by employees as acceptable. Collectivistic societies value the group rather than the individual. Therefore, the directive leader is more of a fit in a collectivistic society than the participative leader and so may establish and strengthen a culture of (acquiescent) voice.

Implications for IB Research and Practice

More empirical research is needed to test the relationship between national cultural dimensions, cultures of voice and silence, and the moderating influence of leadership practices when consistent and inconsistent with national cultural norms where the organization operates. Possible research strategies could be field studies, employee observations, and ethnographies in organizational settings that compare and contrast specific national cultural values and the relationship to cultures of voice and silence. This would allow researchers to gain a deeper and richer account of the relationship between national cultural values on organizational cultures of voice and silence, and to examine the moderating influence of participative and directive leadership practices on this relationship. For example, based on a phenomenological study, researchers could examine the lived experiences of employees working in an organization operating in a specific society where particular cultural values (e.g., large or small power distance) is expected to influence the relationship between cultural values and cultures of voice and silence. Researchers could then determine how employees actually experience participative and directive leaders at work and how leader practices actually influence their silence and voice behaviors across different national cultures.

Leaders of MNCs operating in multicultural environments must have extensive knowledge about the national cultural value orientations of local employees in all countries in which they operate subsidiaries. They must also understand how their leadership practices influence cultures of voice and silence and develop the ability to encourage voice. They must be able to recognize the signs of silence and voice in daily interactions and understand specifically which leader practices encourage

voice and which ones elicit silence. Recognizing the signs of silence is only a first step. Leaders must then be able to flexibly shift their behavior to encourage voice when they realize that they have elicited silence. Human resource practitioners must establish a common language and mindset around cultures of voice and silence at all organizational levels starting with the C-Suite. Senior leaders should hold all organizational leaders and employees accountable for demonstrating practices that encourage voice behaviors resulting in a culture of voice, and for reducing or eliminating practices that elicit silence that can result in a culture of silence. When organizations establish a common language around voice and silence behaviors, and leaders consistently demonstrate practices that encourage voice, only then can a culture of voice become an organizational norm.

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