

# Is Silence Killing Your Company?

by Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams



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Faced with organizational or interpersonal problems at work, people often decide not to speak up. “It’s not worth it,” they say, and soldier on. But disturbing new research shows that the price of silence is much greater than we realize.

# Is Silence Killing Your Company?

by Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams

SILENCE IS ASSOCIATED with many virtues: modesty, respect for others, prudence, decorum. Thanks to deeply ingrained rules of etiquette, people silence themselves to avoid embarrassment, confrontation, and other perceived dangers. There’s an old saying that sums up the virtues of silence: “Better to be quiet and thought a fool than to talk and be known as one.”

The social virtues of silence are reinforced by our survival instincts. Many organizations send the message – verbally or nonverbally – that falling into line is the safest way to hold on to our jobs and further our careers. The need for quiet submission is exaggerated by today’s difficult economy, where millions of people have lost their jobs and many more worry that they might. A Dilbert cartoon poignantly expresses how pointless – and perilous – many people feel it is to speak out. Dilbert, the everyman underling, recognizes that a senior executive is making a poor decision. “Shouldn’t we tell her?” he asks his boss, who laughs cynically. “Yes,” the boss replies. “Let’s end our careers by challenging a decision that won’t change. That’s a great idea.”

To be sure, people who speak out sometimes get their day in the sun: Sherron Watkins of Enron, Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, and Coleen Rowley at the FBI all ended up on the cover of *Time* as “Persons of the Year.” But public recognition of a few people does not mean that speaking out is necessarily viewed as courageous or praiseworthy. Most individuals who go against their organizations or express their concerns publicly are severely punished. If they’re not fired outright, they’re usually marginalized and made to feel irrelevant.

But it is time to take the guilt off silence. Our research shows that silence is not only ubiquitous and expected in organizations but extremely costly to both the firm and the individual. Our interviews with senior executives and employees in organizations ranging from small businesses to *Fortune* 500 corporations to government bureaucracies reveal that silence can exact a high psychological price on individuals, generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment, and the like that, if unexpressed, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity, and undermine productivity.

Take the case of Jeff, a team leader at a *Fortune* 100 company who was working on a large, long-term, high-pressure project. Each Tuesday, Jeff and his peers had a project management meeting (PMM) with Matt, their boss. Jeff would start writing his weekly update reports on Wednesday, continuing to work on them when he had time on Thursday and Friday, working even into the weekend. On Monday morning, he would hand in his document to Matt. Jeff figured that a weekly update was probably useful for Matt; all the same, he felt deeply frustrated at the time he was wasting writing the elaborate reports. Yet despite complaining endlessly to his peers, week after week Jeff said nothing to Matt. With each act of silence, Jeff's resentment grew and his respect for Matt disintegrated, even as Jeff became more and more uncomfortable with the idea of questioning Matt. And so the process continued, as the project fell further behind schedule. For his part, when Matt was asked about the value of the PMM, he was mystified: "Not to insult my team leaders, but in my mind, every Tuesday morning I have a Painfully Meaningless Meeting."

The fact that no one suggested an alternative to the PMM was fairly typical of our findings. Individuals are frequently convinced that keeping quiet is the best way to preserve relationships and get work done. In the following pages, we will examine what makes this sort of silence so prevalent in organizations. From there, we will discuss the personal and organizational costs of silence, which often remain hidden for long periods of time even as they grow exponentially with each additional act of silence. Finally, we will investigate several ways to break free from the insidious silent sink.

## The Reign of Silence

Silence often starts when we choose not to confront a difference. Given the dissimilarities in our temperaments, backgrounds, and experiences, it's inevitable that we will have different opinions, beliefs, and tastes. Most of us recognize the value of such variety: Who really wants to go into a brainstorming session with people who all have the same views and ideas? But we're also aware of how terribly painful it can be to raise and work through differences. The French word *différend*, tellingly, means "quarrel." Not surprisingly, most people decide it's easier to cover up their differences than to try to discuss them.

Our research shows that this tendency to remain silent rather than express a difference exists both in individual relationships and in groups, where we fear a loss of status or even expulsion if we differ from the rest. Most of us can remember from our adolescence how compelling the desire was to conform. Even as adults, many people in organizations are willing to go to enormous lengths to get along with members of their work groups – at least superficially. We do what we believe other group mem-

bers want us to do. We say what we think other people want us to say.

Consider what happened at one off-site meeting of top management at a Web-based education company. Concerned about the company's vision, the managers met to share and discuss different perspectives. But one speaker after another just echoed what the previous speaker had said. When any manager did dare to dissent, a colleague would quickly dismiss his idea. Having effectively tabled every discussion in which disagreement surfaced, the management team crowed about the level of "consensus" they had achieved. One by one, team members celebrated their achievement. The head of marketing went first. "We made some great progress today," he said, "I'm excited – passionate – committed to the future." The CFO continued, "I thought today was going to be a lot uglier. I expected battles. Yet things were remarkably consistent." Yet despite the outward expression of consensus, at the end of the day, many of the attendees privately despaired that the off-site had been a waste of time. By silencing themselves and one another, they failed to create a compelling vision, and the company continued with no clear direction.

This meeting shows how the pressure for unanimity can prevent employees of roughly equal grade and status – even top managers – from exploring their differences. More familiar to many is the pressure to keep silent that's created by differences in rank. How easy it is for a boss to send a powerful signal that a worker should be quiet. Take the case of Robert and Linda. Robert was an attorney in charge of his law firm's support staff. Linda, who was head of the library, came to Robert one day to complain about the performance evaluation process. She felt that many of the lawyers weren't being fair in their evaluations of the library staff and that they shouldn't have the automatic right to determine the librarians' raises and promotions. Robert disagreed. "If you think of the lawyers as your clients," he advised, "you can see why they have every expectation to be able to critique the quality of service." When Linda pressed again, Robert got irritated and said, "This is the way we do it around here, and this is the way it's going to continue!" Linda said nothing more and quietly left his office.

At least Linda tried to speak up. Many members of organizations silence themselves before the boss has the slightest inkling of what they're thinking. Often in these instances, employees use silence as a strategy to get ahead.

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# When to Zip It

Although most people tend to speak up too little rather than too much, there are times when it's better to stay quiet. Some issues are simply not worth raising, and you don't want to unnecessarily turn small differences of opinion into broad conflicts. There's no sense in spending time and effort getting bogged down dealing with every little difference, especially ones that are not likely to affect the quality of people's work or those you're not likely to remember in a week or a month. And if the conflict is in an unimportant relationship or one that won't continue much longer, speaking up may not be crucial. You will still lose out on the creativity and learning that stem from expressing differences, but you don't need to worry about the additional costs of unresolved differences lurking beneath the surface and destroying the relationship.

Even when a difference should be addressed, there is the question of timing. It may be fruitless, for example, to raise a

tough issue with your boss when you face an impending deadline – unless speaking up is important for the task at hand and there really is enough time to work through the issue. Waiting until the deadline has passed and people can focus on what you have to say may be the best option. Moreover, initially keeping a lid on differences when your own or the other person's emotions are highly charged can be beneficial in the longer run. If you've just had a row with a colleague and either of you is very upset, arrange a time to talk in the future when both of you have had a chance to cool down and can discuss differences without venting or blaming. But if you defer a difficult conversation, make sure you do not postpone it indefinitely. Otherwise, the unresolved differences will come back to haunt you.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about what needs to be discussed or when it's best to do so. You must rely on your best judgment. What's important is that you shift your mind-set from asking whether this is one of those rare times when you should speak to asking instead whether this is one of those rare times when you should remain quiet.

Consider Don, a senior analyst at an investment bank who carefully keeps his opinions to himself when he's around his superiors. "It comes down to the hierarchical nature of the bank," he says. "Basically you're just trying to make the person above you love you so you'll get a big bonus. If you start raising uncomfortable questions and being holier-than-thou, you may be absolutely right, but you shoot yourself in the foot. What the managing director says goes."

And it's not just that subordinates feel pressure to keep silent with their bosses. Bosses also may feel uncomfortable expressing their differences with subordinates. It is frequently difficult for managers, for instance, to give negative performance feedback to subordinates – especially in organizations that place a high value on being polite and avoiding confrontation.

## The Costs of Suffering in Silence

When we silence ourselves and others – even when we're convinced that it is the best way, the right way, or the only way to preserve the relationships we care about and get on with our work – we may be fooling ourselves. Let's return for a moment to the law firm where Robert and Linda worked. After meeting with Linda, Robert simply forgot about their discussion. As a senior partner, he thought his view was a no-brainer, and he assumed that the issue would just go away. Linda, for her part, was acutely aware that she had been forced into silence, but, given that Robert was the boss, she thought the best course was to say nothing further to him.

Still, she was profoundly angry. In an attempt to release her negative feelings, she complained bitterly to her

peers about what Robert had said and how he had shut her down. But gossiping only alleviated Linda's anger temporarily, and news of Robert's insensitivity quickly spread throughout the support staff, which came to view the incident as evidence that "management doesn't listen." Ultimately, Robert's strained relations with the support staff led to high turnover. As he later reflected, "My action that day was probably the single greatest mistake I ever made."

The damage wasn't just to Robert and the organization. Linda, in choosing to respond to Robert with silence, caused herself great damage as well, far more in fact than she may have realized. That's because silencing doesn't resolve anything; rather than erase differences, it merely pushes them beneath the surface. Every time we keep silent about our differences, we swell with negative emotions like anxiety, anger, and resentment. Of course, we

can go on for a long time pretending to ourselves and others that nothing is wrong. But as long as the conflict is not resolved, our repressed feelings remain potent and color the way we relate to other people. We begin to feel a sense of disconnection in our relationships, which in turn causes us to become increasingly self-protective.

When we feel defensive in this way, we become all the more fearful that if we speak up we will be embarrassed or rejected. Our sense of insecurity grows. In relationships we care about preserving, more acts of silence follow, which only bring more defensiveness and more distrust. A destructive "spiral of silence" is set in motion.

Caught up in just such a spiral was Maria, a project manager we interviewed at a management consulting firm. At the beginning of her first project, her boss, Max, suggested to Maria ways her team should make its initial presentation to the client. Maria wasn't convinced that

## Speed Trap

There's no doubt that pressure to go fast can have its benefits. It can, for example, push us to find more efficient, less bureaucratic ways of working. But it also makes us even more likely to keep silent. How many times has a looming deadline caused you to bite your tongue and think to yourself, "We don't have time to worry about this now; we just need to get it done?"

When we perpetually silence ourselves in the short-sighted belief that we are getting our tasks done as expeditiously as possible, we may interfere with creativity, learning, and decision making. If our work depends on divergent thinking, these less-effective processes may in turn result in problems that take time and attention to resolve. Then, in addition to all the work we are rushing to complete, we will also have to address these new problems. That can lead to a vicious cycle that makes us feel the need to go even faster. A little fable about a farmer with a wagon full of apples helps illustrate the point. The farmer stopped a man on the side of the road and asked how far it was to mar-

ket. The man responded, "It is an hour away, if you go slow." He continued, "If you go fast, it will take you all day." There was a bump in the road, and if the farmer went too fast he would hit it, all his apples would fall out, and he'd have to spend the day picking up the fruit. The farmer would then be in all the greater hurry to get to market.

The pressure to go fast ends up feeding on itself, perpetuating an internally generated and self-destructive, ever-increasing need for speed. Overstretched workers become more overstretched; managers already focused on crises become all the more so. In our daily lives, many of us face pressure to go fast, and we end up silencing our differences in response. We need to be careful, though, or we may end up in a self-made "speed trap."

In the end, whether our primary concern is to preserve our relationships or to get our tasks done as expeditiously as possible, we must speak up rather than withhold our differences. Otherwise, we risk undermining both our relationships and our ability to complete our work.<sup>1</sup>

1. For a more detailed discussion of how speed relates to silencing, see Leslie A. Perlow, Gerardo A. Okhuysen, and Nelson P. Repenning, "The Speed Trap: Exploring the Relationship Between Decision Making and the Temporal Context," *Academy of Management Journal* (October 2002).

Max's approach was the best. But Max was the partner, so Maria kept her concerns to herself. Later, when Max discovered that the team had failed to collect some of the data he wanted, he lost his temper and ordered Maria to push the team harder. Maria thought that the data were irrelevant and that searching for them would just waste the team's time. But, inwardly clenching her fists and gritting her teeth, she deferred to her superior.

A few days later, Maria and her team received a lukewarm response when they presented their findings to the client. Maria later met with Max to discuss the next steps. Convinced that she understood the client's needs better than he did, she was intent on laying out her own point of view and explaining to him the error in his approach. But Maria had become very uncomfortable around Max, so when he launched into a critique of her team's performance, she lost her nerve. Again she stifled her resistance and opted to do as Max said. Maria's discomfort grew each time she chose to remain silent, and she descended down the spiral of silence. Ultimately, her desire and ability to work with Max were destroyed.

There's a cruel and all too common irony here, for the reason Maria had silenced herself in the first place was to preserve her relationship with Max. We don't speak up for fear of destroying our relationships, but in the end our silence creates an emotional distance that becomes an unbridgeable rift.

That's what happened to Shoney, a research fellow in pulmonary and critical-care medicine. When we interviewed him, he had already discovered where the spiral leads. Praveen, a research associate one level higher, was supposed to oversee Shoney's work. In exchange, Praveen's name would appear on everything Shoney published. Eager to maximize Shoney's productivity, Praveen constantly issued him instructions. Shoney resented being bossed around but always did as he was told, never pushing back. Over time, however, Shoney's resentment grew as Praveen continued to treat him more like an unknowing assistant than a highly qualified peer. One day, when Praveen started to question Shoney about how he had spent his time in the lab the previous evening, something inside Shoney snapped. He still said nothing. But from that day forth, Shoney refused to collaborate with Praveen. On their next assignment, they divided the tasks and carried them out independently.

That just made things worse. By shutting himself off, Shoney lost the opportunity to brainstorm with an informed colleague. He also precluded the possibility of sharing anything he may have learned that could have helped Praveen. And he foreclosed on any potential for eliminating redundancy in the two researchers' work. Silencing was not only costly to Shoney, but it was a cost doubly borne, for the organization paid it as well. Each time workers remain silent in the face of conflict, they keep new ideas to themselves and leave alternative courses of

action unexplored. And they withhold important information from colleagues that could enhance the quality of both their own and the organization's work.

## Breaking the Spiral of Silence

How do we get ourselves and others to speak up? Can the vicious spirals of silence be replaced with virtuous spirals of communication? The answer is yes, but doing so requires that we find the courage to act differently and that we create the context in which people will value the expression of such difference. Managers with a lot of authority need to be especially careful not to punish people, explicitly or implicitly, for speaking out, particularly on issues that may be difficult for the organization to deal with. Harry's case illustrates how a leader can create such a context.

Harry was a battalion commander, whose unit of more than 500 soldiers had just been miserably defeated in a mock battle against another unit. "If this had been a real battle, two-thirds of us would be dead," Harry said to the unit in the debriefing that followed. But he continued, "I was at fault. I failed you." And he went on to explain exactly how, taking full responsibility for the failure.

At first, no one said a word. Then Nick, a very junior scout who was responsible for detecting and alerting the battalion to the enemy's movements, said, "No sir, it wasn't your fault. I fell asleep on duty."

Harry was shocked. But rather than focus on Nick's failure, great as it was, Harry immediately redirected the unit's attention to uncovering the underlying problem—the exhaustion his men were suffering. How many had also slept through the opening rounds of the attack, he asked his soldiers to think to themselves. "Nick is a good soldier," he said. "All of you are good soldiers. We need to focus on the bigger issue: How can we sustain our capabilities during continuous operations in such high-intensity situations?"

Harry set the tone for this discussion. Had he not started by exhibiting his own failures, it's highly unlikely that Nick would have had the courage to speak up. Moreover, Harry carefully framed the ensuing discussion to avoid blame and instead focus on the larger problem they all faced. In the end, this unit gained a rich appreciation for the importance of speaking up and admitting mistakes.

Keeping quiet is too big a problem to be left just to leaders, however. If an organization wants to escape the spiral of silence, everyone has to fight the urge to withdraw and has to work hard to speak up. That's a tough challenge, for all the reasons we've explored, but the following practices can help.

**Recognize your power.** We all have the power to express ourselves and to encourage others to speak freely, whether they're subordinates, peers, or even bosses. Of

course, nobody likes to be the one to break the ice; in the face of personal conflict, passivity always feels safer than action. Who would not prefer to sit back, blame the other person, and wait for him to make the first move? Yet it's almost never the case that something is entirely another person's fault. Instead of waiting for the other person to apologize or to broach the subject, we need to be willing to take the first step ourselves – to bring differences out into the open so that they can be explored.


This can even be a good strategy for dealing with a boss who has overtly silenced a subordinate, like Robert, from the law firm. In that situation, Linda could have chosen to go back to Robert to try to turn the situation around. She could have met with him again and said something like, "I know that you don't think the issue with the performance evaluation process is important. But it is very important to the library staff, and we would like you to understand our point of view. I don't feel comfortable dropping the issue, as you suggested. I would like a chance to better explain my perspective."

When one person finds the courage to take a step like this and presents new information in a way that the other person can absorb, the two are likely to join in a process of mutual exploration of the differences that separate them. Indeed, we all have much more power than we think. Our superiors certainly have formal power over us, but it's also true that their performance depends on how well we are doing. Don't forget: Your boss needs you, too. And knowing that should empower you to speak up and help him appreciate your point of view.

**Act deviantly.** To break the walls of silence, sometimes we have to behave in ways that are not considered appropriate for our particular organization. Put differently, we must act deviantly—for example, by choosing to ask tough questions at a company meeting where employees normally just accept the decisions of top management. Although deviance often carries negative connotations, it is not synonymous with dysfunctionality. Deviance is, at heart, a creative act—a way of searching out and inventing new approaches to doing things. Acts of deviance can point to areas where organizations need to change and can re-

sult in fruitful alternatives. The chief thing to keep in mind here is that norms can have exceptions. By challenging a particular norm, we can play a role in changing it.

**Build a coalition.** Reaching out to others can give us the strength to break the hold of silence. Not only is it easier to speak up when we know we're not alone, but a coalition also carries more legitimacy and resources. Even though it may feel threatening to approach people to join forces with you, it is surprising how often you may find that many people feel the same way you do. That's what happened to Nancy Hopkins, a scientist at MIT.<sup>1</sup> Hopkins repeatedly found herself having to fight harder than her male colleagues for resources like lab space. After dealing with the same issues for years, she drafted a letter to the MIT administration. Before sending it, however, she showed it to a female colleague whom she regarded as politically savvy. To Hopkins's surprise, the other woman wanted to add her signature to the letter; the same type of things had happened to her, too. In the end, 14 of the 15 women Hopkins approached decided to sign as well. As a result, a committee was formed, and a pattern of discrimination was uncovered and addressed.

We've recently seen in the scandals at Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom, to name but a few, just how catastrophic situations can become when silence prevails. Yet silence does not have to be about fraud and malfeasance to do grave damage to a company. All too often, behind failed products, broken processes, and mistaken decisions are people who chose to hold their tongues rather than to speak up. Breaking the silence can bring an outpouring of fresh ideas from all levels of an organization – ideas that might just raise the organization's performance to a whole new level. 

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1. The account here is taken from material in both Nancy H. Hopkins, "Experience of Women at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology," *Women in the Chemical Workforce: A Workshop Report to the Chemical Sciences Roundtable* (CPSMA, 2000) and Lotte Bailyn, "Academic Careers and Gender Equity: Lessons Learned from MIT," *Gender, Work, and Organizations* (March, 2003).

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