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# Antecedents and outcomes of voice and silence behaviours of employees of tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria

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**Abstract**

In collectivist cultures with a high degree of the Power Distance Index (PDI), an expression of voice by employees in the form of opinions and suggestions on work related issues are a task as difficult as doing away with the turban of a *Tuareng* man. Silence is prevalent as employees feel culturally bonded not to take up issues with what is now popularly referred to as "*Oga at the top*" in the Nigerian context. This study investigates through the use of interview, why middle cadre administrative employees in Nigerian tertiary educational institutions feel reluctant to voice opinions and suggestions on work related issues to the person(s) above them in organisation hierarchy. This study uses cultural dimensions to explore the antecedents and outcomes of voice and silence behaviours of middle cadre administrative employees in Nigerian tertiary educational institutions. 26 employees selected across tertiary institutions from the North-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria were interviewed. The finding reveals that the cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior is the chief reason followed by fear of negative label, being marked rebellious or antagonist as well as inability to rise to top positions. Employees believe this will continue for a reasonably long time, because culture more than any other thing influence employee voice on work related issues.

## 1. Introduction

The health of an organisation is determined by how well decisions are taken within that organisation. The wellness of decisions depend much, on how employees contribute in bringing new ideas, suggestions and necessary corrections. The ability of employees to open up and come up with useful suggestions and corrections is dependent on how superior officers permit and encourage the voice in organisations. Silence may seem reasonable if employee fears that voice may land him/her in trouble. When the superior's reaction is likely to be negative, it makes sense not to take up issues to the top for fear of negative reaction [1]. However, organisational decisions suffer where employees withhold vital information and/or opinions capable of enhancing the quality of decisions and performance of the task at hand.

The culture of the society in which an organisation operates exerts a lot of influence on how employees perceive their work, relate with others and discharge their responsibilities. According to value-belief theory [2], the values and beliefs held by members of cultures influence the degree to which the behaviours of individuals, groups, and the

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institutions within cultures are enacted. Research on voice and silence behaviours in organisations is western bias. Most studies were carried out in the west, therefore reflecting western cultures (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Brinsfield, 2009). In large-power distance situations, superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal; the hierarchical system is based on this existential inequality [3]. Organisations centralise power as much as possible in a few hands. Subordinates expect to be told what to do. In this type of situation, voice behaviour on the part of subordinates is highly restricted making it difficult for employees to suggest anything so matter how valuation such thing may be in improving work and enhancing efficiency.

In Nigeria (classified as a collectivist culture with large-power distance index) [3] employees in most organisations tend to accept the cultural value of not stepping into the sphere of the superiors. The common believe is that the "*Oga at the top*" knows better. As such he/she is to be listened to, not to be challenged or unnecessarily be embarrassed by offering unsolicited opinions or suggestions. To act in a way that shows the boss has erred and therefore need to be corrected is a scandalous situation. Hence, silence is the order of the day. These believe emanated from the cultural environment of operation limits the voice behaviours of employees and force them to adopt silence as a norm. Silence is not only a surviving strategy, but also the tactic of execution. As such employees are always reluctant to offer even constructive opinions and suggestions capable of improving task accomplishment. This study aims to explore why middle cadre employees in tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria are reluctant to voice on issues of concerns and find out the issues they tend to avoid and remain silent on.

## 2. Cultural dimensions and voice and silence

National culture and industry are integral parts of the environment in which organisations function, organisational culture by implication should be influenced both by the broader societal culture and by the industry in which they operate [4]. Generalisations from western individualistic cultures are unlikely to provide good bases for drawing conclusions across global cultures. Culturally specific phenomena that occur in only a subset of cultures, and are not comparable across all cultures [5] are not enough to make global generalisations possible. The willingness of employees to voice work-related concerns and suggestions to their bosses, according to Saunders, Shepard, Knight, and Roth [6, pg.248] depended on how approachable and responsive they perceived their supervisors to be. These perceived responses are culturally determined.

It is often suggested that there is a substantial amount of cross-national convergence of management practices, values and beliefs. This occurs as a result of interactions among organisations engaged in cross-border trading and wide-spread proliferation of management societal differences education programs that reflect Western assumptions, values, and practices. However, there is no evidence of a single model of management practices or of cultural values towards which all nations are converging [7].

There is a great deal of stability with respect to the more fundamental aspects of both cultural practices and psychological commonalities within cultural entities. According to Dorfman and House [8, pg. 54] studies in many geographical regions show consistent results when it comes to cultural values. Therefore, cultural diversity of employees is an expected phenomenon. Generalisations based on western values may not apply to all regions and nations. Hayes and Prakasam [9] found that societal differences in power distance predicted the type of consultant-client relationship preferred those societies; organisations in countries characterised by high power distance preferred relationships that were more directive and less collaborative.

Thus, it seems clear that societal characteristics can and do influence the characteristics of the organisations within the society. The cultural immersion theory asserts that most people live their entire lives within a single societal culture – they become immersed in that culture and may in many ways forget that other cultures perceive and experience the world differently. This lead to the development of shared schemas in responding and interpreting stimuli they encounter operate [10].

Relying on studies carried out in Western cultures, may be unhealthy for organisations in other cultures different in beliefs and values with the west. The best option is to internally explore the best practices and come up with the right frame that suit the cultural setting in those cultures for better performance. The decision to remain silent about developing issues or problems is a fairly common one. Individuals in organisations face a choice about whether to speak up or remain silent about concerns that they have at work. Individuals make this choice within the context of an organisational hierarchy in which bosses who do not wish to hear about problems can punish people for speaking up and within the context of a social system that has implicit norms about the desirability of speaking up [1].

In the west there is evidence that employees loyalty to their organisations influence their voice [11]. Some studies have indicated that employees who identify with their organizations are invested strongly in improving their workplaces, making them inclined to speak up about their work-related concerns or opinions when dissatisfied [12]. Tangirala & Ramanujam [11, pg 208-211] listed antecedents to be opportunities for voice, fear of reprisals, and perceived utility of voice.

Upward communication from employees about problems, opportunities, and issues of concern is critical to an organization's performance [13]. Managers need information from lower levels to make effective decisions, respond appropriately to dynamic organizational conditions and correct problems. Employees most often are reluctant to provide these informations [1].

## 3. Methodology

This study adopted Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin [1] interview questions and method of sorting and coding. Twenty six (26) middle cadre administrative employees of tertiary educational institutions in the North-West geopolitical region of Nigeria were selected randomly and interviewed for the study. The rationale for choosing this sample is to reduce repetitive and superfluous data, non-participation of this cadre from participation in this study as it has been shown by Jimoh (1986) [12] that average Nigerian middle cadre worker detests responding to questionnaires. This is because this cadre is a bridge; any non-favourable evaluation report against an officer on this cadre will cause non advancement to a senior position. The proneness of this cadre has a profound impact on workers thereby making it a silent group of organisational issues [12]. Therefore, this group of employees was chosen for the purpose of the interview.

The sample size of 26 for the interview is arrived at after reaching saturation at this level. Also, Lee, Woo and Mackenzie's [13] suggested that studies that use more than one method require fewer interview participants. While Mason [14] concluded after analysing 560 PhD's that use qualitative methods that the average sample size is between 6 – 30 interview participants.

The sample is as follows:

| State | Sample |
|-------|--------|
| Jigawa | 3 |
| Kaduna | 4 |
| Kano | 4 |
| Katsina | 4 |
| Kebbi | 4 |
| Sokoto | 4 |
| Zamfara | 3 |
| **Total** | **26** |

The interviews were conducted personally by one of the researchers in the office premises of the respondents. The respondents were given ample opportunity to express themselves and were given assurance that their identities would not be disclosed. The average time of the interview was thirty two (32) minutes. The interviews were recorded on a voice recording device, transcribed and analysed.

### Analysis

Forty two per cent (42%) of the respondents were on the Registrar's cadre while the remaining fifty eight percent (58%) were on executive cadre. 69% of the respondents were male and the remaining 31% were female. All the participants were graduates holding at least a Bachelor's degree or High National Diploma (HND). Those on the

Registrar's cadre had at least second class honours degree and those with third class honours degrees and HND's were on executive cadre. 35% of the participant had an MBA or MPA. The length of service of respondents in the institutions ranged from 5 to 23 years, with a mean of 8.2 years.

The mean for comfortably speaking and bringing issues to the boss was 4.23 and SD 0.9. To openly raise issue with the boss has mean of 1.62 and SD 0.49. while discussing organizational issues with the boss or colleagues has mean of 0.54 and SD of 0.63. problems with organizational processes has mean of 4.12 and SD 0.81.

## 4. Results

The outcome of our interviews shows that middle cadre administrative employees were not uncomfortable talking with the officers above them in the organisation's hierarchy, more especially their immediate boss. A substantial number of the respondents 24 (92%) agreed that they were comfortable speaking with their immediate boss. However, 85% said they found it difficult to take up issues with other superiors above their immediate boss. The immediate boss being their trainer supposed to be listened to and interacted well with in order to learn effectively. Bringing issues and suggestions were regarded as unnecessary disruption and therefore ineffective in objective attainment. After all "silence is talk too" in Nigerian context [15]. 74% of the respondents felt given opportunity to express a voice on issues of concern in their organisation, they would opt for silence because doing so may amount to underrating their boss. The conception being the boss knows best.

Employees felt uncomfortable speaking on certain issues not because they could not freely discuss such issues with the boss, but because such discussions were considered bad, evil or immoral in the culture of Nigerian society. The major reason of labelling such kind of discussion as evil is because of the potential they have in breading enmity, hatred and suspicion among people. Issues like performance or competency of bosses or colleague were hardly raised. Only 4 (15%) of respondents said they could raise this issue. 92% believed that employment, deployment, placement and assessment supposed to be top people's work, delving into such matter amount to stepping into the sphere of the Oga at the top". Voicing opinion or suggestion for this type of issue amount of arrogance and claim over what is unknown or beyond your capacity to assess.

Concerning problems with the organisational processes or performance or to offer suggestions for organisational improvement, employees seldom discussed these with the boss. 92% of the respondents felt they could not raise such issues. Bringing such issues may attract negativities as evil, antagonist and arrogant. The same thing applied to pay and equity issues. 84% of the respondents felt they could not raise this issue to the boss, but given the opportunity they may raise it at union meetings. All the 26 respondents (100%) agreed that they could not discuss concerns about disagreement with institutional policies before their boss, discussing such issues tantamount to tendering resignation. All the 26 respondents (100%) agreed also that they could discuss concerns about personal carrier issues with their immediate boss only but not with any other superior.

Only 2 (8%) of the respondents felt they could raise concern about ethical or fairness issues with the boss. Concerning harassment or abuse (15%) and all of them female felt they could take up this issue even if it means to the top echelon of the hierarchy. With regard to conflict with co-workers, 2 (8%) of the respondents felt they could take it up. One of the respondents in rejecting taking concern to the boss concerning conflict with coworkers answered the interview question with a proverb "only coward cries to the chief". The believe in Nigerian culture is that one should be bold enough to stand firm in the midst of his/her peers. Weakness in the midst of peers in considered cowardice. While constant a complaint about peers or co-workers is viewed as hypocrisy, sycophancy and evil. As such, most people shun the act of complaining about their colleagues to the boss.

Silence is not seen as an impediment but it is considered as a way of expressing respect for the people on top, beside voice is figure and silence is ground [16].

## 5. Discussion

From our research the antecedents of voice are the opportunities provided by the boss moderated by the cultural context in which the relationship take place. Openness on the part of the boss provide the basic climate for suggestions and expressions of work related opinions by the employees which also enhance understanding and discharge of organizational responsibilities.

As is the case with Morrison, Milliken and Hewlin's [1], this study also found that silence about issues or concerns at work may be a fairly common (cultural) choice for employees in organisations. The majority of our respondent agreed that the cultural setting they find themselves demand of them not to unnecessarily burden the boss with issues that he/she supposed to know. Employees' voice opinions and suggestions on issues that they felt are positive and promote positive and healthy co-existence of all in the organisation. On the other hand, silence is observed in situations likely to generate ill-feelings, bad-effect and sour relationships.

Employees freely interact and complement their bosses in discharging organisational responsibilities. However, certain issues and concerns are never discussed because not only that the bosses they welcome them, but such issues attract bad name and reputation for the employee. Discussing other people's incompetency or performance attract such things as "bad belle, CIA, sycophant etc." and the repercussions that normally followed such things in term of sanctions. The mere mention of the boss incompetency is equal to sending oneself to the early grave. You are sure not to scale performance appraisal and you will remain redundant. All these are consistent with other findings of employees desire to avoid negative outcomes [15].

As organisational silence is focused on collective-level dynamics, such as an organisation-wide silence norms [16] and differences between societies are related to preferred championing behaviour in organisations [17], it is apparent that what obtained in the West has no or little value in predicting behaviours in other cultures. The culture of every society has a firm and serious influence on what goes on in that organization. Voice and silence behaviour of employees are no exemption.

## 6. Conclusion

In Nigeria, the antecedents and of voice and silence behaviours are the organizational climate provided by both the organizational structures and the boss. The openness of the boss with regard to issues of concern to the employees as well as the organization and the intensity of the relationship between an employee and the rest of the workers he/she interact with. The environment moderates what the employee likely voice and what he also likely kept silent about.

The outcomes of voice and silence include loyalty when the employee feels that the organization identify with hi/her and provided ground for realizations of personal objectives. Certain negative outcomes also exist side by side with loyalty. Fear of being labelled "bad belle, CIA, sycophant etc.", sanctions by co-workers as a result of providing information to the boss are there, possibly for not scaling performance appraisal and difficulty in earning promotions as a result of being too arrogant in showing the boss you know better than him by voicing.

The major difference on the antecedents and outcome of voice and silence in the west and Nigeria is that unlike in the west where everybody in the workplace is considered equal, the employees themselves agree that there is inequality between them and their superiors. Any attempt to draw the attention of the boss is considered as challenging the status quo. The gap in the power distance is so large that it is almost always impossible to bring issues to the boss unsolicited.

To achieve organisational objectives, conducive atmosphere must be provided for all to do their best in the most effective and efficient ways possible. The society that provides an environment of operation must be respected for survival and prosperity. Cultural values in the general society influence much of the value in organisation notwithstanding the use of universal theories and practices. Human resource practitioners therefore need to pay much attention to employee values, create condusive atmosphere for employees to feel relaxed and encourage them to make suggestions by involving them in decision making on issues that affect them. Support services should also be provided to enable employees feels that the success of the organization is a collective success. These would help in providing employee's voice and respect in their silence.

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