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Hearing voice and silence during stressful economic times

Hearing voice
and silence

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Abstract

Purpose – It is ironic that in stressful economic times, when new ideas and positive behaviors could be most valuable, employees may not speak up, leading to reduced employee participation, less organizational learning, less innovation and less receptiveness to change. The supervisor is the organization's first line of defense against a culture of silence and towards a culture of openness. The purpose of this paper is to ask what helps supervisors to hear prosocial voice and notice defensive silence.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a cross-sectional field study of 142 supervisors.

Findings – The results indicate that prosocial voice is increased by supervisor tension and trust in employees, while defensive silence is increased by supervisor tension but reduced by unionization of employees and trust in employees. This indicates that, as hypothesized by others, voice and silence are orthogonal and not opposites of the same construct.

Research limitations/implications – The data are measured at one point in time, and further longitudinal study would be helpful to further understand the phenomena.

Practical implications – This research highlights the potential for supervisors in stressful situations to selectively hear voice and silence from employees.

Social implications – This research also has implications for supervisors who work in a unionized environment. Although seemingly counter-intuitive, there is a value to employee unionization in terms of either reducing the level of actual defensive silence, or at least reducing supervisors' perceptions of defensive silence.

Originality/value – The paper adds to our knowledge of prosocial voice and defensive silence by testing supervisors' perceptions of these constructs during difficult times. It provides valuable empirical insights to a literature dominated by conceptual non-empirical papers. Limited research on silence might reflect how difficult it is to study such an ambiguous and passive construct as silence (often simply viewed as a lack of speech). The paper contributes also to trust literature by identifying its role in increasing supervisor's perceptions of prosocial voice and reducing perceptions of defensive silence.

Keywords Employees participation, Employees relations, Employees behaviour, Trust, Voice, Silence, Positive coping, Management attitudes, Recession

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Employees use silence and voice to signal their willingness or unwillingness to become involved in organizational decisions and actions (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Voice and silence are also related to organizational citizenship behaviors (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998; Whiting *et al.*, 2008). In general voice is proposed to have positive effects, while silence, although ambiguous, is often noted for its negative effects. Otherwise called the deaf effect (Cuellar *et al.*, 2006) or the mum effect (Smith *et al.*, 2001) defensive silence is self-protection at its most detrimental, and akin to "fiddling while Rome burns." Therefore it is ironic that in hard economic times, when new ideas and positive



behaviors could be most valuable, employees may not speak up, leading to reduced employee participation, less organizational learning, less innovation and less receptiveness to change.

Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) propose that defensive silence is motivated by fear and self-protection. In contrast they propose that prosocial voice is motivated by cooperation and is “other-orientated.” Both behaviors are proactive, as opposed to passive. Therefore, although defensive silence and prosocial voice are considered to be orthogonal constructs (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003) they are likely to have different antecedents and they could have opposite effects.

The supervisor is the organization’s first line of defense against a culture of silence and toward a culture of openness. Vakola and Bouradas (2005) found that supervisors’ attitudes to silence were the strongest predictor of silence behavior followed by top management attitudes and communication opportunities. They also found a negative relationship between silence behavior and organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Therefore it is important for the supervisor to recognize when employees are contributing voice or silence to the organization’s dialogue. But in times of increased pressures, could difficult contexts, strained relationships and high-tension influence the supervisor’s ability to detect employee voice and silence? Supervisors may become so tense that they become deaf to employees – to the point where employees hesitate to express their own opinions and dissatisfaction (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Peirce *et al.*, 1998). This research asks what helps supervisors to hear prosocial voice and defensive silence?

Hirschman (1970, p. 30) defined voice as “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs.” Voice is also widely considered to include “speaking up” behavior when employees make constructive suggestions for change (e.g. Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). This type of prosocial voice involves being a “good soldier” and taking personal risk for the good of the organization (Organ, 1988; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

In contrast, defensive silence is defined as “intentional and proactive behavior that is intended to protect the self from external threats” (Schlenker and Weigold, 1989; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003, p. 1367). Some researchers focus on the motivation of the employee for remaining silent (e.g. Glauser, 1984; Bies, 2009; Parker and Collins, 2010). In contrast our study builds upon other previous research (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Vakola and Bouradas, 2005) to better understand the role of the supervisor in encouraging or discouraging employee voice.

Milliken *et al.* (2003) have noted the need to study the organizational context in which voice and silence develops. They describe the spread of silence and the importance of relationships. The justice literature has linked voice to the presence of due process procedures that enhance justice judgments and facilitate employee participation in decision making (e.g. Bies and Shapiro, 1988). Consequently, our study examines multiple levels of influence from contextual factors, such as the employee’s union participation while controlling for organizational morale, to the supervisor’s level of tension and use of positive coping behaviors, and concluding with the supervisor’s trust of employees.

We respond to Edwards and Greenberg (2009), who in their conclusion to their recent edited book on voice and silence in organizations, note the need for research with practical relevance to decision makers, conducted in a field setting, that will augment and clarify the existing experimental and conceptual research on voice and silence.

To investigate the effects of contextual and interpersonal factors on supervisor's perceptions of employee voice and silence we surveyed 142 supervisors in the highly unionized Canadian public sector during the recent global economic crisis. The public sector has traditionally been more sheltered relative to the private sector, however, the pressure to downsize and decrease compensation in the public sector during the global economic crisis has created more stress. It is important to note that the expanded general impact of the global crisis situated this study in a stressful context that may not extend to less stressful environments.

Voice and silence in the workplace

Employees can express their opinions in the workplace using both formal and informal voice mechanisms, for reasons ranging from championing to whistle blowing (Morrison and Milliken, 2003).

In contrast, silence is a more nebulous construct to label and its very ambiguity creates challenges in attribution (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). In general silence is the withholding of genuine expressions about one's organizational circumstances to persons capable of effecting change (Pinder and Harlos, 2001 in Morrison and Milliken, 2003, p. 1354).

There are consequences to silence that are detrimental to both individual and organization. Voice is essential to organizational learning (Argyris, 1977), and to identifying and remedying unethical and illegal practices (Near and Miceli, 1985). Silence negatively impacts these important processes, as well as puts a strain on individual employees because they may feel impotent, and less satisfied with their work environment (Milliken and Morrison, 2003).

Milliken *et al.* (2003) conducted 40 interviews with employees and found that most employees had been in situations where although they were concerned about something, they were afraid to speak up, and that there was actually a wide range of issues about which they did not like to discuss. The most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent was the fear of being viewed or labeled negatively – essentially employees were afraid they might damage a valued relationship or their professional reputation. They were also concerned that their future in their organizations might be affected. The authors noted the unwillingness of employees to blow the whistle on problems at Enron as a real life example. Although 22.5 percent of their sample felt uncomfortable voicing disagreement with company policies or decisions, the most frequently mentioned issue (37.5 percent) was raising concerns about a supervisor's competence or performance. The main reasons for silence were fear of being labeled as a troublemaker, complainer or tattletale (30 percent), and lack of experience and tenure (32.5 percent) – these seem to be related to image and protection and to “relational currency” (Milliken *et al.*, 2003, p. 1470).

Voice and silence

Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) presented a multi-dimensional conceptualization of silence and voice – essentially they provide evidence from previous literature and studies that indicate that silence and voice are not just opposite ends of a continuum, and that they are best considered separate multi-dimensional constructs. They “argue that the key feature that differentiates silence and voice is not the presence or absence of speaking up, but the actor's motivation to *withhold versus express ideas, information and opinions* about work-related improvements” (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003, p. 1360). They consider the deliberate decision to be silent or to speak as well as the motives attached

to this kind of rational decision. Three types of silence are distinguished according to motive: acquiescent silence (individuals are passively silent because they do not believe they can make a difference), defensive silence (an individual is afraid to proactively speak up) and prosocial silence (an active form, e.g. keeping proprietary information confidential) and then the three voice counterparts: acquiescent voice (disengaged resignation), defensive voice (self-protective voice) and prosocial voice (actively cooperating by expressing work-related ideas and opinions).

Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) differentiated the types of voice and silence because this helped to explain “good” vs “bad” silence. While useful in understanding motives, Van Dyne *et al.*'s (2003) conceptualization muddled the construct because it combined the “why” with the “what.” Hence it is crucial that researchers anchor their studies by identifying exactly whose perceptions and attributions of the observed voice and silence are being measured. Other researchers have separated the action of silence from motives, for example Detert and Burris (2007) chose to use only part of Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) original proposed measure.

Motives are perceived and attributed by observers such as supervisors and coworkers, and researchers suggest it is critical that we focus on observer attributions because those attributions will shape the consequences at work including rewards and punishments. And this in particular highlights how the ambiguity inherent in silence can lead to misattributions and incongruent outcomes for the employee. Hence the lack of research on silence might reflect how difficult it is to study such an ambiguous and passive construct as silence viewed as a lack of speech (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). However, more recently, Bies (2009) described how defensive silence might be used actively – not passively – to create a “façade of conformity,” that provides a different public vs private face.

The reporting of good vs bad news might be considered separate processes (Uysal and Oner-Ozkan, 2007). To clarify, the motivations for reporting good news are not necessarily the opposite of those for reporting bad news because individuals may choose to be “mum” about a bad news topic in order to save face whereas this will not enter into the decision to share good news. The mum effect focusses primarily on bad news, in fact recent research has supported that individuals more quickly report good news and less quickly report bad news (Dibble and Levine, 2010). Milliken and Lam (2009) examined how managers who receive only good news get a biased understanding of what is going on in their organizations, so the decision to speak up or remain silent can have very negative ramifications for the quality of decisions and organizational learning in general.

In conclusion, previous researchers have outlined the potential importance and developed conceptualizations of organizational voice and silence, and the motivations and behaviors associated with both (e.g. Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003; Bies, 2009; Edwards and Greenberg, 2009), but have lagged in actual empirical work (e.g. Detert and Burris, 2007) – despite the development of relevant instruments (e.g. Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Consequently there is a need for empirical development and testing of predictors. In the following sections we support propositions linking perceived employee voice and silence to supervisory nervous tension and coping style, organizational morale, supervisory trust in subordinates and existence of organized labor.

Nervous tension

A difficult economic and social context may place pressure on a supervisor, creating nervous tension. In addition to adversely affecting supervisor's ability to detect

employee voice and silence, the supervisor may become so tense that employees feel discouraged from expressing their own opinions and dissatisfaction and shape the possibility of “deaf ear syndrome” (Peirce *et al.*, 1998; Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Signaling theory also provides support for a connection between supervisor tension, supervisor trust in employee and perceived prosocial voice or defensive silence. Relational signals are “behavioral clues that allow us to make inferences about other people’s interest in maintaining a mutually rewarding social relationship with us” (Wittek, 1999, p. 8). A person’s ability to make a rational objective decision is bounded by the way that they frame the situation and pay selective attention to certain main goals (Kruglanski, 1996). The trustworthiness of the trustee is based on whether the individual trustors perceive the trustee to be genuinely interested in helping them and that they share the same goals. Consequently relational signaling is goal directed and context dependent (Lindenberg, 1988). Individuals who interpret these signals will frame them as either self-focussed or other-focussed. Accordingly the situation is framed either in terms of potential gain, potential loss or normative responsibilities (Lindenberg, 1988). During a stressful period, self-interest is a strong motivating factor for affected employees which means they will be focussed upon gain and loss (Lindenberg, 2003).

Relational signals can be interpreted as positive, negative or ambiguous depending on the intentions that are attributed to the sender by the receiver. Individuals who are feeling tense may focus upon negative aspects, and this may make a tense supervisor more likely to attribute employee silence to an employee’s desire to protect themselves, that is, to be defensive. Alternatively, in dealing with a tough economy, and potentially with actions from senior executives, front line supervisors may listen more closely to their subordinates. As a result of this collective feeling they may attribute more prosocial voice to their subordinates, believing they are working together to deal with the tough economic situation. Hence:

H1a. The higher the supervisors’ tension, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates express prosocial voice.

H1b. The higher the supervisors’ tension, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates are defensively silent.

Positive thinking coping

Latack *et al.* (1992) defined positive thinking coping as recasting the stressful situation into positive terms. Other researchers have studied similar constructs of positive reinterpretation or positive reframing of signals. There have been previous studies considering how individuals cope with organizational transitions such as downsizing and layoffs (e.g. Armstrong-Stassen, 1993); however, few have considered the use of positive coping skills during a general downturn in the economy across a variety of public sector organizations.

Positive coping behaviors are the antithesis of the mum effect experienced by supervisors who are reluctant to provide feedback to problem employees (e.g. Moss and Martinko, 1998; Tessier *et al.*, 1971). Although keeping “mum” may prevent the supervisor from the stress of interacting with problem employees, feedback from supervisors is significantly related to the performance of the employee attributed by the supervisor and to outcome dependence (the extent to which supervisory rewards are contingent upon employee performance) (Moss and Martinko, 1998). Voice and

silence have been viewed as collective and contagious constructs, so when supervisors use positive coping instead of being “mum,” this encourages similar positive behaviors in employees.

A longitudinal field study conducted by Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser (2008) linked the use of positive coping skills to performance outcomes and success expectancies in survivors of downsizing. In the present study, we propose that positive coping behaviors may help supervisors to deal with the risk and uncertainty of economic downturn. By reframing issues in positive terms, supervisors develop an attitude of openness toward their subordinates, and hear more positive discussion:

H2a. The higher the supervisors’ use of positive coping skills, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates express prosocial voice.

H2b. The lower the supervisors’ use of positive coping skills, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates will be defensively silent.

Trust in subordinates

This research considers the relationship between trust-in-subordinates and perceptions of employee voice. Rotter (1967, p. 651) defined interpersonal trust as “an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon.” This general expectancy of trustworthiness creates in the trustor a pre-disposition to trust others (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006, p. 561). Rotter’s (1967) measure of generalized trust in others explicated trust as a characteristic of the trustor, while other definitions of trust consider the context, the trusted person and the history of the relationship (Mayer *et al.*, 1995, pp. 714-5).

In this research, trust is defined as the trustor’s willingness to accept the risk of relying on a trustee, even when the trustor is unable to monitor or control the trustee (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; see also Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Trust is highly influenced by the perceived trustworthiness of the trustee, the context (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; McEvily *et al.*, 2003; Zolin *et al.*, 2004) and the history of the relationship (Zolin *et al.*, 2004; Zolin and Hinds, 2004). The higher the supervisor’s perceived trustworthiness for subordinates, the greater the trust and risk taking in the relationship (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

Previous studies have demonstrated a positive connection between communication and the development of trust-based relationships, and highlighted important organizational outcomes linked to employee participation and job performance (Dirks, 1999; Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Ellis and Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Kramer, 1996; Pincus, 1986; Ruppel and Harrington, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 2009).

A qualitative study conducted by Edmondson (2003) stressed the importance of developing an open and psychologically safe climate in which team leaders can influence how much members speak up. Speaking up influences effective implementation of new procedures. Detert and Burris (2007) found a relationship between leadership behavior and the employee’s feelings of psychological safety that encouraged employees to practice “improvement” or prosocial voice. The authors measured employee perceptions of leader behaviors in two studies and found that management openness to change was the behavior most consistently related to employee voice. Accordingly, employees will not speak up if they feel they are at risk and fear significant personal loss in speaking up (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

Results of an empirical field study conducted by Premeaux and Bedeian (2003) indicated that internal locus of control and self-esteem are positively related to prosocial voice (a construct referred to by the authors as “speaking up”) for low self-monitors but negatively related to speaking up for employees who are high self-monitors. Perceived top management openness and trust in supervisor was positively related to voice for low self-monitors but negatively related to voice for high self-monitors. This study might suggest that a difference in motives may moderate the relationship between trust and voice. Premeaux and Bedeian (2003) tested the relationship between trust in supervisor and speaking up and identified a significant correlation, so we might also expect to find a relationship between trust in subordinate and perceived voice and silence.

Edmondson (2003) considered interdisciplinary action teams (in operating rooms), and the actions that leaders might take to encourage team learning through a process of voice. Interestingly, she considered how leaders motivate input and minimize power differences using coaching and communication strategies. After conducting 165 interviews at 16 hospitals Edmondson found that team leaders facilitated speaking up and that this helped to successfully implement new practices. However, her study did not consider how to develop trust – a reciprocal construct. In our study we suggest that supervisors’ trust in subordinates creates a welcoming environment in which the supervisor can hear the reciprocal voice from the employee.

Returning to signaling theory (Lindenberg, 1988), negative or ambiguous signals may erode trust, by creating distrust or simply not build trust by reinforcing the irrelevance of trust. In contrast, frequent positive relational signals can help two parties to reduce information asymmetry (Spence, 2002) and consequently build trust between employer and employee:

H3a. The higher the supervisor’s trust in subordinates, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates express prosocial voice.

H3b. The higher the supervisor’s trust in subordinates, the less likely the supervisor will be to perceive that subordinates will be defensively silent.

Role of union presence

Previous researchers have often considered union participation (involvement in union activities) to be a form of employee “voice” (e.g. Iverson and Currihan, 2003) following the union voice hypothesis, which proposes that unions provide a forum for discussing employee issues (Wooden and Baker, 1994; Freeman and Medoff, 1979). Employee decisions about whether and how to speak up about an issue are influenced by what their peers think (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Most researchers have considered the existence of a union to provide a mechanism for collective voice. Wooden and Baker (1994) found that union membership was linked to lower exit rates supporting the union voice theory.

Silence may also be considered a collective phenomenon (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Keil and Robey (2001) studied the mum effect in the context of project teams – for example when project team members are reluctant to report on slow project progress or “blow the whistle.” However, if responsibility for a delayed project is attributed to external vendors (or those outside of the collective group), employees are more likely to speak up (Park *et al.*, 2008). Park and Keil’s (2009) experiments established that the mum effect was connected to a climate of silence created by centralized organizational

decision making, the supervisor's lack of openness to new ideas and the demographic dissimilarity between employees and management.

A qualitative study conducted by Milliken *et al.* (2003) identified a number of implications stemming from lack of voice, including loss of trust, respect, credibility, social rejection, lack of cooperation and buy-in, difficulty in getting a job done well and reduced likelihood of promotion or career opportunities. These implications could be offset by union participation/membership because a protective collective agreement exists that defines the roles, relationships and promotion process (based on seniority). Accordingly, union participants may reframe the behaviors that would risk them being labeled as a complainer or troublemaker as being activism, without the social ostracism (instead they would be supported by union brothers).

Morrison and Milliken (2000) developed a model of silence and power that considered both the roles of the supervisors and subordinates in developing and maintaining a culture of defensive silence. Power distance (inequities in power based on seniority and status) significantly influenced factors related to the mum effect, such as fear of consequences, communication gap and team solidarity (Sajeev and Ramingwong, 2010). Sajeev and Ramingwong's field study of offshore professionals in Thailand also noted that teams were more likely to maintain a collectively protective silence when there was a power distance between them and their supervisor. Building upon this research, unions may be considered mechanisms that balance power between management and unionized workers.

Iverson and Currihan (2003) considered various ways of participating in a union and concluded that union participation is related to employee retention and most notably, to both job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. This might indicate that the presence of unions may level the playing field in terms of power, but might result in a few different outcomes. For example, although union members might feel more distant from union outsiders and less motivated to voice new ideas and more likely to be defensively silent, they may also feel protected by their unions and so more likely to speak up.

Milliken *et al.* (2003) study focussed upon the decisions of individuals yet they propose a social connection – a collective phenomenon because often many employees have some knowledge of the same problem but this is collectively withheld from their supervisors. However, we propose that unions not only provide a substitute for collective voice; additionally they also have implications by providing a safer environment for speaking out at an individual level. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H4a. If subordinates belong to a union the supervisor will be more likely to perceive that subordinates express prosocial voice.

H4b. If subordinates belong to a union the supervisor will be less likely to perceive that subordinates will be defensively silent.

Methodology

We position this study in a public sector context, in a central Canadian region dominated by automotive manufacturing, and one with a strong unionized tradition across sectors. The union-intensive automotive companies in the sample region were hit quite hard by the economic decline, and this had a reverberating effect on almost all other local organizations, cutting a wide swath from businesses to charities and affecting every household in the region. Hence the region was one of the hardest hit in North America, and experienced the highest unemployment rate in Canada. The public

sector was more insulated than the private sector but was characterized by increasing union militancy.

Sample

Directories from local leadership organizations were used to compile a database of managers across many organizations, but with an over-representation of public sector management in education and government. Managers were contacted by phone, and if they agreed to participate, a survey was mailed out. Among 142 respondents, 68 respondents (47.9 percent) were male and 74 (52.1 percent), female. Most (80.1 percent) were born in Canada and 96.4 percent respondents were educated in Canada. Almost, 18 percent of subordinates and 7.8 percent of supervisors were unionized. A total of 9.3 of them had experienced a labor action, and 39.6 percent of them had experienced lay-offs or severed employees during the year. The age median was 43 years old with a minimum of 23 and a maximum of 67.

Measures

The dependent variables are perceived prosocial voice and perceived defensive silence. Perceived defensive silence was measured with one question on a five-point scale from 1 = "almost never" to 5 = "almost always." The item was: "How frequently, in your experience, are subordinates afraid to express disagreement with their superiors?" Perceived prosocial voice was measured with one question on a five-point scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." The item was "My subordinates are sincere in informing me about matters that concern me."

Nervous tension was measured on a five-point scale from 1 = "almost never" to 5 = "almost always" using one question: "How often do you feel nervous or tense at work?"

We assessed how respondents were dealing with the current economic environment using the positive thinking coping subscale developed by Latack *et al.* (1992). Respondents were asked to describe how they were currently reacting to the downturn in the economy. Sample items were "Think about the challenges I find in this situation" and "Try to see this situation as an opportunity to learn and develop new skills." The response categories ranged from "Do not do this" to "Do this a great deal." Coping had a Cronbach's α of 0.74 and loaded on one factor.

Supervisor's trust in subordinate was measured on a five-point scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree": using four items: first, "I tend to trust my subordinates"; second, "My subordinates will keep their word to me"; third, "I can count on my subordinates if I need help"; and fourth, "I can count on my subordinates to keep their word to me." These items are based upon Rotter's (1967) fundamental philosophy surrounding a propensity to trust someone that you can rely on. Trust in subordinates had a Cronbach's α of 0.806 and loaded on one factor.

Subordinates in union was measured by asking supervisors if their subordinates were unionized or non-unionized. A dummy variable was created for subordinates in union with 1 for unionized and 0 for non-unionized.

Organizational morale was included as a control variable. Zeitz (1983) defined morale as an employee's general sense of well-being and enthusiasm for the organization. Previous researchers have connected organizational restructuring and reductions to a decrease in organizational morale (e.g. Sutton *et al.*, 1986). Because voice is tied to justice and fairness, we propose that lower organizational morale will also shape a climate where supervisors will not perceive employees to be comfortable in

speaking up in a prosocial way. The semantic differential measure of organizational morale consisted of seven pairs of bipolar adjectives designed to reflect enthusiasm for the organization such as enthusiastic indifferent, encouraged discouraged. The items were developed by Armstrong-Stassen (1993, 2001) based upon Scott (1967). This measure is well accepted in the literature, and has been validated longitudinally and across other contexts (Armstrong-Stassen, 2001). Organizational morale had a Cronbach's α of 0.897 and loaded on one factor.

Four measures use single-item scales to reduce respondent fatigue and boredom. These include perceived prosocial voice, perceived defensive silence, nervous tension and subordinates in union. Single-item scales are common practice when measuring self-reported facts, such as subordinates in union (Wanous *et al.*, 1997). Studies also show that single-item scales are reliable and valid when compared to multi-item scales (de Boer *et al.*, 2004; Gardner *et al.*, 1998; Robins *et al.*, 2001; Wanous *et al.*, 1997) having the advantage of not being subject to common methods variance.

Data analysis

Linear regression was used to model the relationship between the prosocial voice and defensive silence as the dependent variables and the various independent variables. To test the hypothesis, we conducted regression models for each of the two dependent variables first with the control variable only (Model A and Model C) and then containing all of the independent variables (Model B for voice and Model D for silence).

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables are shown in Table I. We notice that prosocial voice ($M = 3.9$) is scored higher than defensive silence ($M = 2.4$). The sample has a high percentage of subordinates in the union (80 percent), and supervisors are experiencing an average level of tension ($M = 2.3$).

H1a, that the higher the supervisors' tension, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates express prosocial voice, was supported (Table II, Model B: $\beta = 0.12$). *H1b*, that the higher the supervisors' tension, the more likely the supervisor will perceive that subordinates are defensively silent was also significant (Table II, Model D: $\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$).

H2a proposed that supervisors' use of positive coping skills would be positively related to supervisor's perception of prosocial voice. We found a marginally significant negative relationship between coping and prosocial voice (Table II, Model B: $\beta = -0.04$, $p < 0.10$), providing limited support of *H2a*. Although *H2b* proposed coping skills is negatively related to defensive silence we found no support for the hypothesis (Table II, Model D: $\beta = -0.00$, ns).

In *H3a* we propose that the higher the supervisor's trust in subordinates, the more likely the supervisor is to perceive that subordinates will express prosocial voice. We found a strong positive relationship between trust and prosocial voice (Table II, Model B: $\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$) thus supporting *H3a*. *H3b* proposed that the higher the supervisor's trust in subordinates, the less likely the supervisor is to perceive that subordinates will be defensively silent. We found a significant negative relationship between trust and silence (Table II, Model D: $\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$) thus also supporting *H3b*.

H4a proposed that subordinates in a union would be positively related to prosocial voice, but we did not find any support for this (Table II, Model B: $\beta = -0.09$, ns). But we did find support for *H4b*, which proposed that if subordinates belong to a union the

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Positive voice	Defensive silence	Organizational morale	Coping	Trust in subordinates	Subordinates in union
Prosocial voice	3.9	0.71	1	5						
Defensive silence	2.4	0.98	1	5	-0.27**					
Organizational morale	24.0	5.52	7	35	0.11	-0.08				
Positive coping skills	15.1	2.86	7	20	-0.02	-0.08	0.04			
Trust in subordinates	16.1	2.25	10	20	0.62***	-0.30***	0.08	0.15*		
Subordinates in union	0.8	0.39	0	1	0.02	-0.13	0.27***	0.02	-0.00	
Supervisor's tension	2.3	1.00	1	5	0.01	0.28***	-0.08	-0.04	-0.18**	0.04

Notes: $n = 142$; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Table I.
Mean, SD and correlations
among variables

supervisor will be less likely to perceive that subordinates will be defensively silent (Table II, Model D: $\beta = -0.54, p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Given that this research is premised upon the supervisor’s perceptions of their subordinate reactions to a stressful event, the discussion points can be developed around the self-interest of the supervisor. To explain, during a stressful economic period, self-interest is a strong motivating factor for employees. Gain and loss frames center on self-interest, whereas a normative frame centers on interest in others (Lindenberg, 2003). For example, employee behavior might be perceived by the supervisor through various other-directed attitudinal and attributional lenses, or might be a simple reaction to the supervisor’s own self-interested actions under stressful situations.

Other-focussed

Difficult economic circumstances make it even more important than ever for supervisors to listen to employee suggestions for improvement. The good news we find is that as supervisors’ tension levels increase they hear more prosocial voice from employees, although they will also detect more defensive silence. This could be because, as supervisors become tenser, they may listen more for opportunities to improve the situation and hence hear more positive and prosocial voice, yet they may also be more attuned to the real potential that employees will be afraid to speak out.

Unfortunately, as supervisors become tenser, we presume that they also become less sensitive to defensive silence with the attitude “No news is good news!” As economic and other environmental conditions put greater pressures on organizations, and workers are asked to produce more with less (Sekerka and Zolin, 2007) supervisors are likely to become more stressed. Hence, overly stressed supervisors could be less sensitive to their employees’ defensive silence. To some extent it may also be possible that increased perceptions of defensive silence increase supervisors’ stress levels. More research is needed to tease out these closely related effects.

In contrast, membership of subordinates in a union also reduces supervisor’s perception of defensive silence but that reduction might be due to the actual reduction in defensive silence due to union protection. If union membership of employees reduces the actual occurrences of defensive silence it can contribute toward creating a more open organizational culture. However, what is also interesting is that although supervisors

Table II.
Comparison of OLS
estimates (standardized
 β values) of prosocial
voice and defensive silence

	Prosocial voice		Defensive silence	
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Intercept	***	ns	***	***
Organizational morale	0.11	0.01	-0.08	-0.02
Positive coping skills		-0.04*		-0.00
Trust in subordinates		0.21***		-0.09**
Subordinates in union		-0.09		-0.54**
Supervisor’s tension		0.12**		0.26**
F	ns	***	ns	***
R ²	0.01	0.44	0.00	0.21
Degrees of freedom	1,135	5,107	1,136	5,107

Notes: $n = 113$; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

may perceive that their employees reduce defensive silence and stop protecting themselves, the supervisors do not perceive that the employees take the extra step to voice ideas that are creative and innovative relevant to the supervisor and management.

As anticipated, the greater the trust the supervisor holds for employees, the more prosocial voice will be heard and the less defensive silence will be perceived. When supervisors trust employees they will perceive suggestions to be prosocial voice and take more notice of what employees are recommending. This could lead to greater organizational learning and innovation, since many practical ideas are produced by those actually doing the work. Similarly, when supervisors trust employees they are less likely to suspect defensive silence. This could be positive in terms of reducing supervisor stress but it could be counter-productive if employees are employing defensive silence and the supervisor is oblivious to the situation and only selectively seeing their employees. The organizational environment could then become a victim of the good news/bad news situation (Milliken and Lam, 2009), or the façade of conformity described by Bies (2009).

Self-interested

When stressed, supervisors may act out in a self-interested with potentially erratic behaviors, and prompt responsive behaviors from their employees. This is well-explained in the literature by emotional contagion theorists, where an emotional stimuli from one individual precipitates a complementary emotional response in a second person (Hatfield *et al.*, 1994). A supervisor's defensive silence may prompt defensive silence in employees. Similarly, Blenkinsopp and Edwards (2008) noted that acquiescent silence is an emotional response to perceived wrongdoing.

Implications for academia and practice

This study adds to our knowledge of prosocial voice and defensive silence by testing supervisors' perceptions of these constructs during difficult economic times. It provides valuable empirical insights to an academic literature dominated by conceptual non-empirical papers. We also contribute to trust literature by identifying its role in increasing supervisor's perceptions of prosocial voice and reducing perceptions of defensive silence. Finally, we identify areas for future academic research. This research also extends the union voice hypothesis, which proposes that unions provide a voice for employee issues (and Baker, 1994; Freeman and Medoff, 1979), but adding the role of unions in avoiding defensive silence.

For practitioners, the economic and public sector context of this study is quite relevant given the lagged economic recovery. The Conference Board of Canada released its 2012 Industrial Relations Outlook (Shepherdson, 2011) which predicted that government will be more likely to intervene in labor disputes in the highly unionized Canadian public sector (70 percent unionized vs a 16 percent rate in the private sector). The report predicts that workers, who in response to the poor economy and limited public budgets, have quietly accepted restraint over the past few years, may be increasingly frustrated at the bargaining table. Similarly, the Conference Board of Canada's World Outlook (Beckman, 2012) anticipates that the eurozone debt crisis will again restrain global growth in 2012. Industry pundits from western countries all over the world are recommending that governments "play hardball with the unions" (Levitt, 2011; Powers, 2011; Chapman and Barrow, 2011). Hence our examination of supervisor and employee dynamics in the public sector during a stressful economic time is of continuing interest to organizations.

The recommendations for increasing supervisors' perceptions of prosocial voice and reducing defensive silence are very similar to those for creating a culture with open communications, that is, to increase trust (Thomas *et al.*, 2009). Increased trust will help supervisors hear their employees' suggestions for improvement and reduce either perceived or actual defensive silence, both of which are counter-productive. Supervisors might consider how to build this trust through their actions, in order to stimulate reciprocal and complementary actions in their employees. For example, Six and Sorge (2008) suggested that trust could be built by giving positive feedback and compliments in both private and public meetings, and by giving negative feedback in a constructive way. Supervisors should seek to clarify their expectations and take responsibility for their own actions as the uncertain economic news unfolds. Additionally it is important for supervisors to recognize the legitimacy of employee interests by considering events through other-focussed lenses.

This research also has implications for supervisors who work in a unionized environment. Although seemingly counter-intuitive, there is a value to employee unionization in terms of either reducing the level of actual defensive silence, or at least reducing supervisors' perceptions of defensive silence. Unionization could help employees to feel more secure and potentially avoid self-protective behaviors associated with defensive silence such as withholding information on problems based on fear and omitting facts to protect the self (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Unionization may also make supervisors feel more secure that employees are speaking up about problems in the workplace, which may or may not be a valid assumption. By focussing on building cooperative and respectful relationships with employee unions, supervisors will develop "other-focussed" strategies that help them to interpret nuances of their own particular union situation.

Study limitations and future research

Our work provides a new empirical contribution, however, we faced some limitations. For example, one-item scales were used to measure the dependent variables of positive prosocial voice and defensive silence. However, these constructs are perceptions of the supervisor and form only one dimension of the voice and the silence constructs. The intent of the study was not to measure the entire construct. We focussed upon defensive silence and prosocial voice factors because these were aligned with our desire to understand employee willingness to speak up and be positive forces for change during difficult economic times. We do recommend future researchers supplement this item with others.

We measured the construct across a number of organizations, so we have effectively controlled for the "collective" and contagious part of silence and voice that might occur in a single workplace. The study also used same source data and measured perceptions. Although this creates the potential for self-report and perceptual bias, this is a common practical challenge associated with data collection, for example, other researchers have utilized similar methods from the viewpoint of the employee, not the supervisor (e.g. Premeaux and Bedeian, 2003).

Another methodological concern is the framing of the measures of perceived defensive silence, perceived prosocial voice and nervous tension measures. These items apply to work in general and do not focus responses on the "stressful times." In contrast, the positive thinking coping measure specifically refers to coping in the context of the current economic environment. There is a possibility that respondents may have different frames of reference when answering these questions.

Conclusion

Considering the significance of supervisory trust in our study, it seems incumbent upon organizations to help maintain the trust relationship between supervisors and subordinate, because that will keep the communication door open during a time of flux.

Supervisors and unions both provide protection during times of uncertainty. So in a time of economic disruption and uncertainty, the risk associated with speaking out may be mitigated through supervisory trust and defensiveness may be minimized through union presence and supervisory trust. More research is clearly required on this topic, from both the supervisor and the subordinate perspective.

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