Organizationally Mute: A Metaphorical Descriptor of Silence in Organizational Life

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Abstract

While organizational silence is a theory that is still being explored (Jain, 2015), there arises a need within research to classify organizations that function within a culture of organizational silence and specifically Abilene Paradox Theory within decision-making processes. Using Morgan's (2006) organizational metaphor framework, this document presents organizationally-mute organizations as a definition for these organizations. First, the document explores metaphors, organizational silence, and Abilene paradox theory. Then, the concept of organizationally-mute organizations are introduced with its multiple components. The results are three implications of organizationally-mute organizations: (a) the experience of action anxiety and negative fantasies among membership, (b) an organizational environment that lacks organizational communication, and (c) leadership that perpetuates organizational silence. The result is a document that expands organizational silence literature, combines organizational silence and Abilene paradox theory, puts into practice Morgan's metaphoric theory on organizational design, and provides a new metaphor for organizations that adapt or normalize organizational silence Likewise, this document initiates further discussions on creating new metaphors for organizational designs.

Keywords: Organizational silence, Abilene Paradox Theory, Mute, Organizationally-Mute Organizations, Organizational Design (1)

1   Organizationally Mute: A Metaphorical Descriptor of Silence in Organizational Life

The purpose of this document is to offer "organizationally-mute organizations" as a metaphorical descriptor of organizations that have imbedded organizational silence into the structure and design of the organization. This work is imperative as it not only provides new metaphors for researchers to identify organizations of this kind, but it also explores the normalization of muteness within organizations and the implications of such. This document defines organizational metaphors and their significance to organizational theory and design; suggests a definition of organizationally-mute organizations and their tendencies to (a) contain membership that experiences action anxiety and negative fantasies during decision-making, (b) feature of organizational environments that lack organizational communication and (c) comprise of leadership that leadership that perpetuates organizational silence. The aim is to expand organizational silence and organizational design literature by providing a

metaphorical descriptive for organizations that experience Abilene Paradox Theory within their decision-making process. Finally, the research is a call for organizational researchers to develop new metaphors to explain future organization designs.

2   Understanding Metaphors as Descriptors for Organizations

Historically, the understanding of metaphors can be attributed to Aristotle, who adopted an equivalence view to describe how the concept of comparison works (Romano, 2017). It is from Aristotle's theory that Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory or CMT was developed which further expands the concept of a metaphor (Romano, 2017). Lakoff and Johnson's theory suggests that what creates a metaphor are two domains, a base and a target, which are connected through language (Romano, 2017).

Plainly, metaphors are rhetorical devices used within language to make an assertion about a person, idea or thought (Romano, 2017). Different from similes, which make explicit assertions that connect a base and its target through the words of "like" or "as," metaphors make implicit assertions that connect assertions using the word "is" (Romano, 2017). Whereas a simile would offer that "my job is like a jail," a metaphor would offer that "my job is a jail." The difference is, the former sentence connotes that a person's job may have some similarities to a prison, to which a follow-up sentence may be needed to explain how or why this is the case, as there may be many reasons. While a follow-up sentence may be needed after a metaphor also, the latter sentence offers a more obvious and direct inference that the person's job makes them feel trapped. In short, similes are more ambiguous and complex in nature whereas metaphors are used for more straightforward and familiar in nature.

Within organizational literature, Morgan (2006) posits that all organizational theories are derived from images and metaphors that helps leaders, followers, and members to understand organizations in different ways. They are useful in the sense that they provide an understanding of experience and perspective, allowing new ways of thinking and seeing to occur (Morgan, 2006). While stretching the imagination to greater heights, Morgan (2006) also cites that metaphors are not necessarily perfect comparisons and can also create distortions if not careful. Centrally, Morgan's work provides for readers an opportunity to amass a greater understanding of organizations using metaphorical language. Taking from Morgan's pattern, the next section will propose a new organizational metaphor, which is an organizationally-mute organization.

3   Understanding Organizational Silence

With the influx of technology and social media in the 21st Century, "mute" has evolved from being just a button on a remote control to a fundamental feature of telecommunication and online etiquette in the world today (Mute, 2018; Randall, 2020; Weber, Fulk & Monge, 2016). Because these online worlds have become organizations of their own—namely complex adaptive systems that constantly change and restructure themselves to the pressing needs of the people they serve—the "mute" feature provides both a standard and a staple to these systems, creating order out of chaos (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

While the "mute" feature within complex adaptive systems allow members the beneficial privilege of hearing and being heard at the same time, the ironic truth is that many organizations, employ, adapt, and function in a culture of organizational silence (Jain, 2015).

95

According to Pinder and Harlos (2001), organizational silence refers to the cognitive and behavioral withholding of expression and information about people and/or circumstances, specifically to individuals who are capable of effecting change within an organization or group. It is the intentional suppression of ideas, experience, perspective, and viewpoint from follower to leader or from leader to leader, when an organizational environment lacks organizational trust, limit opportunities for open, safe communication, and present negative repercussions when employees or members speak out (Johannesen, 1974; Ryan & Oestreich, 1998; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). While a study from Burris, Detert and Harrison (2010) conclude that 51% of members within Fortune 100 multi-national organizations felt safe speaking to their supervisor, 61% of those same members indicated that they have ultimately withheld information from their supervisor, not expressing all of their original ideas. What is important about these findings is it explores the various components of organizational silence and how they play a role in organization behavior.

Extensive research within organizational silence literature conclude that there are four dimensions of silence: a) acquiescent silence, b) quiescent silence, c) prosocial silence, and d) opportunist silence (Knoll & Van Dick, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Acquiescent silence is the withholding of ideas based upon the notion that their speaking up is pointless, quiescent silence is the withholding of ideas based upon fear or a desire to protect one's self or someone else, prosocial silence is the withholding of ideas with the notion that the silence will cause a benefit to others and opportunistic silence is the intentional withholding of ideas in order to achieve an advantage over someone or purely out of the expense of someone else (Knoll & Van Dick, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Jain (2015) further adds that organizational silence can vary according to culture as well. According to the GLOBE study and Hofstede's four-dimension value theory, the behavioral response of a culture is determined by that cultures understanding of (a) power distance, (b) masculinity versus femininity, (c) individual versus collectivism, and (d) uncertainty avoidance (House, 2004). What this suggest is the definition of organizational silence and the support or opposing of it will depend on the values of that country, especially as it relates to power (Jain, 2015). Still, there is ongoing research on the interconnection between these two ideas (Jain, 2015). Though some countries may endorse organizational silence, what makes organizational silence problematic for organizations is how it effects group behavior and specifically, the decision-making process of an organization (Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). The specific theory that names addresses organizational silence as it relates to decision-making is entitled Abilene paradox theory, which when implemented can be detrimental to an organization as a whole (Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001).

Abilene paradox theory is defined by various scholars as the mismanagement of agreement (Brown, Appan, Safi, Mellarkod, 2018; Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Sheingold & Sheingold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). A form of organizational silence, Abilene paradox theory refers to the silence that occurs within decision-making processes (Brown, Appan, Safi, Mellarkod, 2018; Daniel, 2001; Donnelly, 2005; Harvey, 1988; Sheingold & Sheingold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). The theory is not, as some may presuppose, the mismanagement of conflict. This is because even though there is an internal conflict between what an individual desires and what they consent to, that dissention is either never voiced

until they reflect the decision, or never voiced at all (Brown, Appan, Safi, Mellarkod, 2018; Daniel, 2001; Harvey, 1988; Sheingold & Sheingold, 2010; Wilson & Harrison, 2001).

The theory is derived from Harvey (1988) who found himself and his family taking a drive from Coleman to Abilene, Texas by Harvey's father-in-law, who suggested a restaurant in Abilene for lunch (Daniel, 2001; Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Upon traveling back to Coleman, 106 miles later, the family consensus was that none of them— including the father-in-law—wanted to go to Abilene, but failed to voice their dissentions as to not create conflict (Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Harvey (1988) deduced that the family's resentment of Abilene, due to the hot weather and the disliking of the food, was far more than just a bad choice, but a group behavior phenomenon that not only occurs in families, but also within institutions and organizations of any kind (Harvey, 1988; Moosmayer et al., 2018; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011).

Based upon the Abilene trip, Harvey further deduced that whenever there is (a) public mutual agreement, (b) ineffective communication, (c) false appearances of agreement, (d) resentment of past decisions, and the e) failure of leaders to recognize the organizational silence, Abilene paradox is bound to occur within the decision-making of organizations (Harvey et al., 2004, pp. 215-226). For Harvey (1988), if groups and organizations are unable to be honest—and have safe spaces to voice their honesty—then they will make decisions that can lead to organizational death (Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). This is because within the decision-making process, Abilene paradox theory creates an organizational paradox (Cafferky, 2007)) that breeds false consensus amongst group members (Guan, 2014; Malony, 1999; Roberto, 2005). Though Harvey et al. (2004) posits that organizations can never truly reach true consensus without any reservation at all, false consensuses, stemming from organizational silence only mask organizational problems, verses addressing them head on. As a result, organizational decision-making moves from being a process where healthy discussion and deliberation occurs to bring forth solutions, to being an environment where a "yes" culture permeates in order to not "rock the boat" during the decision-making process (Perez et al., 2018; Urfalino, 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). What becomes of this is ultimately sloppy, illegitimate decision-making that is censored and truncated (Guan, 2014).

4   Characteristics of Organizationally-Mute Organizations

Combining organizational silence and Abilene paradox theory literature, as well as Morgan's metaphor theory, organizationally-mute organizations are those who: (a) have members who withhold ideas to avoid negative consequences, (b) have members who withhold ideas in order to reach consensus, though it is false consensus, (c) have poor organizational communication, (d) create a "yes" culture that is apprehensive about disagreeing in the decision-making process, (e) have members who resent the decisions-made, even in silence, and (f) feature leaders who do not intentionally create opportunities and spaces that reduce or eliminate organizational silence and Abilene paradox theory (Harvey, 1988; Harvey et al., 2004; Perez et al., 2018; Urfalino, 2014; Wilson & Harrison, 2001; Zhang et al., 2018). The metaphor is important in that names the relationship between the behavior and the design of the organization. Further, they reinforce each other. If the behavior is one of organizational silence, it could be because of the organization's design. Likewise, if the organization's design is conducive to organizational silence, it will produce Abilene paradoxical behavior. Understanding the metaphor and its components provides a means for organizational leaders to think through probable solutions for decision-making processses and

could also explain why an organizational death occured. Further are the implications of organizationally-mute organizations for leaders.

5 Implications of Organizationally-Mute Organizations

When organizationally-mute organizations are in full operation, the results are (a) the experience of action anxiety and negative fantasies among members, (b) the permeation of poor organizational communication, and (c) the normalization of organizational silence. These results not only affect the organization, but the members of the organization, also. Leaders and followers who work within organizational-mute organization design may create the picture that there is solidarity and peace within the organization when there really is division and strife. Members who work in this environment may make decisions that, in reality, go against the core values of the organization. Lastly, members who work in this environment may experience toxicity in their work culture, which could also impact performance. Further are the specific implications of organizationally-mute organizations.

5.1 Action Anxiety and Negative Fantasies

According to Brown, Appan, Safi, and Mellarkod (2018), action anxiety is the emotional decision to cease a mode of approach or response, due to the belief that the approach or mode will not be received. Action anxiety directly correlates with the acquiescent and quiescent dimensions of silence which entails the withholding of ideas due to fear, protection, or because the individual feels the expression of the idea is pointless (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018; Knoll & Van Dick, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Action anxiety is problematic in organizations for two reasons. The first is, it limits the possibility of new, innovative ideas for the organization. Burris, Detert and Harrison (2010) posit that there is no correlation between psychological or demographic data and ideas. This means any individual, regardless of their cognitive capacity and social location can come up with good ideas (Burris, Detert & Harrison, 2010). Thus, if an organization contain members who have action anxiety, the growth, development, and potential survival of that organization is now in jeopardy (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018).

Negative fantasies are defined as the experience of pessimistic thoughts attached to decision-making (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018). It is the cognitive thinking of the worse that could occur if an individual went with a certain action, thus causing them to remain silent (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018). Like action anxiety, negative fantasies correlate with acquiescent and quiescent components of silence but can also correlate with prosocial silence and opportunistic silence (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018). If an individual is experiencing negative fantasies within decision-making, they may take a prosocial silence approach to benefit others or take an opportunistic silence approach to benefit themselves (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018). Negative fantasies are a problematic for members of an organization to experience in that they create an assumption or conclusion—whether true, false, or distorted—about a decisional outcome before a decision has been made (Brown, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2018). Consumed with negative assumptions, members of an organization may be less inclined to take a risk of dissention in the decision-making process, which will cause them to resort to Abilene paradox theory (Harvey, 1988). Centrally, action anxiety and negative fantasies are not only problematic for the decision-making process of an organization but are problematic for organizational culture

as a whole. It can not only cause a breakdown in communication when its time to make a costly decision, but it can also cause general breakdown of communication within the organization (Hannah, Meyer & Seidel, 2018). The next section will discuss how communication is affected in organizationally-mute organizations.

5.2   Lack of Organizational Communication

Banerjee and Singh (2015) define grapevine communication, which is also known as water cooler communication, as an informal, yet integral method of communication in the workplace because it provides another source for information to flow. Though grapevine and water cooler communication is also known as "gossip," Blithe (2014) posits that all gossip is not necessarily negative. This healthy method of communication eases the tension of the work environment by punctuating it with nonwork conversations, providing space for employees to vent, creating opportunities for employees to further connect, and has been proven to be just as effective, as formal communication in the workplace (Blithe, 2014; Davis, 1969; Johnson & Indvik, 2003). Inevitable, and functioning as a complex adaptive system of its own, research shows that effective leaders learn how to utilize grapevine communication to accomplish organizational goals and strengthen organizational communication (Blithe, 2014). This understanding is important to the concept of organizational communication because when these concepts are built into an organizational culture, it creates a dynamic of organizational trust that allows members the freedom to express their thoughts—even if they are dissenting thoughts (Wilson & Harrison, 2001). When members can express these thoughts within informal spaces, chances are, they may feel free to also express those same thoughts within formal spaces.

When an organization is organizationally-mute, it contains a culture where openness and dissention is not allowed. Rather than taking a group-thinking approach and openly opposing a group member, members of organizationally-mute organizations will instead withhold their true feelings until after the decision is made and then express their resentment (Kim, 2001). The problem here is two-fold. Firstly, the true feelings and regret of the decision comes too late, which makes it difficult for the organization effectively make well-rounded decisions (Harvey, 1988). Secondly, the resentment of the decisions made may not ever be heard formally, but informally within grapevine or water cooler communication (Blithe, 2014). This now turns grapevine or water cooler communication from a healthy form of information flow, to an unhealthy, negative, victimizing flow of information, which can become toxic to the organization and further provide a blind spot for leaders who are unaware that the dissentions exist (Browne, Appan, Safi & Mellarkod, 2016; Harvey, 1988; Harvey et al., 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). The next section will conclude the implications of organizationally-mute organizations, exploring how leadership can influence and perpetuate organizational silence.

5.3   Leadership Perpetuation of Organizational Silence

Harvey et al. (2014) posit that organizational silence, specifically Abilene paradox theory, is perpetuated when leadership fails to recognize its existence. Wilson and Harrison (2001) add that it becomes the role of the leader to combat systems within an organization that hinders or stifles the communication of its members. Doing so closes the trust gap within the organization, creates a healthy Johari window into the organization, and creates a cultural change in the organization that is exploratory, playful, and even values mistakes (Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Such change is not only capable with practical approaches such as the

creation of suggestion boxes or secret ballots, but it comes from the leader simply naming the existence of organizational silence and being willing to address the systems that keep it alive (Taras, 1991; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). Centrally, leadership has a paramount role in giving—and in some ways restoring—voice to the voiceless in the organization (Taras, 1991). Doing so not only benefits the organization itself, but it also benefits the leader who needs the feedback of the group members in order to lead the organization with a larger picture (Harvey et al,, 2004; Wilson & Harrison, 2001). What it ultimately takes is the willingness for a leader to examine themselves and explore how they may be contributing to the very toxicity, they want to eradicate (Gillette & McCollom, 1995).

6   Discussion

This document sought to create a new organizational metaphor using Morgan's (2006) framework on organizational metaphors. The document offered organizationally-mute organizations as an exploration and expansion of organizational silence's influence on organizational life, not just organizational decision-making. The method of approach was to first provide an understanding of organizational metaphors as posited by Morgan (2006), define organizational silence theory and Abilene paradox theory, to propose the idea of organizationally-mute organizations, and finally to explore the components of organizationally-mute organizations and their implications: The goal here was to add to organizational silence literature and provide a metaphorical descriptor to classify organizations that function in this way. It also provides a further discussion for how organizational leaders can create new metaphors to describe organizational designs. The central invitation here is simple: the thoughts, viewpoints, opinions, perspectives, and experiences of group members—whether in leadership or not—should be valued. While silence can be an indicator of peace, silence can also indicate death. This research serves as a clarion call for leaders and members to speak that their organization may live.

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101

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