AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF EMPLOYEE SILENCE:

ISSUES THAT EMPLOYEES DON'T COMMUNICATE UPWARD AND WHY

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Abstract

There is evidence from a variety of sources that employees often do not feel comfortable speaking to their bosses about organizational problems or issues that concern them. The purpose of this study was to shed light on the types of issues that employees are reluctant to raise, and identify why employees sometimes decide to remain silent rather than voice their concerns. We interviewed 40 employees and found that most had been in situations where they were concerned about an issue but did not raise it to a supervisor. Silence spanned a range of organizational issues, with several of our respondents indicating that they did not feel comfortable speaking to those above them about *any* issues or concerns. The most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent was the fear of being viewed or labeled negatively, and as a consequence, damaging valued relationships. From our data, we develop a model of how the perceived consequences of voice contribute to silence, and a model of how the social and relational implications of speaking up can take away employees' ability to have influence within an organizational setting.

"I raised a concern about some policies and I was told to shut up and that I was becoming a troublemaker. I would have pursued [the issue] further but presently I can't afford to risk my job. This has made me go into a detached mode, making me a 'yes man'."

Male respondent, Information Systems

Employees are often reluctant to share information that could be interpreted as negative or threatening to those above them in an organizational hierarchy (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). This reluctance to speak up, and the silence or information withholding that it gives rise to, has the potential to undermine organizational decision making and error-correction and to damage employee trust and morale (Argyris & Schon, 1986; Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Janis, 1982; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tamuz, 2001). Yet, as the above quote illustrates, remaining silent may make sense when it is considered from the perspective of the employee who fears that his or her manager will react negatively to the upward communication of concerns and may react further by taking steps that undermine the employee's ability to work in the organization.

A salient real-world example of these dynamics can be seen in the recent events at Enron. News reports suggest that many Enron employees had concerns about the firm's activities but were afraid to speak to their bosses about these concerns. According to the testimony of Sherron Watkins, a vice-president at the company, there was "a culture of intimidation at Enron where there was widespread knowledge of the company's shaky finances," yet no one felt confident enough to raise these issues (Oppel, 2002). This case and others provide vivid illustrations of employee discomfort with speaking up about problems and concerns. They also hint at the real damage that can occur (both organizationally and psychologically) when employees feel unable to voice their concerns and therefore, do not speak up.

Sometimes, however, employees do speak up. Sherron Watkins is one example as is Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom and Coleen Rowley of the FBI, who were named the 2002 People of the Year by Time Magazine for their courage in choosing to speak up to their bosses about problems they observed in their organizations. Thus, it may be most appropriate to think of the process of communicating upward about problems or issues as the outcome of a choice that employees make (Meyerson, 2001). Sometimes

employees choose to speak and sometimes they choose to be silent. The purpose of this research is to explore how and why employees decide to be silent rather than voice their concerns and the types of issues that employees feel most reluctant to raise.

Review of the Literature

One reason why people are sometimes silent about their concerns may be what psychologists have termed the "mum effect" (Rosen & Tesser, 1970). Research on the mum effect shows that individuals have a general reluctance to convey negative information because of the discomfort associated with being the conveyer of bad news (Conlee & Tesser, 1973). In organizations, there is evidence that employees are especially uncomfortable conveying information about potential problems or issues to those above them. For example, several studies have shown that subordinates distort the information that they convey to their superiors, communicating upward in a way that minimizes negative information (e.g., Athanassiades, 1973; Read, 1962; Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974).

In other words, the hierarchical relationship between subordinate and supervisor appears to intensify the mum effect. More than half a century ago, Festinger (1950) noted that structuring groups into hierarchies automatically introduces restraints against free communication, particularly criticisms by low-status members toward those in higher-status positions. Research by Athanassiades (1973), among others, suggests that this is a form of instrumental, self-protective behavior. Although the evidence is inconsistent (Glauser, 1984), it appears that employees are most likely to filter information that they convey upward when they have high mobility aspirations (which they do not want to jeopardize) and when they lack trust in their supervisor (Read, 1962; Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974).

In his work on organizational learning, Argyris (1977) noted that there are powerful norms and defensive routines within organizations that often prevent employees from saying what they know. Other scholars note that organizations are often intolerant of criticism and dissent, and that employees may withhold information in order to not "rock the boat" or create conflict (Ewing, 1977; Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). As well, research that has built upon Hirshman's (1970) exit, voice and loyalty (EVL) model has highlighted that while voice is an option for dealing with dissatisfying conditions, it is

often not the option that is chosen (Withey & Cooper, 1989).

More recently, researchers have sought to explore factors that might make people willing to communicate up hierarchies or to "sell" issues to higher management. Saunders, Shepard, Knight, and Roth (1992), for example, found that employees' willingness to voice work-related concerns and suggestions to their bosses depended on how approachable and responsive they perceived their supervisors to be. This finding is consistent with Glauser's (1984) review of earlier works which suggested that upward communication is affected not only by characteristics of the communicator, the message, and the organizational context, but also by characteristics of the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Research on issue selling has asserted that employees decide whether to raise strategic issues with top management by "reading the context" for clues concerning "context favorability" (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002). A favorable context is described as one where top management is perceived to be willing to listen, the culture is seen as generally supportive, and there is relatively little uncertainty or fear of negative consequences (Dutton et al., 1997). Other factors that have been found to affect perceived context favorability, and hence willingness to engage in issue selling, are perceived organizational support, norms, and the quality of one's relationship with senior management (Ashford et al., 1998). Although research on issue selling focuses on the decision to *raise* a particular strategic issue, it also suggests that employees may choose to remain silent about issues if they conclude that the context is unfavorable.

An important idea from the issue selling literature is that an unfavorable context is one where employees believe that raising an issue may lead to negative consequences. For example, the literature has highlighted how raising a sensitive issue such as gender inequity can damage a person's public image. Research on whistleblowing likewise highlights the risks (real and perceived) associated with calling attention to problems. Whistleblowers are sometimes viewed as traitors and can suffer negative career outcomes as a result of their calling attention to organizational wrongdoing. Research suggests that

employees weigh these costs when considering whether or not to speak up about issues and concerns (Dutton et al., 1997; Near & Miceli, 1992).

<u>Objectives of This Study</u>

Despite the numerous research streams suggesting that employees often feel uncomfortable raising issues, problems and concerns to their bosses, there is much that we do not know about why people often remain silent. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to see if we could better understand when and how employees decide to be silent about an issue of concern to them, and the factors that employees consider when making this decision. Although past research provides guidance on some of these factors, we wanted to gain a richer appreciation of how employees think about this choice. Thus, we felt that it was most appropriate to conduct an interview-based study in which participants shared with us their thoughts and feelings about situations in which they had decided to remain silent about their concerns related to issues and problems at work.

Before deciding whether to speak up about a particular issue, employees must develop a cognitive map of the organization's communication norms, a map of what one can and cannot say, and of what may happen as a result of different forms of communication. We know relatively little, however, about what these cognitive maps look like. Our main research objective was to gain a better sense of employees' implicit theories about speaking up or not, and how these theories form, as a way of better understanding the decision to remain silent. In particular, we hoped that we could learn more about the types of risks and dangers that employees are most concerned about. The issue selling literature suggests that employees are reluctant to raise an issue if they fear that their image could be damaged (Ashford et al., 1998). Less clear, however, is exactly what perceived image risks entail and why employees are so concerned about damaging their image.

In terms of *how* employees develop the implicit theories that may cause them to remain silent, we were interested in seeing whether we could find evidence of collective and social dynamics that may shape employees' views about speaking up. According to Morrison and Milliken's (2000) model of organizational silence, employees form shared beliefs about the danger and/or futility of speaking up

through processes of information sharing, social contagion, and collective sense-making. They suggested that employees' cognitive maps of what they can and cannot discuss at work are shaped through observation of and communication with others.

We were also interested in exploring the extent to which silence spans across different issues. In other words, do employees feel that they can't speak up at all, or only about *specific types* of issues, problems, and concerns? If the latter, what types of issues, problems and concerns are most likely to elicit silence? Studies on issue selling, whistle-blowing, and other forms of upward communication do not inform us much about the breadth of problems and issues that create discomfort and that, as a result, are not communicated upward. Morrison and Milliken (2000), however, suggested that silence might sometimes spread across a range of issues as employees form generalized beliefs about the dangers of speaking up. Thus, a second objective of this study was to identify the type and range of issues and concerns most likely to elicit silence.

METHODS

Sample

We interviewed 40 full time employees working in an array of industries including consulting, financial services, new media, pharmaceuticals and advertising. Thirty-percent worked in the financial services industry, and 52% were female. Their average tenure in their current job was 4 years (min = 6 months; max = 16 years), and 70% had held prior jobs in different organizations. We obtained the sample by soliciting students in four part-time MBA management classes at a large urban university. We described the study as one that is focused on how and when people choose to speak to those above them about issues or problems that concern them at work. As an incentive to participate, we informed the students that their names would be entered in a raffle to win a gift certificate to one of the top-rated restaurants in the city.

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Each respondent was interviewed by one of the authors. The interviews lasted 25-45 minutes, and were conducted at the location that was most convenient for the participants, either at school or at

their work place. The interview guide appears in Appendix A. All but two of the 40 interviews were tape-recorded[1]. We then transcribed the tapes, focusing particular attention on the subjects' direct answers to our questions. We listened to each tape twice to ensure that we captured all relevant data (i.e., all data relevant to the questions that we were asking).

We began each interview by providing a brief description of the study and assuring respondents that all information would be kept confidential (see Appendix A). We then asked respondents whether, in general, they felt comfortable speaking to their boss or to others above them about problems or issues that concern them in their current organization. Following this general question, we asked respondents (a) whether they could think of specific instances in their current organization where they had felt unable to speak openly or honestly to a superior about an issue that concerned them, and (b) whether they felt there were general classes or types of issues that they could not raise with those above them.

Similar to other qualitative studies that have explored social dynamics at work, we wanted to capture the richness found in personal stories (e.g. Gersick, Bartunek & Dutton, 2000). Hence, we asked respondents to tell us, in detail, about one or more situations where they felt they could not speak up about an issue of concern. We were interested in the nature of the issue and the events surrounding the decision not to raise it. We probed for some of the reasons why respondents chose to be silent, either in general or about particular issues, and encouraged respondents to elaborate. In addition, whenever respondents indicated that they felt uncomfortable raising particular issues or concerns, we asked whether they thought that others within the organization were also uncomfortable about raising those issues. If they said yes, we asked them to explain why they thought this. Our goal was to learn about the collective dynamics of silence.

Content Coding

The interviews asked respondents (a) whether they were generally comfortable expressing their opinions and concerns, (b) whether they have ever felt that they could not openly express their opinions or

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[1] Two respondents asked not to be recorded. Extensive notes were taken during and immediately after those interviews.

concerns, (c) the issues (if any) that they feel unable to raise at work, (d) the reasons (if any) for not

raising these issues, and (e) whether they had a basis for believing that their coworkers had remained

silent in the face of issues or problems. Respondents did not always answer the "yes/no" questions with a

clear-cut yes or no. Hence, there were cases where we needed to make judgments about how to

appropriately code the responses. In coding the question about whether others in the organization were

similarly uncomfortable raising certain issues, we coded a response "yes" if the respondent gave some

evidence for this belief (e.g. comments that co-workers had made in private). If a respondent said that he

or she was unsure, or gave an unclear answer, we coded this as "no."

For the questions that were not coded as yes or no (e.g., the types of issues that respondents felt

they could not raise and the reasons for this reluctance), we employed standard practices for qualitative

data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984), engaging in an inductive process of developing and refining a

coding scheme (cf., Dutton et al., 1997). To obtain an initial list of categories into which we could code

the responses, the three authors reviewed the transcripts independently and generated a list of all of the

issues that respondents mentioned as well as a list of all of the reasons that they mentioned. We then

discussed and refined the two lists, combining categories that reflected the same underlying ideas and

splitting categories where we felt that more fine-grained distinctions were needed. Next, we conducted a

preliminary coding of the data to classify the issue statements and reasons into categories (we wanted to

make sure that there was not overlap between categories or ambiguity about what type of statement

should be coded into a particular category). After several iterations, we were able to come up with a

coding checklist that we felt captured all of the issues and reasons that respondents had mentioned

(Dutton et al., 1997). Using this coding checklist, we then went back to the 40 transcripts to code the

responses, checking as many or as few response categories as were mentioned by the respondent in the

interview. We utilized Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for calculating inter-rater reliability to

check our coding and we obtained reliabilities that ranged from 82.5% (reasons for silence) to 99.7%

(whether respondent indicated having been in a situation where he/she could not speak up).

Disagreements were discussed until they were resolved (e.g., Dutton et al., 1997).

RESULTS

Our interviews suggest that being silent about issues and problems at work is a very common experience with 85% of our sample (34 of 40 people) saying that, on at least one occasion, they had felt unable to raise an issue or concern to their bosses even though they felt the issue was important. Only half of our respondents (51%) indicated that, generally speaking, they felt comfortable speaking up about issues or concerns in their current organizations. Several of the respondents (23% of the sample) gave a definitive "no" when asked whether they generally feel comfortable speaking to their boss or to others above them about problems or issues that concern them. Others (27% of the sample) indicated that they could speak only to certain people (e.g. their immediate boss) or only about certain issues. In most of these cases, respondents indicated that they could speak up about work-related issues (e.g., issues related to specific tasks or projects) but not about more general organizational issues or concerns. Only 6 respondents (15% of the sample) reported that they had never felt unable to openly express their concerns to those above them. These data are summarized in Table 1.

_____

Table 1 about here
_____

Issues that Respondents Felt Uncomfortable Raising

Respondents indicated a range of issues and concerns about which they had remained silent. We identified 8 main categories for classifying these issues (plus an "other" category that contains issues mentioned by 5 or fewer respondents). Table 2 lists the categories and the percentage of respondents who mentioned issues within each. These percentages add to more than 100%, as most respondents discussed more than one issue. On average, respondents mentioned at least two examples of issues that they felt they could not talk about.

_____

Table 2 About Here
_____

The most frequently mentioned issue that respondents felt that they could not raise had to do with performance or competence of a colleague or boss. Overall, 37.5% of our sample identified performance of a superior or peer as a topic that they felt they could not raise or discuss with those above them. Stories that were coded into this category included ones that focused on co-workers who were not adequately or appropriately performing their jobs, as well as supervisors who were viewed by subordinates or peers as incompetent or unprofessional. Examples can be seen in the following quotes:

> *"There was a coworker of mine who many of us thought was slacking off and under-performing. He went to the opera for like three hours one day. We work in a team environment and it became obvious who was not doing the work, but we knew this person was a favorite of our boss."*
>
> *(female, management consulting firm)*

> *"From time to time I am placed on a project with a senior person who I really don't like working for because I think he is incompetent. I don't know how to talk to senior management about this because I don't want to look like I am complaining. I also do not want to hurt his feelings."*
>
> *(female, consulting firm)*

A third of our sample (35%) indicated that they felt unable to speak up about problems with organizational processes or performance, or to offer suggestions for organizational improvement. For example, respondents indicated that they felt unable to raise "problems related to how things operate," "workflow issues," "ideas on how things should work," "ideas for improvement, " or concerns about the company's financial health. The following quotes are from employees who had chosen to be silent about problems with organizational processes or organizational performance.

> *"When there are holes in the research process, we generally don't say anything to the directors of the projects."*
>
> *(male, not-for-profit organization)*

> *"If you question certain processes, they made it sound like you were complaining and not being constructive so you were pressured to just grin and bear it. I didn't like it at all. Was one of the contributing factors for leaving."*
>
> *(male, accounting firm)*

> *"Retention of employees was a major issue. Instead of facing the problems and looking for reasons why, my employer treated those who left as traitors. The company discouraged people to speak up. Solutions offered by employees were quieted by (sic) immediate supervisors."*
>
> *(male, accounting firm)*

A third common issue (27.5% of the sample) had to do with concerns about pay and pay equity. In the words of a male accountant "compensation is off limits to discuss." Other topic areas that respondents said they could not bring up included disagreement with company policies and decisions (or bosses' positions on issues) (22.5%), concerns about personal career issues (20%), ethical or fairness issues (20%), harassment or abuse (17.5%), and conflict with co-workers (15%). The quotes below reflect concerns about fairness that employees did not feel they could express:

> *"A co-worker was being phased-out and it was unclear to those around why this was happening. I did not feel that I could speak honestly and openly to his bosses despite my strong working relationship with them. I felt that I would be fired or fall out of favor if I spoke up. I felt it was a moral imperative to act, but in the end, I did nothing."*
> *(male, financial services firm)*

> *"Female partners have the ability to work part-time or flex-time to balance work and family.. I have never seen women below the partner level having this option. It's something I would never, ever bring up."*
> *(female, advertising firm)*

Reasons for Silence

Respondents gave many different reasons for feeling that they could not express concerns at work. We went through several iterations of sorting these reasons into over-arching categories. Table 3 lists the final set of 8 categories that we used to code the reasons that our respondents gave for feeling that they could not speak up. It also shows the percentage of respondents who mentioned each reason. The percentages add up to more than 100%, as most respondents gave more than one reason for their silence. Since the reasons given did not generally differ between those respondents who felt that they could not speak up about anything and those who were selectively silent, we did not distinguish between these two groups in reporting the results.

Table 3 About Here

Table 3 shows the types of concerns that respondents mentioned as affecting their decisions to not speak up. The most frequently mentioned concern was the fear of being labeled or viewed negatively by

others (30%). Common labels that were mentioned were "troublemaker," "tattletale," or "complainer."

A few respondents also raised concerns that they would not be seen as a "team player." The following

quotes illustrate this type of fear:

> *"There is a general fear of being labeled a troublemaker or a complainer. The management does not want to get involved with sexual harassment issues. In this kind of industry you can get labels very quickly, so I along with other women do not complain about the sexual harassment stuff. It is a hush, hush kind of a thing."*
>
> *(female, sales and trading)*

> *"Because it is a consensus-oriented environment, your power comes from whether people see you as agreeable and easy to work with. Being a rebel is not embraced."*
>
> *(female, investment banking firm)*

The second most commonly expressed fear had to do with relationships. Many respondents

(27.5%) said that speaking up about problems or issues was dangerous because it could damage their

relationships with people on whom they relied either for information or to get their jobs done. They

seemed to fear that, if they spoke up about certain issues, others (bosses and peers) would no longer like

them or view them as credible. This could damage their relationships, leading them to become an

"outcast." The quotes below are examples of this concern:

> *"This particular partner gives me access to a lot of information. I did not want to risk offending him. I did not want to rock the boat and risk losing favor with him."*
>
> *(male, research engineer)*

> *"As far as negative consequences, it is not about whether I'm going to get promoted but more like -- will I become an outcast in the family?"*
>
> *(female, consulting firm)*

> *"I did not feel that I could speak honestly and openly to his bosses despite my strong working relationship with them. I felt that I would be fired or fall out of favor if I spoke up."*
>
> *(male, financial services firm)*

The third most frequently mentioned concern had to do with futility: the feeling that speaking up

was not worth the effort and would not make a difference.   Twenty-five percent of the respondents

discussed feelings of this nature.   Respondents made statements like "why bother," "it would not be

worth it," and "what would be the point?" One respondent explained the issue as follows:

> *It's not so much that I can't communicate than [it is] their inability to hear me. There are*

different degrees of listening and hearing. If they are not hearing – how hard do you push?

(male, entertainment industry)

"Even if I did comment on the issue, it was unlikely to change anything…."

(male, Japanese conglomerate)

Fear of retaliation or punishment was raised by 22.5% of our respondents. These individuals worried that if they spoke up they might lose either their job or promotion opportunities. The following quotes are examples of this fear:

"Managers would take mental notes and you couldn't really express yourself. They would hold it against you. They valued loyalty above all else… You had to watch what you said. If you did an okay job and never said anything controversial, you would move up in the organization."

(female chemist, biotechnology firm)

"…further promotions would be an issue…it's very clear that employees who are rewarded are the ones who go along with the plan."
(male research engineer)

"We have to be careful about the battles we choose to fight. When you get in the doghouse, it's hard to get out. I've seen people get bad assignments and get treated as outcasts when they are in the doghouse."
(male, not-for-profit organization)

An additional concern was that speaking up might negatively impact someone else in the organization (20%). Individuals expressed concerns about upsetting, embarrassing, or in some way harming another person. They indicated that they did not want others to feel threatened or to become defensive. This concern for others can be seen in the following quotes:

"Going above my boss would put him in a bad position …"I really do like him. He'll feel like I am snitching on him."
(female, financial services firm)

"My predecessor is still around, about to retire, and I don't want him to look bad."

(male, office supply company)

In discussing why they felt unable to speak up, respondents also made reference to (a) individual characteristics such as their own lack of experience, tenure or rank (32.5%), (b) immediate supervisors who are not supportive or approachable (20%), and (c) organizational structures and cultures that were

not open to upward communication (30%). Below are two quotes from each of these three categories.

"I was new, learning my job as well as how things go in a corporate setting."

(female, financial services firm)

"I was young and had an entry level position."
(female, university administration)

"My manager is very reactionary. When you say there is a problem, he becomes very nervous. Even if it is a minor problem, when I talk to him I have to be very careful about it."

(male, financial services firm)

"I have a superior with whom I do not feel particularly comfortable."

(female, public relations firm)

"It is very hierarchical. Speaking up is based on seniority. If you are young in the company, don't speak unless you are spoken to."
(female, consulting firm)

"You can praise them 'til the cows come out (sic) but you can never say anything negative. They are the powers that be (sic). They make it very clear that we should all be proud that they allowed us to walk in the front door of the firm"
(male, investment banking firm)

How Employees Learn to be Silent

Of the 34 respondents who indicated that they had been in a situation of feeling uncomfortable about raising certain types of issues, 26 (74%) suggested that other employees were aware of the issue and also felt uncomfortable speaking up about it. The following quotes capture this "collective" aspect to employee silence:

Everybody knew there was a problem, but people didn't speak up. A lot of people quit. They didn't think it would make a difference.
(female, internet consulting firm)

"All my colleagues share my frustration that this piece of system doesn't work as it should be but nobody in Texas is responding."
(male, electronics firm)

A related theme was that employees learned to remain silent, at least in part, from talking with and observing their peers. Although some employees suggested that they had learned firsthand that it was dangerous to speak up (the first quote below), other employees suggested that they had learned this

vicariously, from what they had seen and heard around them.

> *"...when I tried to introduce some new ideas at a meeting...the senior managers looked at me as if I was crazy. They made me feel dumb for sharing my thoughts. I received unkind emails in response to my suggestions. The tone was really bad. Now, I take caution before I speak up...I don't take the risk of receiving the bad response that I did when I shared my ideas with them."*
>
> *(male, not-for-profit organization)*

> *"I have seen people's throats torn out for raising concerns about promises made to them and never delivered. I've seen people verbally abused. I'm not sure I'm a strong enough person to face the wrath. "*
>
> *(female, advertising firm)*

> *"The person in charge is paranoid. I felt uncomfortable giving him any advice because he might lash out at me. There was a literal fear of physical reprisal...you would often hear him blowing his top at people--particularly anyone trying to give him advice."*
>
> *(male, entertainment company)*

> *"I knew that someone else had spoken to the boss about it and was told: 'you got what you deserved. Don't expect any more.' Based on that vicarious experience, I knew that I wouldn't get anywhere and would only lose out in terms of being seen negatively."*
>
> *(female, financial services firm)*

DISCUSSION

Most of the people we interviewed for this study had been in situations (in many cases often) where they felt that they could not raise an important job-related or organizationally-relevant issue with their boss or others above them in the organizational hierarchy. Thus, it seems as though deciding to be silent about issues or concerns at work may be a fairly common choice for employees in organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000: Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

One interesting feature of the topics that employees said that they felt uneasy speaking about is that so many of them can be seen as forms of bad news for the recipient of the message. Our finding suggests that, in the eyes of many employees, discussing such issues with bosses is perceived as risky and often futile. Our findings also indicate that employees often view dissent as something that is not welcome in their organizations (Redding, 1982; Sprague & Rudd, 1988). These results are consistent with research on the mum effect (Tesser & Rosen, 1977), which shows that people do not like to convey bad news as well as with research showing that employees are often uncomfortable conveying negative

feedback and information (Athanassiades, 1973; Fisher, 1979).

How and Why Employees Decide to Remain Silent: An Emergent Model

Our primary goal in conducting this study was to see if we could gain a richer understanding of how and why employees sometimes choose to remain silent about their concerns. Two insights are especially salient. First, respondents were very focused on what they saw as the potential negative outcomes or risks of speaking up. Their desire to avoid negative outcomes played an important role in their decisions to remain silent. Second, in asking the question "what will happen if I raise this issue?" employees consider information culled from both past experiences and observations of the present context. Although research on issue selling has shown that employees try to assess the degree to which the context is favorable or unfavorable (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 1997), our work, we believe, provides deeper insight into the reasoning process that employees use to determine whether it is safe to speak up. In the paragraphs that follow, we explain this reasoning process.

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Figure 1 About Here

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Figure 1 illustrates the five fears, or anticipated negative outcomes, that seemed to play a central role in decisions to remain silent. The most frequently anticipated negative outcome related to damaging one's image or being labeled in a negative manner. The importance of image-related concerns supports previous findings from the issue selling literature (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 1997). Yet other important fears also surfaced. For example, many respondents expressed concerns about damaging relationships and losing relational currency. Others expressed fear of retaliation or punishment, such as losing their job or not getting a promotion. Respondents also expressed concerns about negatively impacting others, a concern that has also been noted in the literature focused on the reporting of sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985; Rudman, Borgida, & Robertson, 1995).

Another outcome that contributed to respondents' decisions to remain silent was the belief that even if they spoke up, it would not make a difference or elicit a response. This is consistent with prior

research which has suggested that employees are more likely to voice concerns if they feel that doing so will result in remedial action (Miceli & Near, 1992; Rudman et al., 1995; Whithey & Cooper, 1989). Based on our data, we would argue that even though problems may be significant, employees may still be reluctant to speak up if they feel that there is no hope of remedial action and discussion would be futile. This poses an interesting question about what happens in organizations over time. Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggest that, if organizational silence reinforces employees' feelings of futility, a state of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) may develop, leading to employee apathy and withdrawal. In fact, 20% of our sample believed that their managers would not be responsive to *any* concerns or issues that employees might raise.

Respondents also pointed to a variety of personal characteristics, organizational characteristics, and relationship characteristics that affected their decision to remain silent. These three sets of factors are also illustrated in Figure 1. We regard these factors as exogenous to the decision process but as having an effect on how an employee will view the potential outcomes associated with raising a concern. For example, relative to older, more experienced employees at higher organizational ranks, those who are young or inexperienced, or in a low organizational position, are likely to see the negative outcomes associated with speaking up as more probable since they have relatively little power in the organization. They may also be more likely to fear that they lack the credibility to be taken seriously.

The model depicted in Figure 1 suggests that the underlying process of deciding to remain silent is similar to the subjective expected utility calculus that employees use when deciding whether to engage in any work behavior (Vroom, 1964). We know, for example, that individuals will be less likely to engage in a behavioral option as the likelihood of negative outcomes associated with that option increase (Vroom, 1964). Using a subjective expected utility framework to view the decision to be silent about a significant issue or problem, however, fails to capture the role of emotions in this decision. Fear was an important theme in many interviews. Research shows that if individuals are experiencing a strong negative affective state such as fear, they are more likely to recall information consistent with that emotion, and so may overestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes in the situation (Isen, Shalker,

Clark & Karp, 1978; McLeod, 1999; Nygren, Isen, Taylor, & Dulin, 1996). These studies suggest that if an individual is fearful about speaking up, he or she will be more likely to think of information that confirms this fear, and as a result, form exaggerated conclusions about the dangers of voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The process, in other words, has emotional as well as cognitive elements.

Our findings also highlight that silence has a social dimension. Although our focus was on *individuals'* decisions to remain silent about concerns, our results hint at collective dynamics that also encourage employees to remain silent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). When employees join an organization, they need to learn the rules of the game – what it is safe to discuss and what one should be quiet about (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). It appears from respondents' stories that they learn to be silent not just through trial-and-error experiences, but also by observing and talking to their colleagues.

As further evidence of the social dynamics involved in employee silence, our interview responses suggest that the decision to remain silent may be inter-related with the decisions that other employees are making. Specifically, a large number of respondents felt that they were not alone in withholding information about a particular issue or set of issues. In several cases, they suggested that knowledge of a problem was widespread among their peers but not conveyed to senior management. These results suggest that silence is often a collective phenomenon (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Going One Step Further: Building a Social and Relational Model of Silence

Many of our respondents seemed very attuned to the negative labels that may get attached to people who raise concerns with those above them and the relational implications of having been so labeled. Our respondents mentioned labels like "troublemaker" or "complainer" as ones that became attached to people who spoke up about problems. Here, we engage in some speculative theory building about employees' implicit theories concerning what may happen if they (a) speak up about a problem, and (b) gain a negative image or label as a result.

Ashford and Humphrey (1995) have highlighted the power of labels in organizations. They argued that when an organizational member is given a label, he/she is implicitly assigned to a category. This process of categorization activates a schema, or a set of characteristics and evaluations associated

with the category (e.g., troublemakers are untrustworthy, self-interested, always trying to stir things up).

This process of labeling can have an enormous impact because as these labels are communicated to others

(e.g., Joe is a troublemaker), there is a tendency for others to simply assume that the label is a valid

characterization of the target person. Others begin to view the target person's behavior through the lens

of the assigned label (e.g., if Joe raises a question at a meeting, others may assume not that he is seeking

clarification but that he is trying to cause trouble). Labeling alters interpersonal interactions, changes

social identity, and creates self-fulfilling prophecies that seemingly validate the labels (Ashford &

Humphrey, 1995).

Respondents seemed to have had an intuitive understanding of these dynamics, knowing that

being labeled as a "complainer" or "troublemaker" could set into motion a whole set of secondary

outcomes with negative consequences in their organizations. It was not merely the labels that they feared,

but the interpersonal consequences of those labels. The following quote illustrates how the respondent

believed that being negatively labeled can set into motion a whole string of other negative outcomes:

> *"So much of our job is based on relationships. It's how well you work with people. You always try to make nice. Once you get labeled as 'difficult to work with' or a 'trouble maker,' it's very, very difficult to get any work done. Part of the job is relationships and the fun you have. When the relationships go bad, the job is just stressful. A lot of people who get these labels leave. It's just not fun anymore."*
>
> *(female, financial services firm)*

The outcomes that respondents referred to in their discussions of labeling included loss of trust,

respect and credibility, social rejection and weakened interpersonal ties, diminished power and hence

difficulty getting cooperation and buy-in, and a lower likelihood of promotion. As shown in Figure 2,

these outcomes appear to be highly inter-related. When an individual loses respect and/or credibility, he

or she risks damaging important task-related and social ties. One may, for example, be excluded from

important discussions. As social ties weaken, one may also have difficulty getting others' cooperation

and support for work-related projects. Without cooperation and support, it may be difficult to get one's

job done effectively. And if a person cannot accomplish his or her job effectively, the person's

organizational career is likely to suffer. As credibility and ability to do one's job suffers, further

exclusion is likely. In essence, since effectiveness in organizations often requires credibility and the use of informal relationships to gain information and cooperation, employees fear that getting a negative image or label like "troublemaker" will set into motion forces that will lead to their exclusion from social networks and ultimately, compromise their job performance. This is a dynamic process that unfolds over time and that may be difficult to reverse.

_____

Figure 2 About Here

_____

Our argument, therefore, is that employees are very concerned about the complex *relational* implications of speaking up about problems and concerns. These relational concerns are reflected not just in how respondents talked about their image fears, but also in their concerns about damaging valued relationships and upsetting colleagues. Based on our results, we would argue that silence is not just about discomfort of conveying bad news up a hierarchy (Festinger, 1960; Tesser & Rosen, 1977). As well, it is about the social and relational nature of work. That is, it is largely about relational currency and the importance of what scholars have referred to as social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Social capital can be thought if as resources (e.g., trust, goodwill) embedded in a social structure (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002). It stems not from personal characteristics or assets, but from ties to others, and is valuable because it can be accessed and/or mobilized to facilitate action. An actor within an organization can have more or less social capital at his or her disposal as a function of the social network of relationships tying that actor to others (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Research has shown that social capital influences career advancement and compensation and that it plays an important role in facilitating coordinated action, particularly in contexts where people need the trust and cooperation of others to achieve their objectives (Burt, 1992; Podolny & Baron, 1997).

Adler & Kwon (2002) noted that, like other forms of capital, social capital requires maintenance. It is not a given. This idea is important in suggesting that employees will work to build and maintain their social capital and will not engage in actions that may weaken or sever social ties. Our results suggest that

employees' fear of destroying social capital may be why they are often reluctant to speak to their bosses about issues and problems. Past research has suggested that people think about their public image when deciding whether to raise a potentially sensitive issue (Ashford et al., 1998). Our results suggest that this concern about public image reflects, at least in part, concerns about protecting one's social capital. Without sufficient social capital, employees are unable to perform their job effectively.

Limitations and Future Research Questions

One limitation of our study is the fact that we base our conclusions on a relatively small sample and our respondents were relatively young and inexperienced. It is possible, for example, that older, longer-tenured employees are more comfortable speaking up than the people we interviewed (Rudman et al., 1995). On the other hand, Noelle-Neuman (1974) suggested that older people may be less willing to articulate minority opinions than younger people because they have more at risk. It will be important for future work to study a more varied sample of employees.

Another potential limitation of our study is that we asked people to reflect on their past experiences. Because we asked respondents for retrospective recollections, we may not have gotten complete and accurate portrayals of the occurrences that they were discussing. There may also have been a social desirability bias operating that caused respondents to try to portray themselves in positive ways. Such bias, however, would most likely have created an under-reporting of silence since in the MBA student population in the United States, it is probably socially desirable to view oneself as able to speak up about one's concerns despite the problems involved.

In this study, we focused on the cognitive, emotional and social processes that underlie employees' decisions to remain silent about work issues of concern. Our goal was to complement the research that has been done on various forms of upward communication by exploring the question of why employees fail to speak up about real or potential organizational problems. An important next step is to look more closely at the types of organizational contexts that foster employee silence. For example, Morrison and Milliken's (2000) model proposes that silence will be more pervasive in organizations that are more centralized and in organizations where there is a high level of demographic dissimilarity

between managers and lower-level employees. Another area for future work would involve exploring how to most effectively alter employees' collective cognitive maps about the consequences of voice and silence. Finally, we believe it is important to examine the psychological and behavioral consequences of feeling unable to voice one's concerns at work. Research shows that whistleblowers typically suffer negative career and personal outcomes as a result of their calling attention to organizational wrongdoing. We believe that individuals who perceive that they cannot express legitimate concerns about job-related or organizational problems are also likely to suffer negative consequences. It would be valuable to examine whether this is the case.

Implications for Organizations

The decision to remain silent is common and yet, it can be a decision with potentially momentous consequences for individuals and for the organization to which these individuals belong. For example, since people tend to be silent about bad news, positive information is likely to flow up organizational hierarchies much more readily than negative information. This can result in large amounts of information about potential problems in the organization being lost to senior managers. It can also create serious distortions in the knowledge on which managers base their decisions. Thus, silence about important issues can compromise an organization's ability to detect errors and engage in learning. Employee silence can also create stress, dissatisfaction, cynicism and disengagement amongst employees (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Nemeth, 1997; Tamuz, 2001). These outcomes can have serious long-term consequences for the employees and for their relationships with the organization.

How can organizations ensure that employees will speak up when confronted with information about potential problems or issues of significance to the organization? It will be important for managers who are serious about designing learning organizations to realize that the dominant tendency is for employees to regard speaking up about concerns as risky, leading them to withhold information about potential problems or issues. If managers want employees to speak up about problems that they encounter, managers must convince organizational members that they truly want to hear about problems or issues as employees experience them. Edmondson (2003) talks about the need for leaders to create

workplaces where employees feel that it is safe to voice. If employees sense that managers are not interested in learning about potential problems or issues, or will react negatively to such information, they will not talk about them.

Thus, to design learning organizations, organizational leaders must fight against the tendency for hierarchies to impede the upward transfer of information about problems. A key step in designing such organizations is to recognize how natural silence is when viewed from the perspective of the employee. Building on our finding about the importance of labels, one obvious way to intervene is to eliminate the sense in employees' minds that they will be labeled negatively if they speak up. If labels like "courageous" were attached to people who spoke up rather than labels such as "troublemaker," the incentive structure for voice or silence would be quite different.

Another way to promote voice might be to create formal systems for the transfer of information about problems that operate outside the traditional organizational hierarchy. An example would be an organizational ombudsman. To be effective, however, any system that seeks to promote employee voice must be built on an understanding of the types of issues that employees are reluctant to raise, and the reasons why they often remain silent. For example, employees who speak up in such a system about sensitive issues such as incompetence or sexual harassment should ideally have their confidentiality protected so that they do not get labeled and cannot be retaliated against. As well, employees who have ideas or suggestions for improvement who do not feel that they can bring these to their bosses could submit them to a designated person who then presents the ideas for review. This would serve to create some potentially positive outcomes attached to the passage of ideas for process improvements up the hierarchy to offset what are now seen as potentially negative outcomes of upsetting one's boss or being perceived as critical.

Developing solutions for managers who want to encourage employees to feel comfortable expressing their concerns is an obvious goal but one that requires a rich understanding of what employees are silent about and why. In this paper, we have attempted to begin this process by focusing on the causes and consequences of silence as perceived through the eyes of organizational participants.

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Table 1

Frequency Data on the Reported Experience of Silence

Question	Percentage of Respondents
Do you feel generally comfortable speaking to your boss or to management about problems or issues that concern you at work?	
Generally yes	51%
No, not at all	23%
Only to some people or about some issues	26%
Have you ever felt that you could not openly raise an issue of concern to someone above you?	
Yes	85%
No	15%

Table 2

Issues That Respondents Said They Felt Unable to Raise to Those Above Them

Issue	Percentage of respondents who mentioned this as an issue they could not raise
Concerns about a colleague's or supervisor's competence or performance	37.5%
Problems with organizational processes or performance and/or suggestions for improvement	35%
Concerns about pay or pay equity	27.5%
Disagreement with company policies or decisions	22.5%
Personal career issues or concerns	20.0%
Ethical or fairness issues (e.g. professional misconduct, discrimination)	20%
Harassment or abuse	17.5%
Conflict with a coworker	15.0%
Other issues	20%

Table 3

Reasons that Respondents Gave For Not Speaking Up about Concerns or Problems

Reason	Percentage of Respondents who Offered this Reason
Fears and Beliefs:	

Fear of Being Labeled or Viewed Negatively
    - As a troublemaker or complainer
    - As a tattletale
	30%

Fear of Damaging a Relationship
    - Loss of trust and respect
    - Loss of acceptance and support
	27.5%

Feelings of Futility:
    -Speaking up will not make a difference
    -Recipient will not be responsive
	25%

Fear of Retaliation or Punishment
    - Losing Job
    - Not Getting Promoted
	22.5%

Concerns about Negative Impact on Others
    - Not wanting to upset or embarrass someone
    - Not wanting someone to get in trouble
	20%

Other Factors:	

Individual characteristics
    - Lack of experience
    - Lack of tenure
	32.5%

Organizational characteristics
    - Hierarchical structure
    - Unsupportive culture
	30%

Poor relationship with supervisor
    - Supervisor is unsupportive
    - Relationship is distant
	20%

APPENDIX A:

Interview Guide

Before we begin, we'd like to tell you a little bit about our study.

We are interested in whether people in organizations feel comfortable communicating up hierarchies and in understanding the circumstances under which they don't feel comfortable. In other words, we want to understand how and when people choose to speak to those above them about issues or problems that concern them at work. We are also interested in finding out whether there are certain topics that people feel they cannot speak openly or honestly about and if so, why this is the case.

In this interview, I would like to learn about what you think about these issues. So, I would like to ask you a few questions about your own experiences with speaking up or remaining silent. Please feel free to say anything you think -- we are not looking for anything in particular; we are simply interested in different people's experiences and points of view. Also, all information will be kept completely confidential.

1. Do you feel generally comfortable speaking to your boss or to management about problems or issues that concern you at work?

2. Have you ever felt that you could <u>not</u> openly raise an issue of concern to your boss or to others above you?

3. How often do you find yourself in this situation?

4. Can you think of a specific instance in your current job where you have felt you could not or should not speak openly or honestly about a certain issue or issues?

   a. Tell me about it. What was the issue?

   b. What made you feel that you could not speak about it?

   c. What do you think would have happened if you expressed your concerns?

5. You've given me a specific example (or: if you can't think of a specific example…) would you say that there are <u>general classes or types</u> of issues that you cannot raise with your boss or others above you?

6. What are these issues?

7. What do you believe inhibits you from speaking up about these types of issues or concerns?

8. Do you think that your colleagues share this feeling of unease/comfort? Why or why not? Do you think they would give the same reasons as you for feeling uneasy/comfortable about expressing their concerns at work?

Individual Characteristics
- Lack of experience
- Low position

Organizational Characteristics
- Hierarchical structure
- Unsupportive culture

Relationship with Supervisor
- Unsupportive style
- Lack of closeness

Anticipated Negative Outcomes:

- Being Labeled or Viewed Negatively

- Damaged Relationships

- Retaliation or Punishment

- Negative Impact on Others

Belief that Speaking Up Will Not Make a Difference

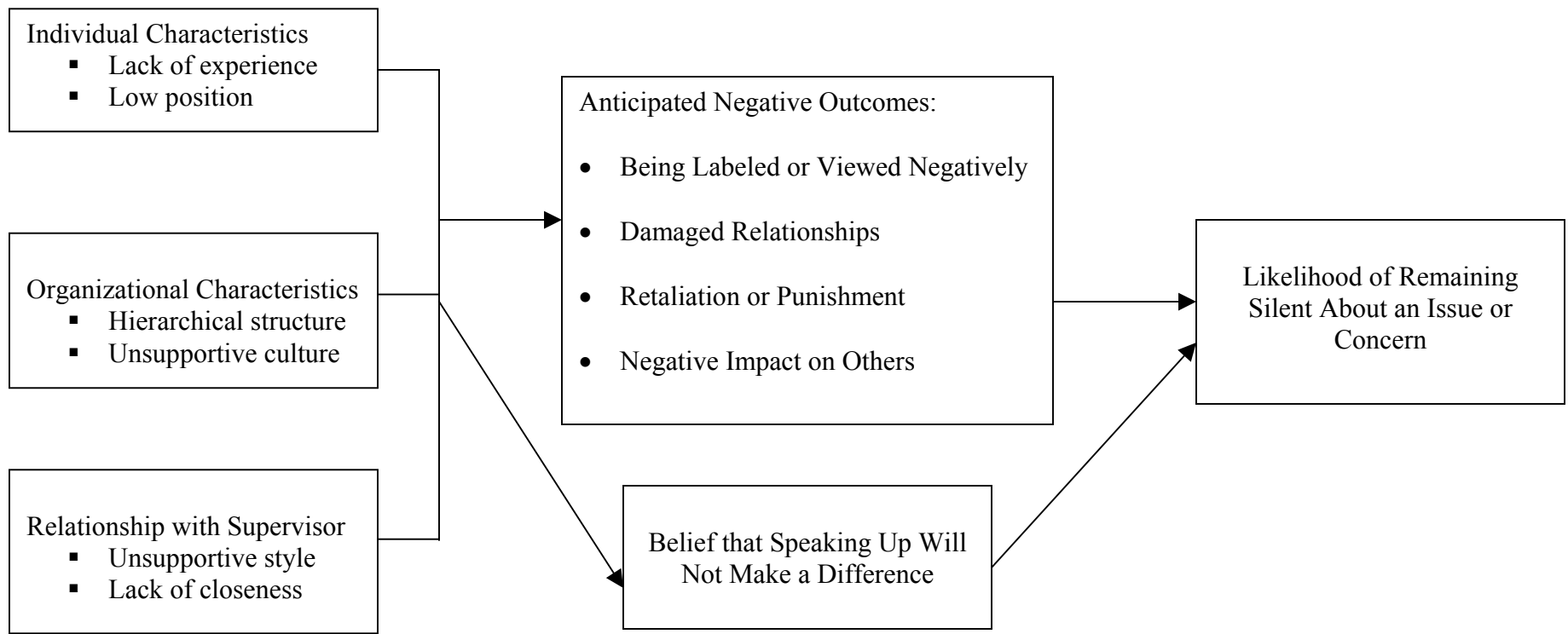Likelihood of Remaining Silent About an Issue or Concern
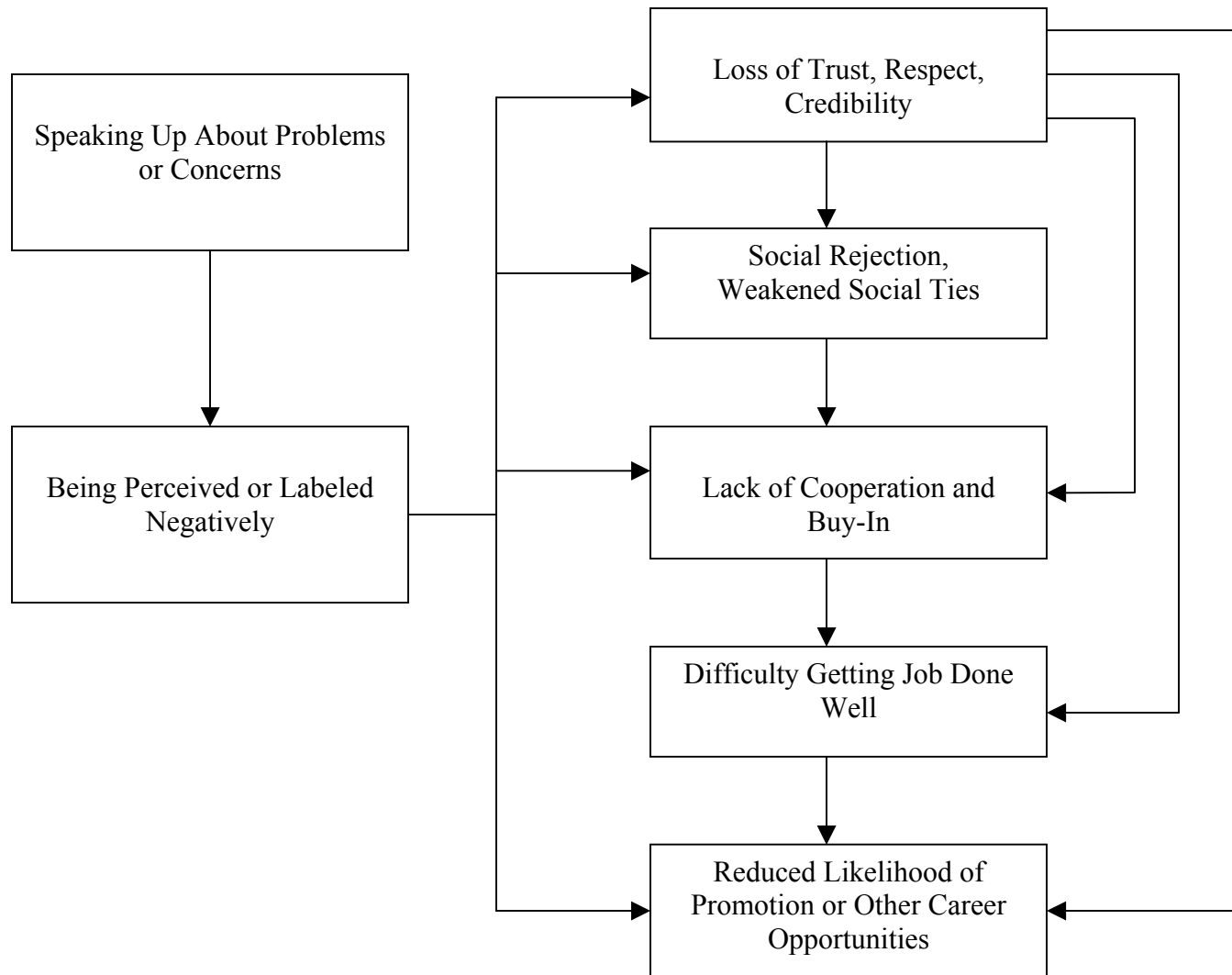
Figure 1: A Model of the Choice to Remain Silent

Figure 2: The Perceived Implications of a Negative Label or Image