



# Communication & Performance

Challenges and enablers of upward communication: How to foster a speak-up culture in your organization

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

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## Executive summary

Upward communication can be intimidating and difficult in organizations depending on the culture and how employees view authority figures. It is important for organizational leaders to be open to upward communication if they want to know what is happening in their organizations. The main factors that cause silence include internal beliefs about authority, personality, leader behaviors, and organizational culture.

In other dossiers within this sprint, we learned of the importance of communication at work along with reasons that it can occur. One of the more extreme examples was the failure to communicate upward in healthcare and aerospace organizations, leading to the deaths of more than 1700 Americans in one year. This dossier will focus exclusively on the complexities behind communicating upward from various perspectives.

### Defining the phenomenon

Speaking upward is formally referred to as “voice” in organizational behavior literature, in which it is defined as “behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge with an intent to improve rather than merely criticize” (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998, p. 854). The definition of voice is meant to exclude speech that has no constructive purpose (e.g., derision) (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998).

### Understanding the problem – early research

Given the problem of employees’ reticence to speak up, scholars have focused on understanding the antecedents of voice. LePine and Van Dyne’s (1998) research was among the early work that explored the antecedents of voice, finding that employees with higher self-esteem were more likely to speak up than people with lower self-esteem, particularly if they were in smaller groups. Authors of other work on voice proposed that people remain silent out of fear, likely due to evolutionarily rooted fears of confronting authority figures (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, & Edmondson, 2009). Concerns about loss of social capital, reputation, or promotion also may play a role in

silence when voice could benefit a situation (Dutton et al., 1997, 2002; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

## Understanding the problem - evolutionarily rooted causes of silence

Beyond beliefs and self-esteem, there may even be a deeper cause for withholding rooted in our evolutionary history. Scholars have argued that we are evolutionarily predisposed to withhold in order to minimize our risks when dealing with authority (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Evolutionary arguments that explain withholding are partly based on the idea that people have “prepared fears” (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009, Seligman, 1971) which include fears of things like heights, snakes, and authority. Prepared fears are learned more easily and held more deeply than other kinds of fears. These fears are easily acquired with minimal exposure to a stimulus. Once developed, such fears are resistant to extinction (LeDoux, 1996). Prepared fears emerged as natural selection favoured individuals who had a predisposition to learn to be afraid of things that could threaten their lives (Ohman & Mineka, 2001). People who instantly became afraid of snakes were more likely to survive and pass along the predisposition for these fears to subsequent generations than people who were not afraid and thus possibly killed by the snakes that they judged as harmless.

Prepared fears about speaking up to one’s boss are a modern-day adaptation of more ancient fears about challenging authority in one’s clan or tribe in the environment of evolutionary adaptiveness (EEA). High status individuals in the EEA held significant control over resources such as food and access to mates (Sapolsky, 2005). Studies of modern tribal societies show that challenging high status, resource-laden authorities is somewhat uncommon (Chagnon, 1968), but when it does occur, it can lead to very negative outcomes ranging from ostracism to death (Archer, 1988; Duntley, 2005; Kerr & Levine, 2008).

Lower status individuals who were predisposed to avoid confrontations with authority would be likely to pass their predispositions on to subsequent generations. Those who did not have this fear may never have survived long enough to have children. Furthermore, the very fact that humans tend to consistently form hierarchical structures

is also likely to be a product of evolution from hierarchical primates (Erdal & Whiten, 1994). The recognition and “prepared fear” of higher status individuals within these structures is argued to have arisen due to self-preservation in a hierarchical species (deCatanzaro, 1998, p. 129).

Today, humans can survive without the approval of a tribal leader, and resources in Western societies are not amassed through hunting and gathering. Nevertheless, resources in organizations are limited and controlled by people with high status to a greater degree than by people with low status. Further, behavioral patterns from the EEA have not been extinguished from 30,000 years of human evolution (Cosmides & Tooby, 1987). Therefore, scholars have argued that “speaking up to someone in a position of authority at work...is often tacitly understood by people as challenging the authority [and] contemplating voice stokes a prepared fear of angering higher-status others” (Kish-Gephart et al., p. 176). Additionally, it may be a natural consequence for people to develop self-protective beliefs from a lifetime of dealing with outcomes from challenging more powerful people. Due to different life experiences, beliefs vary in the population (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) but the fear of challenging authority is far more universal given its evolutionary roots.

## Understanding the problem – belief systems

The research by Detert and Edmondson (2011) provided evidence that internal beliefs (labelled as “implicit voice theories” in their work) can explain why employees withhold in the workplace. Specifically, they studied on employees’ reasons for self-protective silence, defined as “instances in which a would-be speaker believes the possibility exists to speak up to someone with positional power in a face-to-face context about something of importance” (p. 462). One example of a self-protective internal belief about speaking up was “don’t bypass the boss upward,” which is manifested by the thought that “it is not a good idea to make your manager look bad in front of the group by speaking up without telling him/her in advance.” This was identified as a common belief held by a sizable portion of the authors’ interviewees.

Detert and Edmondson (2011) identified five core beliefs (that they referred to as “Implicit Voice Theories”) that prevented upward communication (Table 1).

Belief Category	Sample Thought
Presumed target identification	Someone who helps create a process or routine is likely to be offended when others suggest changes.
Need solid data or solutions (to speak up)	Unless you have clear solutions, you shouldn't speak up about problems.
Don't bypass the boss upward	When you speak up about problems or areas for improvement to your boss in front of people who are even higher in the organization, you make your boss look bad.
Don't embarrass the boss in public	It is not a good idea to make your manager look bad in front of the group by speaking up without telling him/her in advance.
Negative career consequences of voice	You are more likely to be rewarded in organizational life by "going along quietly" than by speaking up about ways the organization can improve.

Excerpted from Detert & Edmondson (2011).

Employees in organizations have internal belief systems about speaking up to bosses (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). It is logical to assume, on one hand, that those beliefs are formed by the current organization's context. For example, one's current boss may have behaved in ways that led to beliefs that it is unsafe to speak up. Indeed, there is some support for the proposition that various workplace factors lead individuals to withhold (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003). In contrast, Detert and Edmondson (2011) proposed that internal beliefs reflect more than what has been learned in one's present job or environment. They argued that internal beliefs about voice originate from generalized beliefs about how one should behave toward authority in a hierarchy. Their work provided initial evidence that beliefs about speaking up to authority figures is formed earlier than the current work context.

## Internal belief longevity

If someone has had bad experiences with authority figures over time, these negative situations will have a stronger effect than positive experiences, and intense memories tend to be very persistent (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; LeDoux, 1996). So, it may be difficult for implicit theories about voice to change on their own, particularly if they stem from negative experiences. Also, beliefs are subject to cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, that serve to reinforce beliefs even in the face of contradictory evidence (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998; Furnham, 1988; Wyer, 2004). Therefore, there may not be many aspects of workplace context that are able to affect internal beliefs, though it is a difficult challenge.

## Leaders trigger subordinate silence

A number of behaviors and characteristics displayed by authority can convey dominance that triggers fears that lead to withholding by subordinates. For example, loud voices and abusive remarks may trigger fear among employees in an organization (Milliken et al., 2003; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Physical characteristics such as height have long been associated with higher status and dominance (Roberts & Herman, 1986). Simple changes in posture by one's boss (e.g., taking up more space) can increase withholding in a subordinate (Locke, 2008). The extent to which evolutionary cues will trigger prepared fears and suppress voice can be tested empirically, but the outcome may also depend on the internal beliefs that a person holds about voice.

Most of us have been in situation where we have found that speaking upward to a boss was difficult, and it was better to stay quiet. Due to the serious consequences of silence, researchers have studied what causes this withholding from multiple perspectives. Early research has found that basic things like self-esteem and group size can affect withholding, and evolutionary psychology explains why we have such a deep and pervasive fear of authority. Later researchers explored internal belief systems that govern our interactions with authority in multiple contexts, suggesting that organizational culture and personality can only partly explain voice and silence.

## Key take-aways

- Failure to communicate upward can have severe consequences including death (in healthcare and aerospace industries, for example)
- People with higher self-esteem tend to communicate upward more than those with lower self-esteem
- It is theorized that we are evolutionarily wired to have some fear of authority, which drives our reticence to speak upward
- Internal belief systems (also known as implicit voice theories) cause individuals to refrain from speaking up. These beliefs persist from one organization to the next
- Leaders who are loud, abusive, and dominant tend to stifle upward communication because this can trigger fear in subordinates

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