Graduate trainees should be seen and not heard? Managing the dilemma of speaking up without speaking out (of place)

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abstract

This paper examines, from within a social constructionist perspective, how graduate trainee newcomers to an organization talk about adjusting their interactions. This is presumed to be a form of learned institutionalised silence, manifest in speaking appropriately. The purpose of this paper is to examine empirical data, from a longitudinal study of graduate trainees, in order to illustrate a dilemma facing this population of employees, that of speaking up without speaking out. The paradoxical requirement of members of a cohort of graduates in competition with one another for scarce promotional resource is to be able to fit in yet stand out. To relate this to silence, this leads to a particular type of interaction management, which unfolds over time.

How newcomers to organizations learn about what it is appropriate to be silent about is of interest. Silence should not be simply regarded as saying nothing, rather, it is a complex phenomenon that includes saying the right thing to the right person. In acknowledging that silence is difficult to identify and interpret I regard silence as not just an absence of sound, although it may be at times, but also as a refusal to speak
when expected. From the perspective that speech and silence are in a dialectical relationship with each other, I suggest that the participants’ attention to descriptions of occasions when they choose not to say something says a great deal. Furthermore, I propose that learning about organizationally defined silence is one of the most important aspects of organizational assimilation as it is through this tacit knowledge that all other learning takes place. In addition, it is probably the most difficult to find set of rules a newcomer seeks, unspoken and unacknowledged until they are broached. These rules are often maintained through myth and reputation unless specifically asked about (by an outsider, researcher, for example) or tested by mavericks.

Learning, or adjusting, an interactive style that is contextually relevant to an organization is one of the ‘ropes’ that newcomers have to navigate (Herriot, 1992). However, the role of the longer serving members of the organization, and the established practices of communication, are not rigid frameworks into which the newcomer must slip, rather they work as resources that may be drawn on by the newcomer, to do discursive business. There should be no doubt that articulate newcomers can mobilise interactional resources for their own ends. Indeed, one mark of someone who is successful in this is often evident in a rapid upward progression through the company.

Isaacs argued that shared organizational meanings are “what produces the commonality of behaviours across any complex organization and what gives communities the power to torment and stifle their members” (1993, p. 25). By considering what may be drawn on as a resource in order to stifle the members of an
organization we may begin to understand what forces systematically discourage people from speaking in a particular way. The collective nature of the phenomenon leads us to consider the individual in context (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). A norm of keeping quiet about issues in a workplace has been described as a ‘climate of silence’ (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). In other words, an intolerance of dissent (Nemeth, 1997) or implicit messages not to ‘rock the boat’ (Redding, 1985) lead to a collective withholding of opinions. Commentators have predicted that stable, mature, industries are more likely to engender collective silence, whereas, companies in high velocity environments, which demand rapid change in order to survive, are less likely to (Eisenhart, 1989). Demographic dissimilarity and high vertical differentiation, bringing managers in at the top, also contribute to the likelihood of silence. In these situations the process remains hidden as employees see no point in speaking out, or even regard it as potentially dangerous (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; see also Coupland, 2001).

Several commentators have discussed how interaction is important to newcomers (Gilsdorf, 1998; Griffin, Colella and Goparaju, 2000; Louis, 1990; Miller and Jablin, 1991; Reichers, 1987). Some of the complexity surrounding this issue is highlighted in Casey’s (1995) now classic study of ‘designer employees’ in the contemporary workplace. She differentiated between participants ‘speaking up’ and ‘speaking out’, the former required, and the latter undesirable. This distinction was unspoken, and assumed to be implicitly understood by employees. “Employees must learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable verbal commentary in these new conditions” (Casey, 1995, p. 141). Self-censored employees learn the subtle rules governing desired discursive practices through acculturation. In addition, Gilsdorf
(1998) found that communication expectations in organizations were conveyed by unwritten means, indicating a tacit, subtle, learning process. However, the silence attained by discouraging speaking out is only one side of a dilemma managed by graduate trainees in the study, who are also required to be seen to be ‘speaking up’.

Consideration of the post-selection application of the person-organization-fit model (Wanous, 1980; 1992; Wanous and Reichers, 2000) may explain silence, in that undesirable and inappropriate activities are reduced as newcomers work out the implicit rules governing interactions in the work place. However, part of that adjustment may be a suppression of desirable questioning that newcomers bring to an organization. Earlier commentators have referred to this ‘personalization’ of the work place as essential for the renewal of the organization (Hess, 1993; Jablin, 1982; 1987). This has particular relevance for the population of graduate trainees as they are expected to bring something new to the work place. Clearly this raises the issue of ‘speaking up’ as pertinent to this group of people who will be active in their adjustment to company rules.

The data collection from which the extracts have been taken is a longitudinal study of graduate trainees’ accounts of their experiences as newcomers to a company. The participants were employed by one, well-known, U.K. high street, retail chain as graduate entrants on a training scheme. Twenty-one participants, six male and fifteen female, took part in the study over a two-year period. Using semi-structured interviews I met with the participants at approximately six-monthly intervals. Our conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The method of analysis is an eclectic mix of discourse analysis drawing on discursive psychological and
conversation analytic concepts and practices (Boden, 1994; Buttny, 1993; Gill, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Silverman, 1998; Widdicombe, 1993).

The main findings illustrate how the participants go about making themselves heard in a distinctive manner. Through employing ‘casual’ conversation techniques, criticising people’s ability to ‘sell’ themselves and metaphorically shouting the participants indicate how they manage the tension of speaking up but not out (of place). Newcomers do arrive prepared to ask fresh questions, however they rapidly learn the consequences of doing so and hence choose to do otherwise. It may be that this adaptability is a particularly valuable resource for the organization, residing in newcomers’ ability to question established practices, which is currently lost during the newcomer assimilation process. This suggests potential that is, as yet, unacknowledged and untapped in organizations. However, one problem for senior managers is that silence from employees may be being interpreted as acquiescence. This suggests further potential for future research. Other commentators have argued that the reduction of variety of voice has a cost: “the marginalization and silencing of all these soft and faint voices – and who could know if they do not address tomorrow’s problems with their different voices?” (Kornberger, Carter and Clegg, 2002, p. 10).

Shotter’s (2001) notion of violating the norms of everyday institutions is evident in the extracts, not in an aggressive, confrontational way, rather in a way that the norms are used to carry out the discursive business of the speaker. Weick’s (1995) claim that every manager is an author and Shotter’s (1993) notion of managers as practical authors can be extended to include all members of organizations as authors, where
talk is regarded as reproducing and creating institutionalised arrangements (Boden, 1994), albeit with differing discursive resources (Mumby and Clair, 1997). In this instance the institutionalised arrangement is that of silence, through learned appropriate interactions. However, in a desire to play the game, climb the ladder (Grey, 1994) without being seduced into believing uncritically, the participants have been willing students. Silence is engendered and maintained by the participants’ unwillingness to risk their embryonic and fragile reputations.

References


