WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

New ideas and positive behaviours from employees are extremely valuable, especially in stressful economic times. However, it is during these times that employees will use either prosocial voice or defensive silence to signal whether they are willing to participate in organizational decisions and actions. Employees not speaking up can lead to reduced employee participation, less organizational learning, less innovation and less receptiveness to change.

- **Prosocial Voice**: An attempt to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs
- **Defensive Silence**: Intentional and proactive behaviour that is intended to protect the self from external threats

This research asks: what helps supervisors to hear prosocial voice and defensive silence? How can we better understand the role of the supervisor in encouraging or discouraging employee voice? This research looks at supervisors specifically, as they are the organization’s first line of defense against a culture of silence and towards a culture of openness. Furthermore, the research looks at what contextual factors, including union participation, levels of tension and use of positive coping behaviours can have an affect, and how does the supervisor’s trust of employees play a role?

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO

Francine Schlosser and Roxanne Zolin from the University of Windsor and Queensland University of Technology, respectively, looked at what helps supervisors hear, encourage and discourage prosocial voice and also what helps supervisors to notice defensive silence.

Together, the two researchers conducted a cross-sectional field study of 142 supervisors. Supervisors were selected from a database of managers from a directory of local leadership organizations. Potential participants were first contacted by phone, and those who agreed to participate had a survey mailed to them.

They surveys featured a series of questions which the researchers used to perform a linear regression on to model the relationship between the prosocial voice and defensive silence as the dependent variables and the various independent variables. The managers contacted were from across many organizations, but with an over-representation of public sector management in education and government. The study was conducted in a central Canadian region with a strong union presence. These companies were hit hard by the economic decline.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers came to the following conclusions:

- Prosocial voice is increased by supervisor tension and trust in employees.
• Defensive silence is increased by supervisor tension but reduced by unionization of employees and trust in employees.
• Therefore, this research indicates that voice and silence are orthogonal and not opposites of the same construct.

In summary, the researchers found that prosocial voice is increased by supervisor tension and trust in employees, while defensive silence is increased by supervisor tension but reduced by unionization of employees and trust in employees. Therefore, in a time of economic disruption and uncertainty, the risk associated with speaking out may be mitigated through supervisory trust and defensiveness may be minimized through union presence and supervisory trust.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Supervisors can stand to benefit from this research, which in turn brings benefit to other stakeholders. An economic decline not only impacts directly affected companies, but also often has a reverberating effect on other local organizations, from businesses to charities and households in the region. It is often the supervisor’s responsibility to maintain a positive environment in an organization and keep communication open. Therefore, knowing the importance of maintaining trust between the supervisors and subordinates and providing protection to employees during times of uncertainty is important information to have.

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

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

CITATION


KEYWORDS

Employee Participation, Employees Relations, Employees Behaviour, Trust, Voice, Silence, Positive Coping, Management Attitudes, Recession

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

In a time of economic disruption and uncertainty, the risk associated with speaking out may be mitigated through supervisory trust and defensiveness may be minimized through union presence and supervisory trust.