



# Identification of Factors Affecting Organizational Silence from the Viewpoint of Middle Managers of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Organizational silence has irreparable consequences for the organization, since withholding ideas (silence) will stop employees' minds from generating organizational knowledge. Therefore, this study aimed at identifying the factors affecting organizational silence among middle managers as well as providing solutions to this problem.

**Methods:** The present qualitative research was conducted through content and thematic analysis. The viewpoints of the managers of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences during years 2016 and 2017, were collected using the purposeful sampling method. The findings were saturated after conducting ten semi-structured interviews.

**Results:** The findings of the research showed that factors affecting organizational silence among middle managers of the university were categorized to: (1) organizational factors (including three main themes: (a) organizational structure and process, (b) organizational communication, (c) organizational culture); and (2) and individual factors (including three main themes: (a) psychological factors, (b) communication skills, and (c) demographic factors).

**Conclusions:** The findings showed that organizational silence exists among university managers and reduces the effectiveness of decision-making and organizational change processes due to restricting the amount of data provided for decision makers.

**Keywords:** Organizational Silence, Organizational Voice, Qualitative Research, University of Medical Sciences

## 1. Background

The twentieth century is known as the age of "knowledge economy", which is the result of creativity and innovation (1). Organizations are in a constant struggle to maintain competitive advantages through creativity development, therefore they allow the development of new ideas in employees (2), the main sources of creativity and innovation in organizations. That is why organizations are constantly looking for ways to encourage their employees to express their opinions and beliefs (3). Today, the most important source of competitive advantage in organizations is their human capital not their equipment; therefore, superior human capital contributes to their sustained competitive advantage, since human capital is the most valuable capital in organizations.

Organizations that enhance the employees' motivation and ability, and effectively use their human capital to gain ascendancy, will succeed (4). Organizational silence

means refusal in expressing ideas, opinions, and information regarding organizational difficulties (5). Organizational silence is a social phenomenon that exists at the organizational level and is influenced by a variety of organizational characteristics, including decision making processes, management processes, timely information, organizational climate, and employee perception (6).

However, the question that remains to be answered is who should remove organizational silence, encourage creativity and facilitate employee engagement in organizational processes? Of course, managers play the most significant role in this regard and they have to pay a large indemnity for lack of planning, resulting in underutilization of organizational resources (7).

Pinder and Harlos (8) defined organizational silence as employee refusal of behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluations of organizational situations. Morrison and Milliken (9) also considered organizational silence as a social phenomenon, in which employees refuse to express

their opinions and concerns about organizational problems. In another definition, organizational silence is referred to as the circumstances, in which employees conscientiously do not explicitly offer their ideas, suggestions, and constructive thoughts about the organization. This can have a positive or negative effect on the organization's changes. For creating a proper environment for employees, an organizational manager should encourage them to express their worries, ideas, and perspectives (10).

Organizational silence is an inefficient process that can neutralize all organizational efforts and may occur in various forms, such as collective silence in meetings, low participation in proposed schemes, low collective voices, and so on (11).

According to Zerei Matin et al. (5), organizational silence results from a series of managerial and organizational variables. Qualitative studies, such as grounded theory, are recommended to trace the root of organizational silence and provide an appropriate suggestion system.

One of the consequences of organizational silence is its effect on organizational change and decision making processes. In general, organizational silence affects the quality of decision making, organizational change, and employees' responses and behaviors (9). The other consequence of organizational silence is its effect on employees' feelings and behavioral responses; researchers have presented a positive image of organizational procedures, which allow employees to express their opinions, as they respect the employees as valuable members of the organization.

Research shows that employee commitment and trust within the organization will decrease if they feel that the organization does not value them. The consequences of low commitment and trust are reduction of employee satisfaction and motivation, Psychological isolation, and even employee withdrawal from the organization (12). In a study entitled "organizational silence and the ways out of it", Hassanpour explored organizational silence and stated that in many contemporary organizations, employees refuse to give their opinions and concerns about the organization and its problems. This collective phenomenon is called "organizational silence." Of course, the consideration of organizational silence as a within-organization phenomenon requires its twin "organizational voice", i.e. ideas on organizational issues. Many scholars believe that silence and voice represent endorsement on or resistance to the status quo. Although scientists have different, and in some cases, contradictory opinions in this regard, in any case, organizational silence is an obstacle against staff comments, and employees' prolonged refusal to give ideas will inhibit their ability to innovate and hinder continuous improvement.

Boogisian (13) examined the interaction of organiza-

tional voices in a phenomenological study of employee experience of organizational science. In his study, he stated that most of the members of an organization tend to maintain their current position. This necessitates avoiding uncertainty and doubt in decision-making situations. As a result, they realized that they should not do something special, thus, they remain silent. Maintaining one's position requires avoiding decision-making under uncertain and risky situations.

Therefore, this study aimed at identifying factors affecting organizational silence among middle managers of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, during years 2016 and 2017, as well as providing solutions to this problem using experts' opinions.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Approach

Methodologically, this study was conducted by taking a qualitative approach to address influential factors on organizational silence from the viewpoint of middle managers of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, during years 2016 and 2017, in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### 2.2. Study Population and Sampling Method

In the current study, the middle managers were not meant to be members of the board of directors (university president and their deputies), as well as frontline directors, who were directly involved with the executive body. Here, the researchers attempted to use such managers in different parts of the university (food and medicine, management and resources development, student affairs, etc.) to increase the credibility of the study. They were also selected from people, who are currently both managers and those, who were previously on the management side. In addition, people with different and sometimes different perspectives were used.

By contrast with quantitative research, the sample size is not determined from the beginning, in qualitative research; rather, data saturation determines the adequacy of sampling (14). Sampling in this study was purposeful and theoretical, so that one or two key employees with rich information on different aspects of organizational silence, that volunteered to participate in the study, were interviewed. Subsequently, the next group of employees were selected and interviewed by analyzing the data obtained from these interviews until the data and classes were completed and saturated.

### 2.3. Data Collection

In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered as a research tool (14) and data is collected through appropriate techniques, which require active participant interaction, such as individual interviews, group interviews, and observation. In this study, data was collected through a deep individual interview, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Arena Memo was also used in some cases. Questions were designed in the form of an interview guide, focusing on the topic and were used during interviews.

The questions were about organizational silence and voice, leadership style, personal experience, and current managers and experts' approach in this field. The sequence and number of questions were not the same for all participants and varied according to conditions. The interview guide assured the researcher of obtaining the same data from all participants (14).

In order to execute the data collection plan, one of the researchers conducted the interview after explaining the objectives of the study to each participant and obtaining an informed consent. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed environment at an appropriate time and place, determined by the participants and were recorded, after obtaining permission from them. The length of each interview was determined, according to the participants' conditions.

The interview was initiated with greetings, restatement of the research objective and a friendly conversation and then focused on the participants' perspectives on organizational voice and silence. The interviewer tried to discover deep and original concepts and encouraged the participants to freely express their opinions about the research topic. When necessary, they asked thoroughgoing and deep questions, such as "would you explain more?"; "Did you mean that ...", "What do you mean...?" Pausing a few seconds before asking the next question and allowing the participants to think more, encouraging participants to speak freely, and listening to them carefully were effective strategies for the interviewer to obtain richer information and increase the participants' confidence and empathy.

### 2.4. Data Management and Analysis

Immediately, after recording each interview, the researchers listened to it carefully; then, each interview was transcribed word-by-word until the analysis unit was formed. Subsequently, the data was read, followed by marking and coding important sentences and phrases. Similar codes were merged and the initial classification was performed. Data reduction was continued for all analysis units until the classification was finished, and general,

conceptual and abstract data were placed in the main category.

### 2.5. Validity of the Data and Study

During this process, the principles of purposeful sampling with maximum diversity (different responsibilities, diverse work history, and different fields of work) were observed. Purposeful participant selection with a wide range of variation allowed a more comprehensive review of experts' perspective on organizational silence and voice. To ensure data saturation, data analysis began after each interview transcription. Data deficiencies/gaps were then identified. Accordingly, the sampling was continued until all the categories and themes were extracted and saturated and no more new categories and concepts were achieved.

In order to ensure the accuracy of collected data, the following were considered: Diversity in the participants' experience, expertise, place of work, gender, researcher's experiences and pre-assumptions, accuracy in data recording, effective communication with participants, long-term involvement in the analysis of data obtained from the interview, review by participants and consulting two experienced professors in the field of qualitative studies on the obtained codes and themes; these were based on four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability), proposed by Lincoln and Guba regarding the establishment of reliability and validity in the qualitative research paradigm (15).

## 3. Results

Ten managers with the work history at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences participated in this study. After obtaining semantic unit expressions and removing/merging repetitive and similar codes, two main dimensions were obtained that included six main themes and 35 subthemes, which are presented in Box 1.

### 3.1. First Dimension: Organizational Factors

According to the participants in this study, one group of factors affecting organizational silence among managers is the group including three main themes: Organizational structure and process, organizational communication, and organizational culture.

#### 3.1.1. Organizational Structure and Process

From the participants' viewpoints, one of the organizational factors, which effects organizational silence among middle managers is organizational structure and process (main theme) that is categorized to eight sub themes:

**Box 1.** Dimensions and Themes

Main Dimension /Main Theme /Sub-Theme
<b>Organizational factors</b>
Organizational structure and process
Making decision in high levels of the organization
The mechanism for workforce attraction
Supervisory and regulatory system' performance
Employee job security
Availability of employment conditions outside the organization
The effect of bonuses or rewards
Transparency in allocating benefits
Knowledge of the managers about the topic of the meeting
Organizational culture
Organization's prudentially
Mocking or neglecting and rejecting the idea
The priority of organizational interests over personal interests
Fear of misusing new ideas
Job commitment
<b>Individual factors</b>
Psychological factors
Commitment to religious instructions and values
Manager's conservatism
The way managers treat subordinates
The ability to speak out the questions
Leadership style
Demographic factors
Gender
Occupation type
Employment Status and type

### 3.1.1.1 Making Decisions at High Levels of the Organization

In this regard, one of the managers said;

"Some people say: we have decided, so we do it." (participant No 6)

### 3.1.1.2. The Mechanism for Workforce Attraction

From the participants' point of view, workforce attraction is one of the sub themes of organizational structure, which affects managers' organizational silence.

"We do not have a scale for employment, i.e. we do not hire efficient employees. Some people are employed by answering non-standard questions and they will be imposed on the organization for 30 years." (participant No. 3)

### 3.1.1.3. Supervisory and Regulatory Systems' Performance

Another influential sub-theme of organizational structure is the role of regulatory and supervisory units of the organization. In this regard, one of the managers acknowledged that

"If you make an expert remark and your boss is against you, no one will support you." (participant No. 3)

### 3.1.1.4. Employee Job Security

From the participants' point of view, another sub-theme of organizational structure is job security. In this regard, one of the managers stated:

"Anyone, who has a conflict with his manager may be fired." (participant No. 3)

### 3.1.1.5. Availability of Employment Conditions Outside the Organization

From the participants' point of view, this sub-theme of organizational structure has a negative effect on organizational silence.

"Wealthy employees don't remain silent although they may be fired." (participant No. 8)

### 3.1.1.6. The Effect of Bonuses or Rewards

From the participants' point of view, one of the sub-themes of organizational structure is the distribution of bonuses or rewards among employees.

"If the employee reward system is really implemented and payment of bonuses to employees is based on their constructive proposals and ideas, employees may express their opinions to win financial rewards." (participant No. 10)

Another manager with a different idea said: "We all feel that rewards will have a positive effect on organizational silence, however, this is not the case. It can work for a short time." (participant No. 5)

### 3.1.1.7. Transparency in Allocating Benefits

From the participants' point of view, the allocation of benefits in a clear and transparent way is another sub-theme of organizational structure that affects organizational silence.

"The great disadvantage of our organization is that personnel payments are somewhat related to the managers, so, if employees expressed their dissatisfaction and criticize management performance, their payments will be affected." (participant No. 1)

### 3.1.1.8. Knowledge of the Managers About the Topic of the Meeting

One of the cases, which influences managers' decision making is adequate information about the topic of the meeting.

"Managers are not aware of their cadre and have no scientific expertise in responding." (participant No. 6)

### 3.1.2. Organizational Culture

From the participants' perspective, one of the organizational factors that influences organizational silence is the concept of organizational culture, which is categorized to five themes: Mocking or neglecting and rejecting the idea, the priority of organizational interests over personal interests, fear of misusing new ideas, job commitment, and organization's prudence.

#### 3.1.2.1. Mocking or Neglecting and Rejecting the Idea

From the participants' point of view, another theme of organizational culture that has a positive effect on organizational silence is mocking or neglecting and rejecting the idea. In this regard, one of the managers acknowledged that:

"Although some people have blamed or mocked my ideas, I have not lost my motivation to express my opinions." (participant No. 6).

#### 3.1.2.2. The Priority of Organizational Interests Over Personal Interests

From the participants' point of view, this is another theme of organizational culture. "Sometimes your organizational interests guide you towards a wrong path and you move in that direction due to its benefits, although you know that's the wrong path." (participant No. 5).

#### 3.1.2.3. Fear of Misusing New Ideas

From the participants' point of view, a theme of organizational culture that effects organizational silence among employees is fear of misusing new ideas.

"You make a suggestion that may be theft and offered by someone else." (participant No. 8), in this regard, another manager stressed "Some of my colleagues say that my idea may be recorded by the manager in his own favor, or middle officials may offer it themselves." (participant No. 6)

#### 3.1.2.4. Job Commitment

One of the managers stated that "A person who is ethically committed to the organization, expresses his opinions." (participant No. 2)

### 3.1.2.5. Organization's Prudence

From the participants' point of view, another theme of organizational culture is managers' prudence in the organization. In this regard, one of the managers stated: "Both personal and organizational interests lead to organizational silence." (participant No. 3)

## 3.2. Second Dimension: Individual Factors

From the participants' point of view, another dimension affecting organizational silence among managers is the concept of individual factors, which include three main themes: Psychological factors, communication skills, and demographic factors.

### 3.2.1. Psychological Factors

From the perspective of the participants in this study, one group of individual factors that affect organizational silence among middle managers is psychological factors group that is categorized to three themes: Commitment to religious instructions and values, manager's conservatism, and the way managers treat subordinates.

#### 3.2.1.1. Commitment to Religious Instructions and Values

In this regard, one of the managers stated:

"I think religious people express their ideas more easily and do not remain silent due to their religious beliefs." (participant No. 4)

#### 3.2.1.2. Manager's Conservatism

From the participants' point of view, this factor has a negative effect on organizational silence.

"As manager's organizational level age rises, his conservatism increases." (participant No. 7)

#### 3.2.1.3. The Way Managers Treat Subordinates

From the participants' perspective, this is a theme of psychological factors, which influences organizational silence.

"I can express my opinion when my superior manager believes in my expert opinion." (participant No. 2), according to one of the managers, "In our organization, managers do not let their subunits express their opinions." (participant No. 1)

### 3.2.2. Communication Skills

One of the individual factors that effects organizational silence is the concept of communication skills, which is categorized to two themes: "The conflict between personal interest and organizational interest, ability to speak out the questions, leadership style, and financial transparency."



### 3.2.2.1. The Ability to Speak Out the Questions

From the viewpoint of the participants, the ability to speak out the questions results in reduced organizational silence. In this regard, one of the managers stated that

"The more able to speak out the questions and analyze information, the less often silent." (participant No. 10)

### 3.2.2.2. Leadership Style

Another theme of communication skills is leadership style, which significantly effects organizational silence.

"Oppression of leadership style is observed in our organization since it is individual-based, not programmatic-based." (participant No. 3)

### 3.2.3. Demographic Factors

From the viewpoint of the participants, demographic factors are categorized to five themes: Gender, occupation type, employment status and type, work history, and educational level.

#### 3.2.3.1. Gender

Gender is a theme of demographic factors that affects organizational silence. In this regard, one of the participants stated that

"Women don't usually involve themselves in troublesome, challenging issues." (participant No. 2), another managers said the opposite, "Women express their expert opinions more often than men do, as men are somehow more conservative from the beginning." (participant No. 6)

#### 3.2.3.2. Occupation Type

Participants in this study believed that occupation type is another theme of demographic factors.

"A person, who is an expert and unique in some particular field, is not afraid to express his ideas." (participant No. 5)

#### 3.2.3.3. Employment Status and Type

Another theme of demographic factors, which influences organizational silence is employment status and its type.

"I think permanent employees express their opinions more easily." (participant No. 4). Another participant with a different idea emphasized "It seems to me that it doesn't make any difference; both permanent and contractual employees can freely express their opinions if there is no difference between them." (participant No. 10)

#### 3.2.3.4. Work History

From the participants' point of view, another theme of demographic factors is work experience:

"Work history is very effective; employees with more years of work history try to be careful not to say everything." (participant No. 6). Another manager emphasized that "Young employees are less likely to be silent in the organization." (participant No. 5)

#### 3.2.3.5. Educational Level

According to participants view in this study, educational level influences organizational silence.

"I think employees with higher levels of education are less likely to be silent in the organization." (participant No. 4), in the same regard, another participant said "Certainly, our faculty members are more likely to talk because of their high educational degree." (participant No. 9).

## 4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was identifying factors affecting organizational silence in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences from the viewpoint of middle managers. The results showed that the most important factors affecting organizational silence among managers were organizational and individual factors, including organizational structure and process, organizational communication and organizational culture as well as psychological factors, communication skills, and demographic factors.

The literature review showed that organizational silence is a common phenomenon in organizations among managers and employees. An important point is that particular types of organizational silence or voice result from different motivations. Consequently, employees intentionally refuse to present their information, ideas, and beliefs. Studies conducted in Iran and abroad on organizational silence among public organizations approve many of the factors and concepts obtained in this study. For example: Dimitris and Vokala ; Henriksen, Kern, Dayton, Elizabeth; Mprison, Wolfe, Milliken, Frances; Bern, Eric; Forgen; Festinger; Fisher and Morrison and Milliken (9) suggest that hierarchical organizational structure automatically prevents free communication within the organization. They have considered the effect of leadership style as well as distrust of managers and pessimism about them on organizational silence among employees.

It can be concluded that organizational silence reduces the effectiveness of decision making and organizational change processes by restricting the amount of data provided for decision makers (2).

It seems that the leadership style of the executive manager in an organization, sustaining team spirit and participatory management among university experts and middle managers, as well as having an efficient, coherent system for reviewing proposals and criticisms may contribute to establishing positive and consistent superior-subordinate communication in an organization.

On the other hand, supervising middle managers' performance by executive managers and giving transparent and explicit feedback to middle managers can be considered as a significant step in reducing organizational silence and receiving real feedback as well as providing appropriate and accurate data for large-scale decision-making (3).

A good and effective relationship between employees and decision-makers at the university contributes to efficient decision-making. The findings of the present study can provide a sufficient guidance for policy makers and senior officials of the ministry and universities to address the problems and increase the confidence coefficient of correct large-scale managerial decision-making and also to improve the performance of health system managers in the country.

## Footnote

**Ethical Considerations:** IR.SUMS.REC.1397.014.

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