Just keep silent: Repeated structural reform could prevent employees from speaking up

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Video Abstract

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Abstract

Employees can be a fountain of ideas on how an organization is run. Yet sometimes, they might feel compelled to keep quiet, fearing conflict or controversy. This so-called “defensive silence” can damage both performance and employee morale. While the source of this fear can vary, new research links defensive silence to repeated structural reform within an organization. Among the most devastating examples of employee silence is the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster of 2003. The cause—a flying piece of insulating foam on takeoff—was long known to NASA engineers as a possible risk. But to avoid disputes, they withheld their concerns from management, who assumed that mission safety was ensured. Research on the origins of defensive silence is still emerging. There is, however, reason to believe that structural reforms could play a role. These shifts in organizational boundaries, tasks, or position can help public organizations adapt to a dynamic environment. But repeated structural change could be too much of a good thing. For the first time, researchers have fit this concept into a broader theory of how employees respond to perceived threats, like budget cuts or political upheaval. According to the theory, organizational reactions to these threats can dampen employee morale. Managers can become more controlling and less receptive to employee suggestions. And lower-level employees can become more stressed, and therefore less vocal. It’s reasonable, then, that repeated structural change could strengthen this negative cascade. To find out, researchers examined the structural reform history of public organizations in Norway. Against that backdrop of organizational change, they analyzed how employees self-reported their defensive silence. That information was gathered from national surveys conducted every 10 years, specifically for the years 2006 and 2016. The team’s results presented a visible correlation: more reforms generally led to employees being more silent. The findings suggest that repeated structural reforms breed uncertainty and the perception of threat among employees at all organizational levels. In turn, employees become increasingly silent, behavior that tends to be reinforced by repetitive reform. While these results appear to conform well to theory, the researchers offer one important caveat: Despite the long-term observations, the possibility that defensive silence causes structural reform—and not the other way around—cannot be ruled out. Research involving more data spanning a longer period is clearly needed. Still, the results offer an important warning for public organizations contemplating change: frequent and rapid structural reforms could indeed do more harm than good.