**WHEN SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT:
THE VALUE OF SILENCE**

Jeroen Stouten

KULeuven University

jeroen.stouten@kuleuven.be

Thomas M. Tripp

Washington State University

ttripp@wsu.edu

Robert J. Bies

Georgetown University

biesr@msb.edu

David De Cremer

Cambridge Judge Business School

d.decremer@jbs.cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Employees facing destructive leader behavior or evidence of unethical or illegal action often remain silent and such silence has been argued to be problematic. We argue that the management literature has a limited and biased view of silence, and contend it can have value for employees and the organization. We discuss the functional value of silence in organizations and how it can be a strategic response to destructive and unethical leaders. Indeed, we argue that both voice and silence have functional value. Drawing on the “See, Judge, Act” model, we describe why and when employees become silent or choose to “break the silence” and we explain that both silence and voice have the ability to confront or resist destructive leadership.

Keywords: leadership; destructive leadership; voice; silence

The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Speech is silver; silence is golden.

—English proverb

“Something is not right here.” Many people arrive at that judgment when faced with examples of destructive leader behavior or evidence of unethical or illegal action. But, despite that judgment, most people in organizations remain silent and do nothing—and, as a result, scholars have viewed silence as a dysfunctional response (Morrison, 2014).

Following this line of reasoning, the literature on voice and silence emphasizes and values proactive employee behavior and encourages employees to voice their opinions also in cases of destructive leadership. The normative undertone of this literature is that silence is wrong, whereas voice is right (Bies, 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). For example, in the past few years, the importance of voicing one’s concerns has gathered momentum in the ethics literature as “Giving Voice to Values” (Gentile, 2010). Giving Voice to Values has gained traction in some business schools as a better way to teach ethics by focusing on teaching individuals to muster the courage to voice and act on their concerns about potentially destructive or unethical actions. Similarly, research on whistleblowing (e.g., Near & Miceli, 1985), organizational resistance (e.g., Piderit, 2000), decision-making (Westphal & Bednar, 2005), and strategic management (e.g., Beer & Eisenstat, 2000) typically views voice as superior to silence. The fact that silence has been described as ‘bad’ is in part because silence allows problems to remain insufficiently analyzed, which then may turn into incorrect actions. This view is best captured by Morrison, who states, “When [employees] withhold such input, they are displaying

silence and depriving their organization of potentially useful information” (2014: 173). A similar view taken in a review by O’Reilly and Aquino (2011), which while highlighting how third-party observers respond to wrongdoing, describes silence as not helping the victims. In short, voice is good, silence is bad.

We argue that the management literature on silence in organizations is one-sided and thus limited, as it only views silence to be dysfunctional for the organization (e.g. Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The focus of our paper is that, when confronted with destructive leadership, sometimes silence can be functional and lead to positive organizational change (Bies, 2009). Voice can be a problem, such as among arrogant employees who speak before they know all the facts. A common anecdote is that of the employee who does not understand why a supervisor made a particular decision. This employee, seeing only how the decision may inconvenience employees, publicly states that the decision is therefore a poor one and potentially destructive, and how only an incompetent supervisor could have made such a decision. Hence the maxim to ‘never tear down a fence until you know why it was put up’. Or consider the employee who hears of a conflict from only one participant in the conflict, then takes that person’s side, without ever hearing the other side. Had such employees remained silent longer, they may have had the chance to hear the other side of the stories, and temper their views. In general, by remaining quiet, individuals can take the time to learn crucial facts about the leader’s behavior, and determine if it really is destructive or not. If not destructive, then individuals can avoid false accusations and the destructive and distracting aftermath such accusations create.

Silence can serve strategic functions. For example, if individuals see that the leader’s behavior really is destructive, then by being silent first they may choose to wait for more effective timing to break their silence. As another strategic function, silence can be a political

strategy to confuse or disorient the leader who would construe the silence as support, when, in fact, it does not mean that. Also, remaining silent allows people the opportunity to form an alliance to fight back and/or provides more time to formulate a corrective response, which might include revenge. In other words, silence can be good.

Our view of the two sides of silence is captured by the quotations that open this paper. That is, on the one hand, it is through silence that employees allow unwise and unethical ideas to progress to action. This view is captured by the Dr. King quotation above. On the other hand, it is through silence that employees have the time to learn what is truly a bad idea, and what, often to their surprise, is not. For instance, employees might learn that they are wrong, or their initial concern is misplaced, and be surprised that they are wrong. This second view is captured by the English proverb above. Thus, in this paper, our goal is to balance these two views by detailing the ways in which both silence, not just voice, can be functional for the organization.

First, we start our perspective to describe the role of voice and silence in destructive leadership and describe how silence can be functional. Further, we detail our argument by relying on the see-judge-act framework (Brigham, 2013), stage by stage, to describe how silence becomes more likely, and second to show how silence may be valuable. We will argue that silence offers the opportunity to more clearly examine how employees see and judge whether there is destructive leadership, and this examination can suggest which action is most effective (including remaining silent).

Destructive Leadership

The literature on voice primarily suggests the functionality of employees voicing concerns, especially in the context of destructive leadership when other employees remain silent. A recent, famous example involves Volkswagen, who installed a defeat device in its diesel-

fueled cars to reduce emissions when undergoing a standard emission test (Neil, 2015). Even though executives ordered the development of the device, dozens of employees – including engine developers, and compliance managers – were aware of and participating in the scheme, to the point that they were destroying evidence. Yet, long before this, in November 2006, employees who raised objections were asked to continue and “not get caught” (sic; The Guardian, 2017). Had this climate of silence not been created, perhaps employees would have spoken up about how unethical and risky this decision was, thus preventing the pollution of the environment, the defrauding of customers, and the billions of dollars of damages Volkswagen incurred.

This example illustrates that sometimes voice indeed is helpful (or would have been in this case), especially in the presence of destructive leadership. Destructive leadership is defined in the literature as “volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader’s organization and/or employees by (a) encouraging employees to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with employees, regardless of justifications for such behavior” (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013: 4). To count as destructive, these behaviors and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations” (Lipman-Blumen, 2004: 18). Krasikova et al. (2013) also mention that destructive leaders harm the organization and/or employees. Destructive leadership behaviors act like a social toxin or “poison,” consequently seeping into all levels of the organization.

When Silence is Functional: The “See, Judge, Act” Model

To describe when silence can be functional, we use a cognitive stage model of “See, Judge, and Act” (Brigham, 2013). That is, employees’ silence depends on whether employees *see* leader’s behavior as destructive, if the employees then *judge* the behavior as counter-normative and intentional, which then allows them to determine if they will remain silent or *act*. The see-judge-act model is similar to other cognitive stage models, of which the best known see-judge-act model is the Felstiner et al. (1981) conflict process model, “Naming, Blaming, and Claiming.” In their model, first a victim must see or “name” the injury – i.e., perceive that an event was in fact injurious. If the behavior is not visible, or employees do not ‘perceive’ the behavior as destructive, they will remain silent. Next, the victim must judge or “blame” someone for that injury. Finally, once the victim has named and blamed, only then can the victim act by making a “claim” against the offender. We use this framework, stage by stage, to describe how silence becomes more likely, and to show how silence may be valuable.

The See Stage: How the Follower Perceives the Situation – Did It Happen?

Somehow, the follower must witness or hear of what the leader did. That is, the act must be *visible*, which we call the “publicity” requirement. Destructive acts are more visible when they are committed in the open office rather than behind closed doors or when they involve tangible goods. For example, a boss who misappropriates organizational funds to fly the corporate jet on a personal vacation, is appropriating funds from the public good more visibly than a leader who misappropriates an intangible benefit behind closed doors, such as accessing sensitive data to further one’s career. Visibility is also influenced by the ambiguity about leaders’ behavior. One specific aspect of ambiguity concerns whether or not destructive leadership behavior is tightly coupled with the consequences of that behavior. For instance, if a

leader falsifies departmental performance data now, which then leads to a bigger budget nine months later, the perceived connection between the behavior and outcome is weaker than if the reward followed the falsification within a week. Moreover, in many cases it is not entirely clear if the leader's behavior is destructive to employees or even to the organization — if there is even a victim. However, if employees know that others got hurt because of the leader's destructive behavior, then this may lead to less sympathy towards the leader and to the perception of the leader as less moral.

Employees' personal dispositions may heighten (or lessen) the likelihood of *seeing* a leader's behavior as destructive. For example, employees who are high in negative affectivity (Watson & Tellegen, 1985) may notice the destructive behavior of a leader (especially if it is directed towards themselves) more easily. Or employees who are more sensitive to injustices (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005) may be more likely to react against the leader rather than being silent.

The Judge Stage: Follower Judges Act As “Bad”

For employees to become upset enough to motivate action, they need to judge the destructive act as bad enough to demand action. But what makes an act bad enough? We argue that an act may be judged as bad in at least five ways: 1) the act is important because it results in severe consequences and violates norms or rules; 2) the follower is affected, not just other employees; 3) the employees identify a specific leader and make the attribution that this leader acted intentionally in ways others in that position would not; 4) the leader does not provide an adequate excuse; and, 5) the leader is not considered entitled to any benefit he or she receives from the destructive act. Below, we elaborate on each of these features, which we argue to be

steps in the judgment process employees strategically (can) use to determine to remain silent or to voice their concerns.

Is it severe, and thus important? It's not enough for a destructive act to be recognized to generate an employee response. It also must be important or non-trivial. For instance, many employees may not care too much about an act that inconveniences them, but may care much about an act that costs them large amounts of money or risks their jobs. Research shows that the more severe the harms are, the greater the motivation for punishment, or even revenge, will be (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002).

Severity is not just about how much the employee is hurt; it also is about the violation of norms and rules. For instance, leaders who yell at their followers may severely affect their followers, but if their yelling is consistent with organizational norms, then workers may judge it far less harshly. In general, employees may not care too much about a leader who breaks a minor rule, such as using the company telephone to make a personal, long-distance call, whereas, employees may care a lot about a leader who breaks a major rule, such as disguising a personal vacation as a business trip that the company pays for. Employees may also judge how common it is within the work unit. An act also may be explicitly forbidden by formal rules, such as in a code-of-conduct.

Moreover, not only does employees being harmed increase the sense of destructive severity, but also leaders receiving benefit may increase the sense of destructive severity. We propose that the greater the perceived benefit *to the leader*, the more negatively employees will react. For instance, the postal office supervisor who redecorated her office in marble and fine woods and put in a hot tub (Franzen, 1994), was seen to act egregiously, even though no particular stakeholder was perceived as harmed (because it's not clear on whom else that money

would have been spent). Thus, employees are more likely to remain silent towards destructive leadership if it is seen as less severe, in part because the harm to employees and the benefit to the leader are both small.

Is the follower affected? It also matters *to whom* the harm occurs. Whether an act is perceived as severe depends not only on its magnitude, but also on whom the victim is. If an employee witnesses a harm, but is unaffected by it (e.g., sees a coworker's pet project cancelled to provide more resources for the leader's pet project), then even though the employee may not like the outcome, the employee may still not object or complain strongly. However, if the employee is directly affected (e.g., the *employee's* pet project is cancelled), then it is more likely that the employee will protest the decision. Hence, employees are more likely to be silent if they are less affected by destructive leadership.

Does the follower blame the leader? It has been argued that in the process of finding causal explanations, people look for the responsibility and intentionality for the act, which results in instances of blame (Shaver, 1985). Perceived intentionality for a harm has been shown to affect victims' desires for revenge (Crossley, 2009). That is, when victims perceive that the harm occurred by accident, they blame the harmdoer very little, and when victims perceive that the harm was intended, they blame the harmdoer much more. Furthermore, Crossley (2009) showed that harm that was intended for malicious reasons (e.g., to see a particular victim experience pain) led to even more blame than harm that was intended for opportunistic reasons (e.g., the harmdoer pursued personal gain, but victims were hurt as a byproduct of that pursuit). In sum, destructive leadership is more likely to encourage silence if the harm is judged as unintentional.

Is it excusable? Another aspect that determines blame is whether the action was excusable or not. The social accounts literature (e.g., Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005) shows that harmdoers will be blamed less if they can shift blame for their intentional acts onto another party. For instance, managers who use the “my hands are tied” ploy shift blame for unpopular decisions from themselves to higher management. According to attribution theory, how much observers blame the leader versus the leader’s environment (e.g., the leader’s boss) should also depend on the leader’s track record. If the leader has performed the behavior before (e.g., yelled at subordinates), then followers may attribute the behavior to the leader’s leadership style, and thus blame the leader. Conversely, if the leader has never performed the behavior before (e.g., has consistently been friendly when interacting with subordinates), then followers more likely will attribute the behavior to the leader’s circumstances (e.g., that subordinate must have done something really bad to get yelled at), and not blame the leader as much. Research has demonstrated support for this possibility, as leaders who were seen as more competent and a source of inspiration were less likely to be judged negatively for their destructive behavior (Shapiro, Boss, Salas, Tangirala, & Von Glinow, 2011).

Is the leader entitled to commit the act? While some behaviors may be counter-normative for many employees, they may not be counter-normative for all employees, including often not for the leaders. That is, leaders may be seen as entitled to certain advantages that lower-level employees are not entitled to. As the leader’s role becomes more important, leaders take advantage of the situation, and are more inclined to increase their own payoff at the expense of fairness and justice for the organization and its employees (see Stouten, De Cremer, & Van Dijk, 2005). This is in line with social cognition research that states that a leader should act in a responsible manner, but on the other hand, it also suggests that a leader should receive certain

privileges and entitlements (Messick, Wilke, Brewer, Kramer, & Zemke, 1983; Samuelson & Allison, 1994). In our view, followers may accept leaders taking more if they see the leader as someone who has done more than others, consequently reinforcing perceptions of justification, and hence encouraging silence. Thus, employees may remain silent towards destructive leaders if they feel that the leaders' entitlements correspond to the leaders' contributions. In sum, the higher the position of leadership (and lower the position of employees), the more (less) normative will the destructive behavior be judged to be and the more (less) silence will occur.

The Act Stage: Voice or Silence?

For an employee to decide on to voice a concern or to stay silent, as we have argued so far, it is necessary for the employee to see the leader's destructive behavior as severe, and to judge the leader as blameworthy. But those two preconditions may not be sufficient. Evidence exists that suggests that several other conditions are needed together in combination to motivate employees to engage in voice. In the organizational justice literature, for instance, Brockner and Weisenfeld (1996) showed that employees who see a distributive injustice and judge/blame a leader for it, usually will still remain silent, unless another condition is met – i.e., procedural injustice. Primarily when processes are unfair or bad do employees care about the outcomes. Thus, when processes are fair, employees will be more silent towards bad or unfair outcomes.

Does the organization have a fair system for handling destructive behaviors? Given the importance of procedural fairness, it is important to examine the processes organizations use to handle destructive behaviors. Aquino, Tripp and Bies (2006) found that the procedural justice climate of the organization discourages employees from seeking revenge against offending supervisors. This finding suggests that in organizations that have fair procedures and grievance systems employees are more likely to take their complaints into an official grievance system. But

the lack of such a system would encourage silence, and sometimes even covert acts of revenge (Aquino et al., 2006).

Is it safe to report to a higher authority? Consider the whistle-blowing literature, which defines whistle blowing as the “disclosure by organization members of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985: 4). This line of research shows that, although people may intend to report the leader, often they do not act on that intention. One aspect that is particularly important for reporting the leader to authorities is whether employees feel that the leader may retaliate. Indeed, when employees report wrongdoing they often experience retaliation themselves (Near & Miceli, 1985). In a meta-analysis, Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) showed that fear of retaliation only predicted the intention but not the actual behavior to report organizational wrongdoing. Employees may have felt that blowing the whistle may eventually backfire on them, and they may have reasoned that “holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned” (Buddha Sakyamuni). Indeed, voicing one’s concern strongly depends on whether employees feel sufficiently efficacious and feel safe (Morrison, 2011). Interestingly, Brown et al. (2005) showed that if the leader is ethical rather than destructive, then employees are more willing to report problems. Perhaps this occurs because employees may see ethical leaders as less likely to retaliate. In sum, employees do not easily report problems with their leader to higher authorities.

DISCUSSION

Silence and Voice

The see-judge-act model identifies conditions that need to occur for employees to voice their concerns. The importance of some of these conditions also suggests that sometimes employees and other involved stakeholders may be better off if the employee remains silent. In particular, the value in silence lies in the mindful attention needed to make a valid judgment of whether the leaders' destructive behavior is harmful and hence, violates norms of acceptable behavior. Silence may entail taking small but incremental steps to accumulate sufficient tangible evidence to make a case against destructive leaders or to deliver a formal complaint to upper management. In silence, evidence concerning intentionality, history of events, deservingness for example can be thought through to finally reach an understanding of destructive leader behavior more carefully. Thus, silence would facilitate learning about different aspects of the destructive behavior of leaders, for which silence eventually may amount to courageous actions against destructive leadership. As Cooperrider and Avital (2004: xxxiii) argued: "Silence is the pre-language we have always turned to as human beings in special moments of reflection and respect; and it provides access to deeper wells of resources when we need them the most. Silence elevates-and-extends. It broadens-and-builds. It connects. It sustains." Hence, we contend that the see, judge and act framework, albeit implicitly suggesting that acting is key, should also explicitly incorporate the role of silence. This also speaks for the general tenets of the voice literature, which seem to suggest that silence is wrong. Our perspective highlights that silence and voice go hand in hand, because employees can use both to decide on a course of action when more facts are gathered, and judgment is developed, thus making voice more effective when it is used. Indeed, in some cases, voice and silence may be iterative: silence

allows contemplation of available and unavailable facts, which then encourages voicing requests for the unavailable facts, which then leads to more silence as those new facts are considered, which then leads to voicing of fairer and more accurate judgments, which support appropriate action.

Silence may not only aid fact gathering, to form more accurate or fairer judgments, but also silence can be an act itself designed to seek justice for destructive behaviors. That is employees can use silence *strategically*. Strategic silence has been argued to be a key political skill (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2006) that employees can use instrumentally as a means to an end. For instance, employees can employ silence to confuse their leader. Leaders may need to know if their actions were observed, to know what actions to take next, and silence deprives them of this information. Indeed, such information-depriving silence can keep leaders off-balance, even disoriented. That is, when silence is used to create uncertainty in this way, it can create a heightened state of stress for the leader (Ferris, Brouer, Laird, & Hochwarter, 2005), as the destructive leader never knows what employees know, and never knows if and when employees will voice their concerns. “Waiting for the other shoe to drop” can be unsettling, and as such may serve as some punishment for the destructive act, thereby bringing some measure of justice.

Silence also can be used as a tool for revenge, which may lead to the downfall of a destructive leader. Consider the situation where employees remain silent instead of helping out their leaders. For instance, employees join in a meeting with their leader and his or her manager is there also, and the leader’s manager asks questions for which the leader doesn’t have answers, but the employees do. The employees then remain silent – refraining from helping their leader when they are capable of helping – who then appears incompetent. This would count as silent

revenge, as it undermines the leader. In one particular case, the manager realized that the destructive leader was incompetent and fired him on the spot. This example illustrates that strategic silence enables standing up against destructive leadership, but in such a way that it is less risky (as compared to whistleblowing).

Silence also can be used strategically in language, as in, for instance, the art and practice of disguise. For example, Bies (2009) reported of a human resources director from a mid-Atlantic state in the United States who said he would say “bless your heart,” which is a phrase used by Southern women to excuse themselves from speaking ill of someone else. The more words inserted before the word “heart” would signal even greater contempt for the leader (Bies, 2009). This use of language to silence one’s true feelings is quite consistent with evidence of the “everyday resistance” by those under the scrutiny of surveillance and regulation (Gilliom, 1997: 275). That is, silence in language does not *openly* resist destructive leadership, but can do so in a disguised fashion. Hence, employees can signal resistance to those who understand the symbolic value of the language that one does not agree.

Finally, strategic silence may give opportunities for employees to create a coalition of likeminded people, who then collectively protest against destructive leadership. Hence, in the absence of explicit individual protesting or voicing concerns, employees may resist immediate action in order to organize collective voice.

New Directions in Theory and Research

When employees are silent, they may be in the process of trying to see if leadership is destructive, judging whether it is harmful and blame is legitimate, developing actions against destructive leadership or using silence as an action. To date, the literature is not clear what

employees experience in each of these stages in which silence is aroused. Our analysis suggests new directions for theory and research on these issues, which are detailed below.

The choice of voice versus silence may depend on situational circumstances. In very urgent and highly critical circumstances, silence might be too ‘slow’ when it is essential to react immediately and strongly. In such circumstances, voice is more effective, but possibly also less common as the literature on bystander apathy has shown (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002). Currently, research is needed to examine the strategic role silence can have and the different ways employees use silence as well as the implications of silence for destructive leadership. Moreover, research is needed on how silence interacts with the environment (e.g. team dynamics or organizational culture) and reactions of both leaders and coworkers on employee silence.

Culture also may influence the functionality of silence. In collectivistic cultures, silence might be more appropriate because speaking up in a critical tone to leaders violates strong social norms. In Japan, employees wait to voice their concerns after hours, when social norms allow them to speak more freely – a practice that is known as “nomunication,” which is a concatenation of the Japanese word “Nomu,” which means to drink, and the English word “Communication.” While drinking with their leader, Japanese employees would be encouraged to voice concerns, especially in the late hours. Even though in individualistic cultures voice is more frequent, leaders often still do not appreciate employees voicing concerns about their own leadership.

Silence may also be functional during changes in organizations. The change management literature emphasized the importance of voicing concerns when change is implemented (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000). Yet, here a reflective attitude in silence indeed may allow for awareness that change needs time and patience to settle. At the same time

this would give room for experimentation in change implementation and being open to seeing new opportunities or roles. Also, silence may be beneficial as it allows for employees to take in the different incremental changes that make up large-scale change, rather than prematurely voice fears at every single step, lest they become the employees who cried wolf. Research on the iterative fashion silence and voice are functional is needed to unravel how both silence and voice can go hand in hand.

The important role that followers have in relation to leadership. The perspective we described has another related but important implication. That is, the influence followers might have on leaders' destructive behavior to date is not well understood. The important message here is that the role of followership is highly underrated in the case of keeping destructive leadership alive. How does followers' silence or voice influence the change in leaders' behavior? Are leaders encouraged to become more aware of their destructive habits or are they resistant and defensive?

Social communication can play a role in the power dynamics between the destructive leader and his or her followers. One particular form of social communication that could contribute to these power dynamics is *gossip*. Kurland and Pelled (2000) argue that the spreading of gossip, particularly negative gossip, will enhance the gossiper's power and influence over the gossip recipients. While the gossiper's power and influence may grow, the question arises as to whether gossiping leads the gossiper or co-workers to speak up or remain silent.

One answer to that question can be derived from catharsis theory (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895/1955). Drawing from catharsis theory, the expression of emotion-related communication, such as in spreading gossip, would be a form of venting, and would lessen the anger and

likelihood of aggressive actions, such as speaking up to destructive leaders. Tripp and Bies (2009) found in their research on revenge, social rumination can have such a cathartic effect, because it does not always lead to vengeful actions.

But there is other evidence suggesting that such cathartic effect of venting does not reduce aggression, and, in fact, may make people more aggressive (Geen & Quanty, 1977). In the workplace, Tripp and Bies (2009) found that venting about harmful treatment from leaders in after-work gatherings of employees was a common occurrence. Further, they found that sharing of gossip was part of that venting, which only reinforced co-worker feelings and hypotheses surrounding the leader's actions. Indeed, such social communication can lead to action, as in filing legal claims.

Venting and gossiping open up the attribution process to group dynamics, such as conformity and group think. When unsure of the true nature of causality, individuals may adopt the group's opinion – more so when the group has consensus. Moreover, when the group consists of close friends, it may provide empathic support unconditionally, while also reinforcing their early, suspicious, even sinister, attributions about the leader. In short, other people may lead the victim to a negative conclusion, thus priming the victim to take action.

The role of personality in being able to remain silent. The ability to enact silence may vary among individuals. For instance, given the fact that enacting silence is usually a stressful event (Perlow & Williams, 2003), individual differences in negative thoughts and emotions are likely to play a role. Research by Madrid, Patterson, and Leiva (2015) revealed evidence that those with high negative affect were more likely to remain silent, and even more so when they were high ruminators. Because of the importance that individual differences in negative affect and rumination plays in the display of silence behavior, it stands to reason that neuroticism

should also play a role. Neuroticism reflects the tendency to experience heightened levels of negative affect such as anxiety, increased hostility, and feelings of depression. The influence of these affect-laden individual differences suggests that the tendency for employees to remain silent is influenced by individual differences in emotion regulation, especially in suppressing the behavioral expression of negative emotions (Gross & John, 2003). This would suggest that those high in emotion suppression are more likely to remain silent and focus on what a potentially destructive leader may have to say. In a related manner, individuals scoring high on the personality attribute of repressive defensiveness also might be more effective in remaining silent towards negative events (Derakshan & Eysenck, 1999). Research shows that repressors make use of an avoidant cognitive style that enables them to move their attention away from negative affect or threatening stimuli (e.g. Bonanno & Singer, 1990; Hock & Krohne, 2004; Tomarken & Davidson, 1994). Finally, keeping silent may also be influenced by self-esteem, with those feeling less confident and proud of oneself thinking that their voice will not be of any importance. Research by Amah and Okafor (2008) showed that especially those low in self-esteem remain silent.

The reasoning above in the different mechanisms that trigger voice or silence also suggests that employees make a judgment and act with voice or silence based on the specific situation (personality, consequences, blame, excuses, ...) rather than to focus on the underlying normative values that might be violated in destructive leadership. This links to the philosophical approach of utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Rosen, 2003). Following this tradition, employees would consider the severity of the leaders' destructive behavior based on the utility they can derive from it. Hence, this would imply that destructive leader behavior would not be considered immoral in absolute terms but relative to the harm received. Research

does seem to support that employees consider the immediate situation when judging whether unethical acts are considered right or wrong (e.g. Gino et al., 2010). Yet, rather than a conscious choice, employees would be influenced in their judgment even without their explicit consideration of the specific elements that are taken into account to come to judge destructive leader behavior (e.g. the leader's entitlement).

Policy Implications

We have argued that given that silence is prevalent, it in fact can be functional as long as employees use it to help themselves and others cope with the situation. Similarly, employees can use the time in silence to gather additional intelligence about their leader--or to prepare for action.

While silence can be bad for the follower and the organizations, we argue that there are times that followers should embrace silence. Silence can be good when an impulsive act to criticize a manager may result in an unfair accusation that harms both the manager's reputation and the relationship between follower and manager, particularly when the employee jumps to conclusions without all of the facts. So, discretion can be the better part of valor.

Silence also should be embraced when employees do not have the power or strategy to confront destructive or unethical leaders. For, to break silence is an act with real political consequences for those who speak up. Being silent can be an effective strategy to build an alliance and use political and influence strategies to fight back against destructive leaders and the toxic environments that they have created.

Silence in the #MeToo Era

Since we began exploring these issues and writing this paper, to balance against the view in the literature that silence is bad and voice is good, Harvey Weinstein happened. Given the

recent events concerning #MeToo as a result of the Harvey Weinstein case, our “silence is (sometimes) good” viewpoint might be particularly problematic. Indeed, what has become clear is that organizational leaders have continued to harass employees because employees did *not* voice their concerns, whether it be out of fear or because they benefitted from the silence. Had these employees spoke up earlier, current thinking goes, then these leaders would have been exposed earlier and had fewer victims. And speaking up in this case is likely not just about exposure of wrongdoing, it also may be about *tolerance* of wrongdoing. When too few people spoke up for too long, in some industries (e.g., film) sexual harassment was not seen as counter-normative as the same behavior might be in other industries or professions, and thus was not judged harshly enough. In fact, silence for small wrongdoings possibly even escalated to bigger transgressions on the leaders’ part. Perhaps in this way, our see-judge-act model may help us understand why leaders got away with harassment for so long, and in some of the ways that organizations were complicit in allowing leaders to continue their destructive behaviors.

That said, as common wisdom has it, when pendulums swing they never stop in the middle but instead swing to the other side. In this way, while many now applaud the #MeToo movement for breaking the silence, some fear that the movement has gone too far. For instance, a recently published opinion piece in the French newspaper *Le Monde* (2018) – authored by 100 women, including actresses Catherine Millet, Ingrid Caven and Catherine Deneuve – took a more nuanced approach. Here, the authors pleaded that women are qualified to judge adequately whether males would engage in ‘clumsy flirting’ as opposed to intentional and harmful sexual harassment. The authors suggest that a relative rather than an absolute approach is needed in which contextual elements are important to reach an adequate judgment. Here, silence may enable such a deliberative approach to allow for nuanced judgment.

We also advocate a little more silence to give due process the space and time to work. The pendulum has swung from employees not ever believing victims of harassment to instantly believing any claim of harassment. What we argue should happen instead is that all claims of harassment, and all employees accused of harassment, should have their “day in court.” That is, organizations should give time to gather evidence regarding each claim before rushing to judgment and action. That will result in a fairer process whereby information is more accurate, the accused exercise voice, rules can be followed more consistently, and authorities have time to calm down and consider the case more open-mindedly. Also, just as in courts, organizations should consider statutes of limitation for many of the same reasons such as, especially, that over time crucial acts fade in detail, not only due to fallible memory but also due to staff turnover. However, when the destructive act is particularly severe, and facts remain clear, statutes should be significantly longer.

Organizations have an important role in establishing a healthy environment by being clear about when destructive behaviors violate norms. Generally, organizations tell employees to speak up and voice their concerns or formally file a complaint in response to destructive leadership. A number of countries in the European Union have turned to political measures to safeguard employees who wish to do exactly this. Yet, companies have largely implemented these measures at a bare minimum, mostly to comply with regulations, and thus unfortunately have not taken these measures sufficiently seriously, for example, by aligning regulation with strategic objectives and procedures. The administrative bodies that are responsible to protect and follow up on these cases also often lack the procedural power to ensure companywide implementation. Yet, especially in such cases of delayed voice, organizations need to ensure that

policies are equipped to not only protect victims but also take their concerns seriously to further examine the complaint thoroughly.

CONCLUSION

When something is not right in an organization, voice should not always be the first reaction, for there are real repercussions for voicing concerns. This does not mean voice is not an appropriate response; indeed, what we argue is that silence may be the best *first* step in order to read and assess the situation accurately and appropriately. There is a time to break silence, as argued in this paper. Stepping up and voicing concerns is often viewed as a courageous act, but it can also mean political suicide. Silence, at least initially, may be the better part of valor.

REFERENCES

- Amah, O. E., & Okafor, C. A. 2008. Relationships among silence climate, employee silence behaviour and work attitudes: The role of self-esteem and locus of control. *Asian Journal of Scientific Research*, 1: 1-11.
- Aquino, K., Tripp, T.M., & Bies, R.J. 2006. Getting even or moving on? Status variables and procedural justice as predictors of revenge, forgiveness, and reconciliation in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91: 653-668.
- Beer, M., & Eisenstat, R. A. 2000. The silent killers of strategy implementation and learning. *Sloan Management Review*, 41: 29-40.
- Bies, R. J. 2009. Sounds of silence: Identifying new motives and behaviors. In J. Greenberg & M.S. Edwards (Eds.), *Voice and silence in organizations*: 157-171. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Group.
- Bobocel, R. D., & Zdaniuk, A. 2005. How can explanations be used to foster organizational justice? In J. Greenberg & J.A. Colquitt (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational justice*: 469-498. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bonanno, G. A., & Singer, J. L. 1990. Repressive personality style: Theoretical and methodological implications for health and pathology. In J. L. Singer (Ed.), *Repression and dissociation: Implications for personality theory, psychopathology, and health* (pp. 435– 470). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Breuer, J., & Freud, S. 1955. *Studies on hysteria (1893-1895). Standard Edition, 2*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Brigham, E. M. 2013. *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic.

- Brockner, J., & Weisenfeld, B. M. 1996. An integrative framework for explaining reactions to decisions: interactive effects of outcomes and procedures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120: 189–208.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Avital, M. (Eds.). 2004. *Constructive discourse and human organization*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Crossley, C. D. 2009. Emotional and behavioral reactions to social undermining: A closer look at perceived offender motives. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 108: 14–24.
- Derakshan, N., & Eysenck, M. W. 1999. Are repressors self-deceivers or other deceivers? *Cognition & Emotion*, 13: 1–17.
- Eby, L. T., Adams, D. M., Russell, J. E. A., & Gaby, S. H. 2000. Perceptions of organizational readiness for change: Factors related to employees' reactions to the implementation of team-based selling. *Human Relations*, 53: 419–442.
- Felstiner, W., Abel, R., & Sarat, A. 1981. Emergence and transformation of disputes: Naming, blaming, claiming. *Law & Society Review*, 15: 631–654.
- Ferris, G. R., & Brouer, R. L. 2006. Organizational politics. In S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 2: 574–576). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ferris, G. R., Davidson, S. L., & Perrewé, P. L. 2005. *Political skill at work: Impact on work effectiveness*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black Publishing
- Franzen, J. 1994. Lost in the mail. *The New Yorker*, October 24, 1994, 62–77.
- Geen, R. G., & Quanty, M. B. 1977. The catharsis of aggression: An evaluation of a hypothesis. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 10: 1–37.

- Gentile, M. C. 2010. *Giving voice to values: How to speak your mind when you know what's right*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gilliom, J. 1997. Everyday surveillance, everyday resistance: Computer monitoring in the lives of the Appalachian poor. In A. Sarat and S.S. Silbey (Eds.), *Studies in law, politics, and society* (Vol. 16, pp. 275-297). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Gino, F., Shu, L., & Bazerman, M. 2010. Nameless Harmless= Blameless: When seemingly irrelevant factors influence judgment of (un)ethical behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 111: 93-101.
- Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. 2003. Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84: 346-356.
- Hock, M., & Krohne, H. W. 2004. Coping with threat and memory for ambiguous information: Testing the repressive discontinuity hypothesis. *Emotion*, 4: 65– 86.
- Krasikova, D. V., Green, S. G., & LeBreton, J. M. 2013. Destructive leadership: A theoretical review, integration, and future research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 39: 1308-1338.
- Kurland, N. B., & Pelled, L. H. 2000. Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(2): 428-438.
- Le Monde, par collectif. 2018, January 9. *Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle*. Retrieved January 9, 2018, from http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html
- Lipman-Blumen, J. 2004. *The allure of destructive leaders: Why we follow destructive bosses and corrupt politicians—and how we can survive them*, Oxford: University Press.

- Madrid, H. P., Patterson, M. G., & Leiva, P. I. 2015. Negative core affect and employee silence: How differences in activation, cognitive rumination, and problem-solving demands matter. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100: 1887-1898.
- Mesmer-Magnus, J. R., & Viswesvaran, C. 2005. Whistleblowing in organizations: An examination of correlates of whistleblowing intentions, actions, and retaliation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 62: 277-297.
- Messick, D. M., Wilke, H., Brewer, M. B., Kramer, R. M., Zemke, P. E., & Lui, L. 1983. Individual adaptations and structural change as solutions to social dilemmas. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44: 294-309.
- Morrison, E. W. 2011. Employee voice behavior: Integration and directions for future research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 5: 373-412.
- Morrison, E. W. 2014. Employee voice and silence. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1: 173-197.
- Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. 2000. Organizational silence: A barrier to change development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 706-725.
- Near, J., & Miceli, M. 1985. Organizational dissidence: The case of whistle-blowing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 4(1): 1-16.
- Neil, D. 2015, September 26-27. VW lost its moral compass in quest for growth. *The Wall Street Journal*, D10. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/vw-lost-its-moral-compass-in-quest-for-growth-1443115862>.
- O'reilly, J., & Aquino, K. 2011. A model of third parties' morally motivated responses to mistreatment in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 526-543.

- Perlow, L., & Williams, S. 2003, May. Is silence killing your company? *Harvard Business Review*, 81: 52-58.
- Piderit, S. K. 2000. Rethinking ambivalence: Resistance and recognizing a multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 783–794.
- Rosen, F. 2003. *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*. London: Routledge.
- Samuelson, C. D., & Allison, S. T. 1994. Cognitive factors affecting the use of social decision heuristics in resource-sharing tasks. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 58: 1-27.
- Schmitt, M., Gollwitzer, M., Maes, J., & Arbach, D. 2005. Justice sensitivity: Assessment and location in the personality space. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 21: 202-211.
- Shapiro, D. L., Boss, A. D., Salas, S., Tangirala, S., & Von Glinow, M. A. 2011. When are transgressing leaders punitively judged? An empirical test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(2): 412–422.
- Shaver, K. G. 1985. *The attribution of blame: Causality, responsibility, and blameworthiness*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Stouten, J., De Cremer, D., & van Dijk, E. 2005. I'm doing the best i can (for myself): Leadership and variance of harvesting in resource dilemmas. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 9: 205–211.
- Tomarken, A. J., & Davidson, R. J. 1994. Frontal brain activation in repressors and nonrepressors. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 103: 339 –349.
- Tripp, T. M., & Bies, R. J. 2009. *Getting even: The truth about workplace revenge—and*

how to stop it. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tripp, T., Bies, R., & Aquino, K. 2002. Poetic justice or petty jealousy? The aesthetics of revenge. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 89(1): 966–984.

Watson, D., & Tellegen, A. 1985. Toward a consensual structure of mood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2): 219–235.

Westphal, J. D., & Bednar, M. K. 2005. Pluralistic ignorance in corporate boards and firms' strategic persistence in response to low firm performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50: 262-298.

Bio's and Twitter information

Jeroen Stouten is an associate professor at KU Leuven (Belgium) and an Associate Researcher of Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. He obtained his Ph.D. from Tilburg University in social and economic psychology. His research focuses on leadership, justice, and workplace conflict.

Email: jeroen.stouten@kuleuven.be

Twitter: @Jstouten

Thomas M. Tripp is Professor of Management, and Associate Dean of Academic Programs, Carson College of Business at Washington State University. He received his Ph.D. in Organization Behavior from the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. He studies workplace conflict, including justice, revenge, forgiveness, and abusive supervision.

Email: ttripp@wsu.edu

Robert J. Bies is a Professor of Management and Founder of the Executive Master's in Leadership program in the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. His research interests are leadership and the delivery of bad news, and revenge, forgiveness, and mercy in the workplace.

Email: biesr@georgetown.edu

Twitter: @ProfBies

David De Cremer is the KPMG chaired professor in management studies in the University of Cambridge and the head of the Leadership and Organisational Decision-Making group at Cambridge Judge Business School. His research focuses on the areas of trust, organizational justice, behavioral ethics, leadership and China management and innovation.

Email: d.decremer@jbs.cam.ac.uk