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Action Research on Employee Silence: The need for Negative Capability in Leadership

Abstract

Focusing on the role of leadership, this report on an action research process discusses employee and organisational silence. Applying system psychodynamics to organisational theory, I argue for tolerance to provisional indecision in leadership as a means to promote openness and acceptance of debate and criticism in a climate that takes into account the unconscious dynamics of organisations.

The research process focused on a merger between the citizen service center and the local library services in a Danish municipality of some 60,000 inhabitants. Staff members were urged to participate in working groups to discuss the reorganisation as such and their future tasks; however, disaffection and concerns about job security gave rise to serious problems between staff and leaders, and no constructive dialogue was established to deal with the issues. Employees' failure to speak up and address their concerns was alleged by management to be the stumbling block to further action, and thus management ignored potential system failures. This position is based on an understanding that 'talking about others' creates a negative spiral of gossiping and distortion of facts. A management perspective that emphasized assertive action thus exacerbated staff frustrations and prevented the management team from acknowledging the true problems facing the organisation.

Keywords: system psychodynamic approach, negative capability, organisational silence, basic assumptions, organisational change

Introduction

My research was motivated by the finding that despite positive attitudes to employee involvement and a formal system to support organisational involvement, the employees felt they were not being meaningfully involved in the organisational change process, causing them to remain silent about issues of importance to their wellbeing and sense of job security. Reflecting this aspect, my research question came to be as follows:

Do employees choose to remain silent about important issues at their workplace as a sign of dysfunctional organisational processes and basic assumption behaviour (Bion, 1991)?

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If so, I argue that we must see employee silence as a system issue and not as a personal issue.

The various perspectives on employee voice stem from research in disciplines as diverse as research management, political science, economics, organisational behaviour, psychology and law (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey & Freeman, 2014). Considering employee silence, the opposite of employee voice, as the withholding of opinions about problems at the workplace (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), I argue that it should be interpreted as a system psychodynamic issue (Stapley, 2004; Heinskou & Visholm, 2004, 2011; Stapley, 2006; Sievers, 2009; Armstrong & Rustin, 2015; Long, 2016). Silence is cast as part of the 'frontier of control' in analyses of organisational behaviour and industrial psychology (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2014). Managerial intervention should be based on negative capability[1], that is, reflection and communication to nurture an organisational culture that encourages listening, reflecting and discussion (French, Simpson & Harvey, 2002, French & Simpson, 2004).

The preunderstanding behind my research question is that employees see things that managers do not, and have an inside perspective on what is working and what is not in the organisation while dealing with customers and interacting with other employees: problems that are brewing, inefficient systems or inappropriate activities, opportunities for improvement, strategic issues and so on (Morrison, 2014). Employee voice is very important, perhaps even necessary, for an organisation to function effectively. Voice is associated with a wide range of positive organisational outcomes, such as learning, improved work processes, innovation, error correction, the curtailment of illegal or immoral behaviour, and crisis prevention (Morrison, 2014). Communication is the key to an organisation's success, and if employee silence does occur communication will suffer and ultimately harm the overall functioning of the organisation. In this way employee silence is smothering innovation and perpetuating poorly planned projects that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line (Bagheri, 2012). We must be aware that there is case-based evidence that employee silence can undermine organisational learning, error correction, and crisis prevention (Morrison, 2014) and that silence can exact a high psychological price on individuals by generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity and in this way undermine productivity (Morrison, 2014). Employee silence affects the personal well-being of employees, increases stress, and gives rise to a feeling of guilt, especially in organisations where employees are prone to experience psychological problems and find it difficult to see the possibility of change (Bagheri, 2012). Beheshtifar points out that the reason for silence seems to be: *"fear, embarrassment, narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility, implicated friends, lack of opportunity for 'voice' and a lack of organisational political skills"* (2012, p. 278). Considering the

1 The phrase was coined by the nineteenth-century poet John Keats.

theorised potential negative consequences associated with voice, it does not come as a surprise that studies have found employees to be more likely to engage in voice when they have a greater sense of psychological safety and are more likely to remain silent when they perceive voice to be unsafe. The more personally risky that voice is perceived to be, the less inclined will an employee be to voice ideas or concerns (Morrison, 2014). The relatedness in the organisation creates a climate of silence in which the employees as a group are relating (Stapley, 2004).

In this paper I argue that from a system psychodynamic perspective, we must view silence as a sign of dysfunctional processes in organisations characterised by two shared beliefs: "*(a) that speaking up about problems in the organisation is not worth the effort, and (b) that voicing one's opinions and concerns is dangerous"* (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). These factors, including patterns of organisational policies and structures, demographic characteristics, beliefs structures within top management teams, and processes of collective sense-making and communication all contribute to explaining how employees become disillusioned and disinclined to speak up and voice their concerns.

The paper is organised into four parts. The first part discusses theories of employee and organisational silence from a system psychodynamic perspective, while the third focuses on an analysis of silence from a system psychodynamic perspective, as related to the case, and emphasises the need to approach employee and organisational silence from a depersonalised perspective that treats silence as a symptom of basic assumption dynamics. As an introduction to part three, a merger case and the action research (AR) project are introduced in part two. In the last part I conclude that the organisational climate and leadership are responsible for the aggravating and entrenched staff frustrations and employee silence. The management team needs to rethink its style and behaviour to change the contagion of silence in the organisation.

Silence According to a System Psychodynamic Approach

Employee silence is viewed as a sign of an organisational culture characterised by injustice, inappropriate group behaviour, leadership challenges and the proliferation of basic assumptions (Bion, 1991; Hopper, 2003; Miller, 2010). Typical symptoms include fear, unspoken opinions, groupthink, shared fantasies, conflicts, conformity and labelling. Bion posits that such signs can be analysed either at the level of the individual or the group. In both cases they are best viewed as unconscious and anonymous contributions to the collective self. Applying Bion's concepts and, as mentioned earlier, I believe that employee silence reflects basic assumption processes arising from shared fantasies in the group (1991).

Based on a system psychodynamic understanding, an organisation is a *'network of thoughts, ideas and feelings that create the social system as it is and more creatively, as it might become'* (Long, 2013), defined by its boundaries, tasks and roles (Bertalanffy,

1969; Miller, 2010). The theory on basic assumptions is premised on the unconscious life of organisations (Bion, 1991; Miller, 2010) and the group's emotional processes (Hampton, 2004). A system psychodynamic perspective challenges the idea that unconscious processes are 'elusive and can only be observed through their effects or inferred from the gaps in our direct experience, and, hence, [are] constantly hypothetical and open to challenge' (Long, 2016). By creating a collective space for experiential learning, employees and managers are enabled to recognise the conscious and unconscious factors that contribute to the systemic processes leading to silence in the organisation. The successful handling of decision-making challenges depends on allowing time for reflection rather than immediate action (Krantz, 2013). As indicated by French and Simpson (2014):

> *"Suspended attention is rooted in the desire to seek the truth and expresses itself in a range of mental dispositions that have been variously described as: patience, observing, waiting, listening, reverie, watchfulness, discernment, and the capacity to stay in the moment without memory or desire".*

The authors go on to say that *'these states of mind depend on the capacity to contain emotion without being unnerved by it'* (2014) and the capacity to transform experiences into thought by being available for thought on behalf of a group or organisation (2006). Elaborating on negative capability, Bion adopts the term to show the necessity of tolerating uncertainty and inaction until time and reflection allow for well-founded decisions (1991).

However, traditional management competences are associated with clear analytical thinking and decisive action (Northouse, 2015), sometimes described as positive capability (French & Simpson, 2014; Armstrong, 2005). As a result, leaders may be too impatient to examine the emotional conditions behind the parties' positions until solutions start emerging (Henriksen & Dayton, 2006; Bagheri, Zarei & Aeen, 2012). Communication barriers and interests also give rise to conflict (Pardo del Val & Martinez Fuentes, 2003). Where competences and positions are in a flux, management must take responsibility for developing a supportive and trustful framework for the transition process.

Research on Employee and Organisational Silence

Research on employee and organisational silence has highlighted the need for team leaders and managers to be wary of silence and to analyse the factors influencing group behaviour. Although the study of silence is a relatively new area when compared to research on employee voice (Timming & Johnstone, 2015; Beheshtifar, Borhani & Moghadam, 2012), an inclusion of this perspective will help us interpret silence from a system psychodynamic perspective informed by notions of basic assumption behaviour. The importance of the issue is demonstrated by its negative impact on decision-making processes and organisational learning (Milliken & Morrison, 2003). Employee silence was studied through the perspective of justice theory, but corporate scandals, revealed by whistleblowers, for example, demonstrated

its relevance for management practices and organisational policies (Beheshtifar et al., 2012). The serious impact was illustrated in Pinder and Harlos' (2001) examination of the abuse of women at American military bases. Others sought to explain the 'spiral of silence' to understand the dynamics of homosexual people's choice to speak up or remain silent in the workplace (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Beheshtifar et al., 2012).

Where early definitions of silence by Hirschman (1970) equated silence with loyalty – based on the maxim that *'nothing was wrong if concerns were not being voiced'* – later research has shown that silent employees are not necessarily content (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Beheshtifar et al., 2012). Applying Pinder and Harlos' definition, I have viewed silence as:

> *'The withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organisational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress'* (2001).

Whereas the concept of employee silence focuses on the individual's behaviour, organisational silence concerns cultures riddled by inefficient and costly processes relating to meetings and the launch of new initiatives (Bagheri et al., 2012). While Henriksen and Dayton warn that the atmosphere in groups and systems may perpetuate organisational silence because of the fear of implication in wrongdoing or questionable practices (2006), others stress the role of silence in supporting the viability of the business by the withholding of sensitive information (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2014). Morrison, See and Pan (2015) argue that a feeling of powerlessness is a key factor in employees' decision to remain silent among colleagues, and they continue*: '[F]eeling more powerful, even when one is interacting with someone of higher rank, can reduce the tendency toward silence and encourage individuals to speak up when they have potentially useful information to share' (2015*).

The importance of psychological safety in the workplace to individuals, groups as well as organisations is documented by its strong correlation with high employee performance (Pacheco, Moniz & Caldeira, 2015). However, team members' interdependence is bound to create occasional tension, and, depending on their internalised experience of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks, the need for psychological safety affects a person's inclination to express thoughts, ideas and information rather than defending the personal self. Psychological safety thus plays a key role in organisational learning and behavioural change.

In uncovering the spiralling silence, Morrison and Milliken identified contagion as a *'fundamental process that seems essential to understanding silence and voice in organisational settings (…). In other words, what begins as silence about one issue can spread to become silence about a range of issues'* (2003). Employees' work and interaction with customers and other employees allow them to see emerging problems, inefficiency, inappropriate activities, opportunities for improvement, etc. Yet, the man-

agers that are in a position to act may be unaware of this if their employees feel their best option is to say nothing (Morrison, 2014).

Contagious silence exacerbates negative well-being. Signs such as an increase in sick days, negative or passive attitudes and reactions to change can develop despite the employees' positive attitude to change. In the growing silence, they will attempt to satisfy their individual needs in order to avoid harmful psychological effects (Bagheri et al., 2012). The suppression of negative feelings, such as anger and resentment, may impact on the person's self-understanding and ultimately threaten productivity (Morrison, 2014).

Employee silence is not just the result of a conscious choice. As Morrison points out, non-conscious processes are also involved*: 'If an employee experiences a high level of fear, perhaps stemming from an angry outburst by a boss, the employee may automatically retreat'* (2014). In their discussion of employees' internalised representations of their experience with silence or interaction with authorities, Pinder and Harlos (2001) likewise stress the influence of deeply held schemas of organisational behaviour and the importance of feeling safe in the workplace. A climate encouraging discussion can develop only if supported by psychological safety and openness in the system as a whole. Despite efforts to hide problems in the management team, poor interaction and intolerance to disagreement will often be visible to the employees. Henriksen and Dayton point out the value of criticism to health sector organisations:

> *'It is time for managers to value [employees] who present evidence contrary to the view that things are alright, who create cognitive dissonance that serves as an impetus for change, and who step out of their accustomed roles to help solve the problem-behind-the-problem. And foremost, it is time [for] managers and their leaders to value these qualities among themselves'* (2006).

In Morrison's view*, 'voice' is associated with a wide range of positive organisational outcomes, such as learning, improved work processes, innovation, error correction, the curtailment of illegal or immoral behavior, and crisis prevention'* (2006). In understanding the importance of voice, leaders must change their mindset instead of adopting the approach that *'all is well if nobody says anything'*. By understanding unconscious processes as a network of thoughts, symbols and signifiers that give rise to many feelings, impulses and images – and importantly, give rise to meaning – the unconscious is like a *'world wide web'* (Long, & Harney, 2013) and therefore leaders have to pay attention to signs of unconscious processes in the organisation. Signs such as silence are of major importance because silence affects the organisation as a whole. A psychologically safe atmosphere in which communication based on negative capability and personal experience facilitates collaboration and voice in collective trust-building processes should thus be nurtured.

According to Bagheri et al., an organisational climate of silence is the product of collective sense-making in which employees try to align their opinions about the workplace with those of their colleagues; it stems mainly from top managers' fear of

negative feedback from subordinates, and a 'we-know-best' ethos that sees employees as self-interested and untrustworthy. Disagreement and dissent are shunned, whereas positive capability, unity and consensus are welcomed (2012), which my research shows to be a central problem.

Silence as a Sign of Dysfunctional Processes in the System as a Whole

Henriksen and Dayton (2006) observe that leaders who expect employees to *'speak up if they have problems'* seem to consider silence as an individual trait rather than a result of organisational dynamics. The individual members and the group contribute anonymously without being conscious of the basic assumption processes that exist at a given time and reflect individual and group characteristics. These processes influence the interaction between individuals and groups in ways that help people make sense of experiences and develop defence mechanisms against uncertainty and anxiety (Miller, 1989). To understand how silence develops within an organisation, employees' disinclination to speak up must be understood as a system psychodynamic problem, rather than as an individual problem. Sustainable change processes depend on leaders' efforts to show that employee information offers a valued contribution to the decision-making process, based on the understanding that the group and organisation are not entities with an objective reality; they are ideas and constructs that we hold in our minds. A particular group is a construct substantially shared, explicitly or implicitly, by a number of individuals (Miller, 2010).

Silence is thus a sign of system psychodynamic problems involving basic assumption dynamics in the organisation, which give rise to unconscious processes. The basic assumption processes (Bion, 1991; Hopper 2009) of silence show a pattern of incohesion: Aggregation/Massification or (ba) I: A/M derived from the fear of annihilation and the characteristic forms of protection against it. Creating reflection space for experiential learning in groups and organisations (Krantz, 2013) enables employees and managers to achieve insight into the conscious and unconscious factors that contribute to silence. A psychologically safe work environment can help transform an organisational culture by empowering employees to speak up.

Having established employee and organisational silence as signs of systemic psychodynamic problems that are rooted in basic assumption dynamics, I present the abductive analysis of the AR project.

An Institutional Change Process

Background

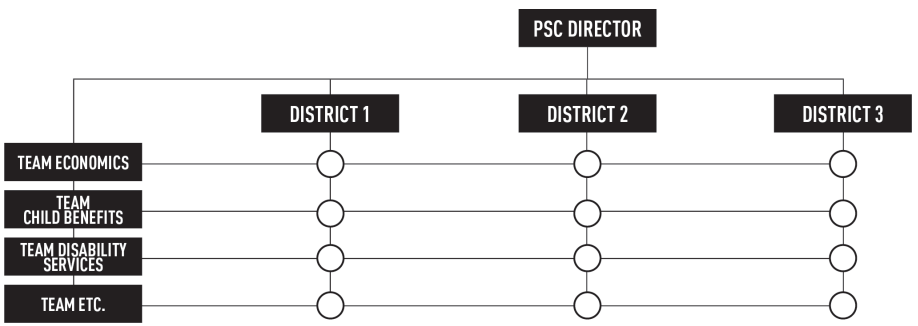
The backdrop to the case was the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm emerging in 1983, signaling a comprehensive shift in the way social welfare and public services were perceived (Dalsgaard & Jørgensen, 2010). A sweeping local government reform in Denmark cut the number of municipalities (Heinskou &

Visholm, 2011) from 271 to 98 and gave rise to the introduction of new management systems focusing on effectiveness and technical and quantitative approaches to leadership. Another factor was the cutting-down by local authorities of the administrative workforce as an austerity measure in response to the financial crisis of the late noughties.

Merging Two Organisations

Following the 2007 national reform of the local government setup, as a result of which three municipalities merged into one, the organisation of the citizen services departments had been restructured several times to improve and rationalise operations and facilitate access to municipal services. However, its leadership, consisting of a director and three geographic district heads, had been unchanged for a number of years. The three separate administrative units were each supervised by a district head, charged with responsibility for day-to-day services within his area of authority. The employees were connected to an array of teams in a matrix organisation, being assigned to both a local district and a task-based team dealing with, e.g., child benefits, driving licences or disability services, as shown in Figure 1.[2]

Figure 1: Citizen services – organisation structure 2007–Dec. 2014



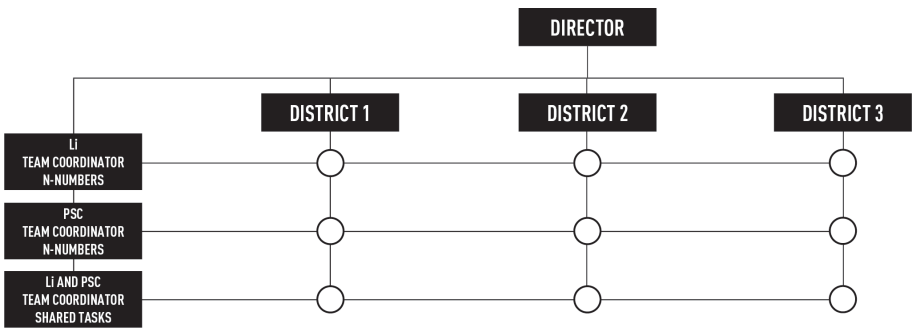
In contrast to the citizen services department, the organisation and work routines of the library services department were only marginally affected by the 2007 reform. The tasks and composition of staff at three different locations remained unchanged, with the three separate administrative units continuing their diverse work routines and procedures. While the new management had no historical experience to base its decisions on, most of the staff had been employed for many years, some up to three decades. The organisation structure of the library services is shown in Figure 2.

2 Matrix inspired by Shin & Shull, 1978.

Figure 2: Library services – organisation structure 2007–Dec. 2014

The integration with the citizen services department began in May 2012 with the appointment of an interim director to take over from the former library services director. With a brief to downscale library services resources, she cut the staff, discharging four persons and entering into severance agreements with a further six employees. Three deaths had occurred during the period. Later, nine employees left their jobs for various reasons. A permanent director was appointed in May 2013, tasked with amalgamating the two services into a new organisation with a branch in each of the three districts. In September 2013, a new head of library services was hired, bringing the management team to a total of five people. Figure 3 shows the result of the amalgamation.

Figure 3: Merged organisation structure, Jan. 2015



The very different histories of the two municipal organisations meant that they were not equally prepared for the change process. In the library services department, the new regime had upset long-ingrained routines and relationships. Staff response to the imminent changes are typified by a working team member's comment that *'heaven and earth were turned upside down'*, indicating that the prospect of losing hard-won benefits and the ensuing bitterness had been laid bare. A colleague admitted that *'decade-old working patterns were not easily changed'* and *'we may do some things differently here, but we have lived with this for forty years'.* The group of Health and Safety Representatives´ (HSRs) frustrations about silence rather than talk among staff members were reflected in comments such as, *'You will be surprised to see how people react; some report sick, others will just stay glued to the computer screen*

until they've finished the job. They may not say so directly, but it's obvious that this makes them nervous'.

The Action Research Project

The AR project involved two groups that were followed during 18 months. In the five months from August to December 2013, I followed one of six mixed groups of employees. Representing all districts and professional groups, their task was to discuss the change process and report their views to management. Throughout 2014, I worked with the group of Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) from both organisations. The AR project ended when the reorganisation process began to take effect in January 2015.

Dialogue conferences were organised to stimulate collaboration between employees and managers throughout the organisation. Focusing on the involvement of employees in the change processes, the conferences were intended to be a 'power-free' forum that would encourage employees to express their honest views without fear of reprisals.

As a researcher my role was to develop an experiential learning environment in which employee involvement could be nurtured. To foster change and allow unconscious patterns to be raised to a conscious level, I encouraged free-floating discussions, emphasizing the importance of communication supported through mirroring, exchange, resonance and translation (Shapiro & Carr, 1991; Foulkes & Anthony, 2003).

Besides my involvement in the employees' discussions of work-related problems and the planning and execution of the actions decided in the groups, I participated in a – largely unfruitful – meeting with the management team to reach a shared understanding of the problems in the organisation. I thus played no role in day-to-day workplace relations between the dialogue conferences.[3]

The analysis is based on field notes, the participants' informal notes, and transcribed recordings of the dialogue conferences and management team meetings. Written communications from group members describing their experiences of the process and their suggestions for intervention were also consulted.

An Abductive Analysis of Silence

The abductive analysis is based on organisational semiotic epistemology, whereas an organisation can be characterised as a community of people that share knowledge of behaviour and participate in the social construction of this knowledge. The aim of organisational semiotics is to understand organisations based on the use of signs, texts, documents, sign-based artefacts and communication, whereas dynamic semi-

3 The AR project was initiated by me as a part of my PhD studies. No payment was involved.

otics focuses on analysing the communication of people during work. Each sentence is a step in a process aimed at creating a common image of the situation (Gazendam, Jorna & Liu, 2004).

The new relations and hierarchies among employees and managers caused by the merger of the two services had created widespread tension – between the individual and the group, the groups and the organisation, the organisation and the wider context (Miller, 1990). The AR project uncovered management's poor understanding of the causes of employee silence by its maintaining that unless problems were voiced directly by those affected, they were best left alone. Management rejected opportunities for remedy by turning a deaf ear to the HSRs' appeal that employee frustration should be addressed. Equating silence with acceptance, management was content to assume that dissenters would speak up, a position that reflected a supercilious attitude and ignorance of the real situation*: 'The team? leader asks whether anyone wants to say something? And the director says: Are there no group members who wish to make any comments? No-one has anything to say!'* Thus, the director expects the employees to speak up individually, instead of talking to the group about the 'knowing of acquaintance' (Stapley, 2004). In short, leaders must demonstrate a willingness to understand the complexity of the socio-technical systems of which they form part, and they must be prepared to break the silence.

Regardless of the way in which opinions are voiced, management should be aware that important information may be lost if outspoken employees are negatively labelled. The climate of injustice and labelling prevented a thorough examination of the situation to help solve 'the problem-behind-the-problem'. The director says: '*This woman – we are not talking about her being petulant, but rather giving off petulant vibes. The other one, I'm sure, is the one pulling the strings and she knows how to make a mountain out of a molehill'.* If the employees speaking up are viewed as troublemakers, this affects the sense of psychological safety in the organisation. In a system psychodynamic perspective, the scapegoat is the one in the group carrying projections on behalf of the group and the system. In this case the director is projecting her problems onto the employees by dysfunctional mirroring (Hawkins, 1986; Nitsun 2006) and not addressing the problems which are the management team's area of responsibility.

The organisational change processes were hampered not only by the employees' reticence about sharing their thoughts, but also by management's lack of attention to their experience and competences. Two directors had taken up their posts only after the initiation of the change process, affecting the whole organisation's ability to effectively tackle the issues, as they had not had time to establish themselves as a team with a shared understanding of leadership roles and behaviour. Their teamwork failed to develop, and differences of opinion about relation-building with employees were evident. The problems were deepened by the new director's uncertainty about the most effective strategy: Whether to adopt a solicitous or a confrontational posi-

tive capability style vis-à-vis the employees. She ascribed the problems to intergroup schisms, as the four middle managers tended to pair up against each other in conflicts. Despite the positive effect of one team leader's coffee-and-small-talk meetings, the director labelled the meetings as a way of 'nursing' the employees. In a team headed up by another team leader, serious problems with stress and sick leave were ignored. Reflecting on this and on the team leader's very business-like meetings, the director ascribed the problems to the absence of a 'nursing gene': *'The team leader is doing the things he is expected to do, but I'm wondering whether he may lack the nursing gene'*. The director sympathises with positive capability by saying that *'the team leader is doing the things he is expected to do'*. The director pays attention to the team leader's actions and not the absence of reflection and mentalisation. If using negative capability in relation to the employees, the team leader would have to reflect and share thoughts about the situation with the group, and invite the group to be a part of the solution. The director talks about reflection and mentalisation as 'the nursing gene', which stamps negative capability as being negative.

The organisational censorship and neglect of the problems resulted in a highly charged atmosphere, characterised by shared fantasies of managers and employees. The HSRs' awareness of problems was all the more frustrating in that their appeals for a more principled dialogue were rejected. With a management team avoiding problems and a tight-lipped staff, the negative cycle of silence and misunderstandings continued. The employees' bewilderment was characterised by various remarks from working group members, such as*, 'We need to vent our frustrations, but in the proper places, not in the corridors'* and *'People spend so much energy talking in the corridors, asking "What does this mean?"* and *"Who said that?" and so on'*. Towards the end of the AR project, cautious optimism was, however, voiced when a group member commented*, 'In the beginning, people were very critical towards the changes – that has improved, but they still need to voice their opinions'*. The lack of psychological safety and personal internalised representations of their experiences led to very different reactions among the employees. Seeing their colleague's reactions made a strong impression on the relatively empowered members of the HSR group: *'Everyone's depressed, but they all react in their own way. One employee throws herself into different projects with lots of other people, other hides behind a closed door. Many employees are downcast – you know, our reactions are so different.'* The feelings of humiliation and anger led to work inefficiency, inappropriate activity and absence. Negative attitudes and passivity squandered opportunities for organisational learning and development. The basic assumption processes (Bion, 1991; Hopper 2009) in the group of employees showed a pattern of incohesion.

In the climate of distrust and failed communication between team leaders and the AR groups, the practice of labelling of individual employees as 'complainers' or 'troublemakers' subjected them to extreme pressure, while it also illustrated the team leaders' projection through dysfunctional mirroring (Hawkins, 1986; Nitsun, 2006) of problems onto the employees and their failure to consider the need for

changes of behaviour and strategy. The two AR groups were careful to avoid openly criticising those in power and mostly directed their mounting frustration at their colleagues, as it became clear that the climate only reinforced their colleagues' silence, for example when, early on, the working group was unsuccessful in eliciting its views on the psychological working environment in an anonymous survey. The impotence felt by the groups was revealed by critical remarks about their colleagues, such as *'Why don't they say what they think instead of becoming angry and walking away!'* and *'Sometimes, I feel they are simply unloading on me – it just goes on and on'.* An HSR had to take sick leave due to stress, which illustrated the frustration felt by employees. The transferee of conscious and unconscious emotions and projective identification in the group led to regression (Stapley, 2004), and the problems were not expressed in formal settings.

The HSRs' knowledge of their colleagues' serious problems compelled them to warn management that the imminent break-up of old districts and new demands for collaboration, specialisation and task coordination caused alarm among the library staff. Despite the HSRs' suggestions and offer of help in the form of defining a framework for teamwork, management only introduced such methods very late in the process.

Commenting on the effect of working group discussions and the dialogue conferences, an HSR indicated that by participating she had gained vital emotional support during a difficult period. The members of the AR groups developed competences in containment (Bion, 1991) and investigating complex feelings and issues. As their colleagues' silence gradually subsided because of these efforts, they started examining shared assumptions (Bion, 1991) and self-understanding. By containing (Bion, 1991) general frustrations, they were thus able to support broader involvement.

Conclusion

This report on an AR project concerning the merger of two municipal service organisations has analysed employee involvement in the change processes and attempted to identify the factors hampering it. The findings point to major problems with employee and organisational silence, reflecting the existence of psychodynamic problems and basic assumption dynamics in the organisation. The management team's dismissal of employee silence as obstructive individual resistance to change led to widespread frustration and passivity, with serious consequences for individuals, groups and the system as a whole.

In all organisations, different perspectives and power aspirations cause tension between managers and employees. In the action research project, the monthly dialogue conferences demonstrated the development of the participants' competences in reflecting on and discussing organisational and interpersonal problems and their repercussions. Both employees and managers were, however, caught in a double-

bind that prevented them from breaking the silence between them because of labelling and the leadership tenet that criticism should be voiced only by those directly affected by a problem. System psychodynamic theories of employee and organisational voice and silence support my abductive analysis, showing that negative capability in leadership is vital in developing a psychologically safe atmosphere in which open discussion and the voicing of criticism are encouraged, an approach that would support experiential learning and decision-making processes that take employees' perspectives into consideration.

The management team's self-understanding and behaviour must be considered in the analysis of the organisational changes. For example, the failure to appreciate one team leader's informal approach meant a lost opportunity to understand the anxieties of the staff in a system psychodynamic perspective. Supporting another team leader's formal approach seemed to indicate avoidance of any negative feedback on his recent appointment, perhaps out of consideration for his as yet unestablished position. When considering the complexity of managing the change process in a fraught atmosphere, it is evident that more time should have been devoted to developing the management team's personal and professional skills in working with group processes in a culture of negative capability and containment.

An environment that nurtures negative capability and is open to guidance by experience requires that the leaders' behaviour reflects those qualities and that their understanding of systemic complexity supports them in tolerating a state of uncertainty. Realising that nothing is gained from interpreting employee or organisational silence as confirmation that staff are content with the situation is fundamental to achieving a trustful atmosphere in which managers' and employees' collective sensemaking can support the understanding of the unconscious dynamics of their workplace. We have seen how silence served to highlight an unconscious, psychodynamic problem whose nature we cannot know. The pervading silence revealed a dysfunctional organisation, with a management team divided over the task of developing a new organisation through employee involvement. For change processes to succeed in a troubled organisation, a trustful culture building on involvement, voice and a sense of common responsibility is required. The branding as 'a nurse' of the only team leader who managed to create a constructive dialogue is one of many indications of the prevailing harmful atmosphere.

In the analysis of employee silence, a systemic approach focuses on the interplay between the parties for a psychodynamic reflection. However, the uncovered structural problems with decision-making, organisational learning, communication, and so forth, also exhibit systemic failure. Using a system psychodynamic framework for the analysis of silence as a sign of underlying dynamics offers a deeper understanding of how unconscious processes influence organisational dynamics. The lack of encouragement to become involved in the change process initially made the employees extremely hesitant to discuss their grievances with either their team leaders

or their elected representatives, a situation that was changed only as a result of the AR groups' strenuous efforts. It is difficult to see how voice could have been articulated without the AR groups and the formal communication structure with elected representatives (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2014).

This study would have gained in strength had the AR project focused directly on the impact of negative and positive capability and on involving the team leaders in the dialogue conferences, in which they did not wish to participate. Several questions need further exploration to improve our understanding of silence from a system psychodynamic perspective, according to which organisational silence is viewed as an indication of unhealthy unconscious processes.

Having shown the harmful consequences of silence for both employees and the organisation, I suggest that the management of change processes should be based on a system psychodynamic understanding of organisational signs, communication based on negative capability and the stimulation of knowledge based on experience.

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