 Debunking Four Myths About Employee Silence

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If you’re like a lot of managers, you pride yourself on your open door and all the other ways you signal to employees that you welcome their input. And you probably believe that you’re actually hearing what’s on their minds — after all, they speak up in meetings, chat with you in the hall, and copy you on emails. Well, you’re not hearing as much as you think or as much as you need to.

In the latest phase of our decade’s worth of research on organizational silence, we piggybacked six questions onto the annual Cornell National Social Survey to explore how and when employees hold back. As you’d expect, they clam up when they’re afraid that speaking could get them into trouble. But surprisingly, the most common reason for withholding input is a sense of futility rather than fear of retribution.

In part because employees sometimes talk, bosses are often unaware of their workers’ self-censorship. They imagine they’re hearing what’s important when in fact they’re being met with silence they’re simply unaware of. Think of the times you’ve kept your own mouth shut. There have been numerous instances, even if you’re generally candid (“I speak up a lot, but not about that issue, or in that setting, or to that manager”). The combination of tight-lipped employees and oblivious bosses buries constructive criticism, not to mention the unvarnished truth. Most important, it prevents the best ideas from bubbling up through the organization.

The data from the 439 survey respondents who are full-time employees (not self-employed) allow us to debunk four common myths managers believe about the flow of ideas and information from the rank and file.

MYTH 1: Women and nonprofessional employees withhold more information than men and professional staffers because they are more concerned about consequences or more likely to see speaking up as futile.

There are no statistically significant differences between workers of different genders, education levels, or income levels in the likelihood of holding back because of fear or futility concerns.

MYTH 2: If my employees are talking openly to me, they’re not holding back.

Fully 42 percent of respondents report periodically speaking up but also withholding information when they felt they had nothing to gain — or something to lose — by sharing what was on their mind.

MYTH 3: If employees aren’t speaking up, it’s because they don’t feel safe doing so, despite all my efforts.

More than 25 percent say they withhold feedback on routine problems and opportunities for improvement to avoid wasting their time, not because they fear consequences.
MYTH 4: The only issues employees are scared to raise involve serious allegations about illegal or unethical activities.
About 20 percent say a fear of consequences has led them to withhold suggestions for addressing ordinary problems and making improvements. Such silence on day-to-day issues keeps managers from having the information they need to prevent bigger problems — performance and otherwise — down the road.

A blog series at blogs.hbr.org/research will look at each of these four myths in greater detail, using cases and analysis to explore ways of unleashing good ideas.

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