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PERSISTENCE, DISTANCE AND SILENCE: BOTTOM-UP ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE TALK

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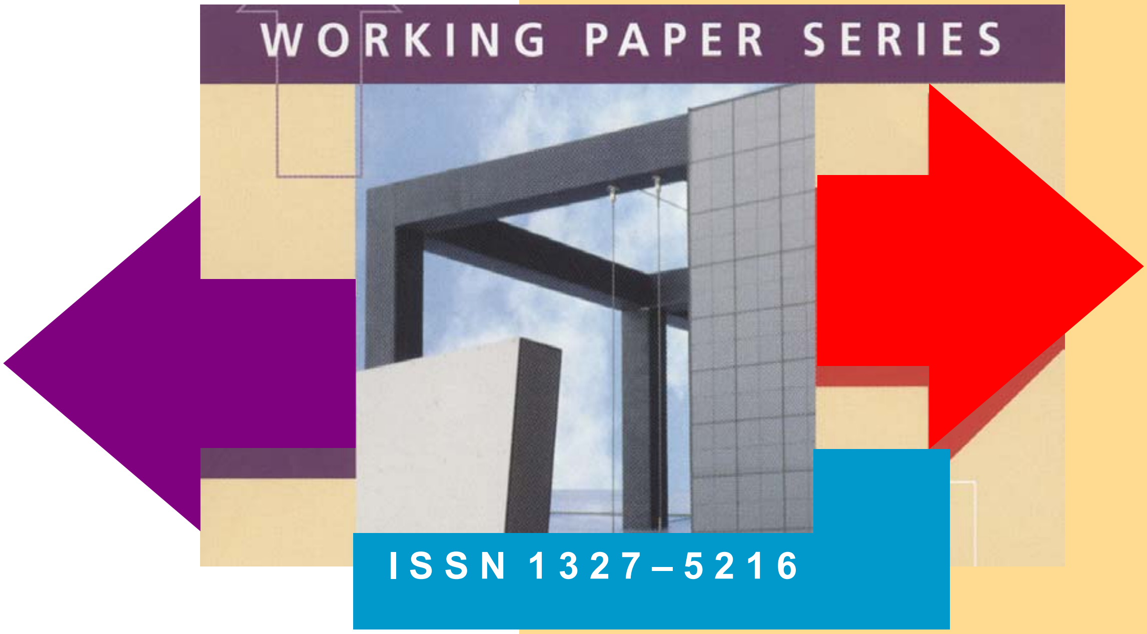

Abstract

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DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT

Abstract

Located in southeast Australia, the Latrobe Valley has been subjected to rapid, large-scale organisational change subsequent to the privatisation of its electricity supply industry. In this paper, narratives of employee experiences of organisational transformation and the impact on employee career opportunities is discussed. The narratives are drawn from an interview study of 25 people working within the electricity, healthcare, paper manufacturing, education and water industries in the Latrobe Valley.

Employees in this study argue that they are not resistant to organisational change per se. However, they suggest that the degree of communication and the overall management of the change process were inadequate. Consequently, employees chose to react to change in two particular ways, with the use of voice to communicate their dissatisfaction, or by withdrawing and/or remaining silent. An emergent theme across the narratives indicates that employees frame their talk of organisational change in relation to voice and silence. Respondents suggest that management, with the removal of decision-making power, career advancement opportunities, and in some cases, pressure to exit the organisation, silenced staff who openly voiced dissatisfaction and actively challenged organisational change. Organisational silence literature indicates that management may attempt to silence employees if they perceive staff will either provide negative feedback or challenge management actions. Employees in this study also argue that management perceived high levels of knowledge and position power amongst staff as a threat to successful organisational change, and thus sought their elimination.

In comparison, employees who remained silent throughout the process of change reaped the rewards of career development and promotion prospects. In addition, these employees suggest that staff who challenged management not only jeopardised their futures in the organisation, but made the process of change harder for all staff. As such they argue that employees who remained silent are worthy of career rewards, whereas those who voiced dissatisfaction are not. Within this paper the relationship between silence, voice and career outcomes is further explored.

PERSISTENCE, DISTANCE AND SILENCE:
BOTTOM-UP ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE TALK

INTRODUCTION

Organisational change studies are traditionally focused on top-down managerial perspectives in which the views and experiences of individual employees are often excluded. However, several organisational theorists (Boje, 1995; 2001; Butcher and Atkinson, 2001; Collins, 1998) argue that change cannot be adequately understood while top-down theoretical approaches continue to transpire in the literature. The aim of this study is to focus on a bottom-up perspective of change in organisations by exploring the experiences of individual employees employed in low-level supervisory levels through to the shop floor.

This paper has been derived from a larger study and is specifically concerned with how employees respond to organisational change. While resistance is an obvious and somewhat standard reaction to change (Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Krantz, 1999; Piderit, 2000), participants in this study indicate that the primary responses to change are to seek information or inform managers of their discontent through voice, or to remain silent. Studies indicate that voice is a constructive reaction to change, providing invaluable feedback to managers about declining conditions or performances lapses (Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers and Mainous, 1988; Zhou and George, 2001). This paper challenges this argument by highlighting a relationship between voice and the destruction of careers, as well as silence and career advancement. In addition, it argues that employees who remain silent throughout the process of organisational change construct very different stories from those who use voice as a response to their dissatisfaction, and contends that silence is not necessarily a display of loyalty towards the organisation.

RESPONDING TO CHANGE

Within management literature, voice and silence (Boroff and Lewin, 1997; Hirschman, 1970; Withey and Cooper, 1989; Zhou and George, 2001) are considered to be obvious responses to job dissatisfaction caused by events such as organisational change. Hirschman (1970, p.30) defines voice as 'any attempt at all to change…an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge'. However, voice as a response to change can incorporate more than simply stating objections or verbalising concerns. Voice can also include strategies to 'try and change…current work situations' (Zhou and George, 2001, p.682) such as grievance filing, challenging managers, seeking information about organisational change through direct questioning (Boroff and Lewin, 1997), or seeking advice from or joining unions or other work-related bodies (Rusbult et al, 1988).

Voice has traditionally been considered as a constructive response to dissatisfaction in the workplace, as it provides direct feedback to management that a performance lapse has occurred (Zhou and George, 2001). Employees can use voice to 'kick up a fuss' (Hirschman, 1970, p.30) about organisational change, or 'articulate their critical views in order to change organizational consequences' (Zhou and George, 2001, p.683). Collinson (1994) refers to such responses to change as resistance through persistence. Although not necessarily exercising resistance to change, employees who persistently use voice in an attempt to alter unfavourable conditions at work seek to 'render management more accountable by extracting information, monitoring practices and challenging decision-making processes' (p.25). However, Hirschman warns that the persistent use of voice can easily be ignored by managers or lead to 'negative returns' (p.31) in the event that it is overused as a strategy by employees to alter post-change conditions at work. While Hirschman does not provide a detailed explanation as to what the consequences of excessive voice may be, both Feuille and Delaney (1993) and Boroff and Lewin (1997) argue that voice has the capacity to afflict negative consequences on an individual. Feuille and Delaney (1993) argue that expressing dissatisfaction at work is linked to exclusion, poor performance and lower promotion opportunities. Focusing specifically on whistleblowing, Boroff and Lewin (1997, p.52) suggest that exposing management or organisational practices can lead to punishment 'including, sometimes dismissal'. While both pieces of research highlight a possible relationship between voice and the demise of careers, it is noteworthy that these findings have not been articulated further, and have been primarily ignored in later research.

As an alternative to voice, silence, or passivity, represents a response to change which is adopted by individuals in the event that ‘they have no means to change the situation’ (Perrewe and Zellars, 1999, p.747). Silence involves acts of distancing, denial or avoidance (Lazarus, 1993), and is referred to as ‘resistance through distance’ by Collinson (1994, p.25). Collinson argues that by remaining silent during processes such as organisational change, employees attempt to escape from the ‘demands of authority…[by distancing] themselves…from the organization and its prevailing power structure’ (p.25). Morrison and Milliken (2000, p.706) argue that employees feel ‘compelled to remain silent’ in organisations for a number of reasons, including fear of retribution, lack of knowledge about organisational change, or representation of loyalty to the organisation. In the event the employees are dissatisfied with conditions created by organisational change but remain committed to the organisation, they are likely to respond by optimistically waiting ‘for conditions to improve’ (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers and Mainous, 1988). Furthermore, the loyal employee is characterised as being ‘a passive person with strong ties to the current setting who thinks that…things will get better on their own’ (Withey and Cooper, 1989, p.525), rather than through actively challenging managers.

While voice is considered as active and constructive, silence is considered as a weak response to change (Jick and Mizt, 1985; Snow-Turek, Norris and Tam, 1996). Snow-Turek et al (1996, p.455) argue that individuals who exercise silence and other passive responses ‘relinquish control…to others’ and thus are more likely to form a dependency relationship with groups with power, such as management. However, individuals who become silent in response to change may simply perceive that events are beyond their control (Anshel, Williams and Williams, 2000). While such arguments provide justification for silence, they do not take into consideration the fact that employees may remain silent as a means of increasing their opportunities at work. As Feuille and Delaney (1993) and Boroff and Lewin (1997) argue that voice can lead to drawbacks for employees, one could assume that the suppression of voice could possibly lead to rewards. This argument is further explored subsequent to a brief discussion of the methodology.

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore and gain an understanding of employee responses to organisational change, an appropriate epistemology and methodology should be adopted. This study adopts an interpretivist perspective (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Schwandt, 1998), which recognises that participant realities differ according to their experiences and situations. The interpretivist approach also enables the researcher to ‘get beneath the skin’ (Collins, 1998, p.190) of organisational change by focusing on what individual employees consider to be most significant to them throughout the change process. Furthermore, it is essential for capturing the ‘translating events’ and ‘frameworks for understanding’ (Isabella, 1990, p.9) that individuals use to make sense of organisational events such as change.

To support the interpretivist approach to this study, a qualitative methodology has been used to ensure that the varying interpretations of change and frameworks for understanding developed by employees are recognised and reported on. A qualitative study of this nature assumes that the participants are best placed to describe their experiences of organisational change regardless of how unclear or ambiguous their descriptions may be (Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). Twenty-two participants were recruited from the power, paper production, water, education and healthcare industries, located within the Latrobe Region in Victoria, Australia, via a snowball sample. The snowball sampling technique was appropriate in this research as it enabled the researcher to locate and study a specific group of people (Morse, 1994) across the region. This group included participants who had been employed in their organisation for five to ten years, had experienced large-scale organisational change, and who were employed in low-level supervisory through to shopfloor positions. It is important to note that this study was not interested in organisational change within particular industries or organisations. Rather, the study is concerned with how individuals understand and talk about their experiences of change. The Latrobe Region has been selected as a research site to study individual interpretations of change due to the nature of large-scale change in the region, the researcher’s knowledge of the local culture, and the geographic proximity of the region to the researcher.

Narratives of individual experiences of organisational change were collected via conversational style (Cahill and Eggleston, 1994) semi-structured interviews. The twenty-two transcribed interviews were then analysed using two principle modes of analysis, each focusing on different aspects of what was being examined. Case study profiles or respondents were firstly developed in order to maintain a sense of the individual subjects that feature in this study and to contextualise their reports and interpretations. From the case studies, narrative plots were examined to explore what links together the events of organisational change to form the structure of the narrative (Boje, 2001). Finally, an inductive theme analysis explored how participants 'sort their stories' (p.123) and how these stories unfolded in the context of the interview. From the case study and narrative analyses, it became evident that either voice or silence was used by all employees as a means of responding to organisational change.

VOICE

Nine of the twenty-two respondents in this study argue that the only way that they could cope with ambiguity and confusion caused by organisational change was to attempt to 'take control [P20]'[1] and 'try and change the situation to something better [P16]' through the enactment of voice. Rather than being 'quiet-like or mouse-like [P12]', employees responded to organisational change and management decision-making by voicing their concerns to management or colleagues, which 'was often something that we would not normally do [P12]'. One respondent thought that 'the stress would make me crumble but I was wrong [P2]', while another adds that she 'felt like a warrior [P20]' during the period that her organisation was undergoing change. Change made some 'more authoritative [P12]', 'demanding [P18]' and 'less inclined to take shit from people [P9]'. The following response is typical of this group of employees, surprising even themselves of how they responded.

> I think sometimes I scared the hell out of some of the managers…I think they thought I was really sort of quiet and wouldn't challenge them much with anything…but one day I just let go. Its like I found this inner thing and the stress and the unknowing all the time just changed me suddenly…I wasn't going to take their bullshit…I wanted clear answers and I damn well demanded them…whether it was the most senior manager I didn't care…their jaws dropped on more than one occasion that's for sure! [P3]

Besides finding a more authoritative voice, some found coping with change easier 'by showing how strong we were…in an attempt to change things for the better [P2]'. A number of employees were proactive and sought positions in unions and on executive boards in their endeavours to 'seek knowledge [P8]', and 'find out information that could be passed onto our colleagues [P20]' so that they could 'better their situations [P16]' and 'try to make work a bit easier [P18]'. One employee recalls that the changes she experienced were:

> …Absolutely horrendous [but]…rather than sitting on my backside I wanted to do something…so I joined the union. I'd never been part of a union. Never in my whole life until I was thirty-nine years old…when someone said, "you could actually do this and speak out for [us]"…So I became a job rep and started representing [staff] because I had something to say…and I was scared for [our industry] and frightened of the changes that were occurring [P16].

Another respondent also sought assistance in the union as a means of expressing her fears and obtaining information. Although she recalls feeling 'bewildered [P17]' by organisational change, she felt that she 'just had to do something to try and help people who would be affected…by management actions [P17]'. While admitting that she did not really want to be involved in the union, the experience of organisational change convinced her that is was essential for the survival of both herself and other employees:

> I'm a very motivated person but…I didn't really [want to be] a union rep at the time but I didn't think I could trust anyone else to do it. Not with five or six hundred people's careers there…it was my decision because I didn't morally feel like I could leave them to fend for themselves [P17].

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[1] Participant numbers appear in square brackets for this and all subsequent quotations

All of the nine respondents who used voice as a response to organisational change argue that ‘it did not work [P8]’ and that ‘our pleas to management fell on deaf ears [P9]’. Furthermore, employees perceived that ‘the more we voiced opinions the more managers started to act strangely towards us [P18]’. Two employees recall that after a ‘while managers got all huffy [P16]’ about employees discussing organisational change with them and ‘started to threaten us and ignore us whenever we brought it up [P3]’. Another employee argues that ‘this type of thing only happened to the louder staff’ and not those who remained silent, suggesting that ‘vocal staff were more or less not appreciated at work’, while those who were silent ‘seemed to get everything handed to them [P17]’.

From the data, it is evident that voice was used predominantly as a means of seeking information, as an attempt to improve post-change conditions at work, and as a way of supporting colleagues. Such uses of voice are similar to the literature reviewed earlier in this paper (Boroff and Lewin, 1997; Rusbult et al, 1988; Zhou and George, 2001). However, employee comments suggest that typical responses to dissatisfaction and change were either ignored or discouraged by management. Furthermore, employees recognised that a potential relationship between silence and rewards was evident.

SILENCE

Employees attribute silence in response to organisational change to a number of reasons. Two employees argue that they ‘felt scared of the consequences [P19]’ of using voice, or ‘feared losing job security [P21]’ in the event that they challenged managers. Therefore, ‘the best thing to do was just pretend everything was okay [P19]’. Furthermore, a perception that ‘management had all the power and employees had none [P14]’ is evident within the narratives and led several respondents to question the purpose of discussing their concerns about change with managers. One employee argues that ‘I have no say in the place’ and thus questions ‘what will challenging change achieve? [P14]’ Other employees respond with comments such as ‘questioning managers gets you nowhere but in trouble [P4]’, or ‘workers who try to find out stuff about change are seen to be troublemakers and I don’t want people to see me like that [P2]’. In addition, a further respondent comments that ‘asking too many questions is seen as being nosy [21]’. A further rationale for remaining silent during organisational change is attributed to the belief that ‘workers do their thing and managers their own’, thus suggesting that it ‘is stupid to try and fight them about something like change [P7]’.

The above comments indicate that silence is exercised as a consequence of a perceived inability to rebalance power between employees and management. Furthermore, the ambiguity and confusion experienced by employees throughout the process of organisational change may also provide a further rationale for becoming silent rather than challenging the situation. While such an argument is unclear within management research, it is noteworthy that studies of power relationships conducted by Collis (1999) and Hobfoll, Dunahoo, Ben-Porath and Monnier (1994) highlight silence or passivity as a consequence of coping with ambiguous situations. This is evident within six respondents’ narratives, which suggest that silence be primarily practiced as a way of coping with the long-term uncertainty caused by change. This is further described by employees as engaging in acts such as ‘switching off [P18]’, ‘disengaging [P6]’ and ‘turning your brain off from the situation [P1]’. Such acts enabled one employee ‘to cope better with the changes [P18]’. In particular, several employees emphasise that ‘it is better for you to stay out of problems at work and deal with them in your own way [P19]’.

> I was fairly concerned at the time…but I was still getting paid and there was no guarantee that [the organisation] wasn’t going to shut down…so you just didn’t know and it was virtually “well in the meantime I’ll keep working and we’ll keep going” [P5].
>
> I felt that there was…threat there…and I guess that was one of the things that probably helped to motivate me [to keep working] because I felt that as long as I am doing things that minimises the threat…I’ll be okay. If I sit back and take the hard line I felt that the threat got bigger…I guess I was lucky I could cope that way. Some people didn’t or couldn’t [P7].

As well as being a conscious decision by employees, silence can also be bestowed on staff by managers. Morrison and Milliken (2000, p.713) argue that managers may ‘reject or discount opinions and feedback from employees, particularly if those opinions differ from their own’. Three employees support this argument and suggest that when opinions are rejected, management ‘certainly make it known that if you don’t shut up you are likely to lose your job [P16]’, and ‘make life very difficult for you [P21]’. Furthermore, one employee comments that managers consider opinionated employees to be ‘resistant to change…and people who should be silenced in some way [P20]’.

From this brief investigation of silence as a response to organisational change, it is evident that suppression of voice is not necessarily an act of loyalty or commitment to the organisation. Rather, one respondent comments that ‘staff don’t necessarily support management at all [P19]’, with others adding that ‘as long as you looked supportive you were okay [P4]’, with a greater likelihood of being ‘picked up for promotion [P2]’. This perception between remaining silent at work and gaining career opportunities is shared by all of the respondents in this study, regardless of whether they used or suppressed voice. However, what is of particular interest at this point in the paper is the different ways in which those who enacted voice or silence construct their stories of organisational change and what the consequences of using voice and silence as responses to change are.

SILENCE AND CONVERSION STORIES

Employees who actively chose to remain silent throughout the process of organisational change frame their narratives in different ways to those who used voice as a response. Respondents in this group tell Conversion Stories in which employees perceive organisational change as providing a ‘better [P19]’ or ‘new way of life [P21]’. The experience of conversion implies personal change, usually associated with a significant event (Yang, 1998) that enables people to transform thought systems or lifestyles (Snow and Machalek, 1983). Although the term conversion is derived primarily from theological studies, this study has found that organisational change can also be considered as an event worthy of conversion. In particular, those who remained silent during organisational change indicate that rewards such as promotion enabled them to align their thoughts and opinions about change with those of management, thus indicating a ‘turning from one viewpoint to another’ (Snow and Machalek, 1983, p.169).

A common perception across employees who remained silent during organisational transition is that they were rewarded with promotions and advancements due to ‘levels of commitment [P22]’, ‘good behaviour [P7]’, and ‘level-headedness [P4]’. They argue that some employees ‘were simply out to make trouble [P2]’ and consequently ‘made things very difficult for themselves [P12]’. Other employees suggest that management ‘did not look favourably at people who caused trouble [P19]’ or ‘challenged everything that they did all the time [P10]’ and argue that ‘some people just made the whole process of change harder for everyone with their behaviour [P14]’. One respondent admits that ‘change is not an easy time for everyone and no one disputed how hard it was for some’ but adds that ‘if you valued your future in the company and wanted some security is wasn’t in your interests to fight managers [P22]’.

While some employees consider themselves ‘lucky to get good promotions [P3]’ one respondent considers promotion to be a reward for ‘being so good during the changes [P21]’. Another adds that ‘people clearly rocked the boat and made a scene when it came to change’ and thus questions ‘how could managers take these people seriously when looking for people to be promoted [P8]’? Others make statements such as: ‘why shouldn’t I get a reward for good work when I never made a fuss about change [P3]’ and ‘being promoted is simply a measure of the work that I did when the changes were coming through [P22]’. Within this group of employees there is a perception that ‘we were better off because we didn’t create a fuss [P2]’ when other employees ‘questioned things, which wasn’t in their best interests career wise [P10]’. Another respondent adds, ‘how can some people be trusted to do well in a better position when all they do is challenge and question all the time [P2]’.

Employees argue that they have definitely benefited from organisational change by remaining silent. As one respondent suggests, ‘my life has changed so much for the better and my job is great…all because I kept my mouth shut at the right time [P12]’. Others add that ‘coming to work is so much better because you are taken so much more seriously [P21]' and that 'a new position has made me feel great about myself and my work [P4]'.

> Before change I was just a basic shit kicker and now I have got this great job where I'm in change of my unit's work and…in charge of a number of employees. I worked hard when change came in and even though I didn't like it…I kept quiet and tried to do the best I could…now I feel that I am doing so well because managers have seen that I can perform under pressure…which all people clearly cannot do [P14].

Some employees suggest that organisational change has enabled them to obtain higher positions within the organisation that they 'would not have dreamed about previously [P3]'. One employee believes that the process of change has allowed her to 'be seen for the hard work that I do [P2]', while another adds that change has enabled him to 'stand out above the rest and be recognised as someone responsible, willing and reliable [P21]'. As a consequence, some employees suggest that 'being recognised…means that you can also be trusted [P12]' and, as such, 'given better…more responsible jobs [P22]'.

Respondents believe that keeping their distance 'from management affairs [P4]' has 'definitely lead to great changes in our lives [P7]'. Not only have employees benefited from career opportunities, they also argue that 'life is so much better than before [P14]'. Where before change 'work life was hard [P19]', employees were 'struggling [P12]' and 'unsure of our futures [P10]', life after change 'has definite promise [P2]' and 'even more room to better ourselves [P3]'. When asked during the interview if the process of change had more benefits than negative outcomes, employees argued that:

> [Change has] given me more opportunity. Had we stayed at the old [organisation]…I still would have been on the floor and would have been bored doing shift work so it's certainly broadened my horizons and the opportunity. I think personally I'm more motivated…I can see that what I do has a result. Um because we've changed so much that if I put in the extra effort I'll get the reward and I'm certainly more motivated in that way…It's been a dramatic difference in my life [P2].

Comments such as the one above are characteristic of conversion stories in which organisational change has provided employees with a turning point (Snow and Machalek, 1983) in their careers. Prior to change, employees indicate that career opportunities were limited and that were not 'seen [P21]' or 'recognised for doing good work [P14]' by management. Furthermore, they argue that 'we didn't really care [P14]' or 'understand anything about change [P22]', rather, 'were more concerned about our jobs [P7]'. However, rewards such as promotion and advancement have enabled employees in this study to 'understand what managers are thinking and doing [P22]' and 'become more like them in our thinking about organisational change [P7]'.

While employees who were silent during organisational change perceive a relationship between silence and career outcomes, other employees suggest that managers silenced them with tactics such as the blocking of opportunities. These employees have 'no doubt [P17]' that various factors like demotion, bullying and alienation are linked to their actions of challenging management and seeking information about change and the impacts that change would have on their careers. The relationship between voice and career outcomes is further investigated in the following discussion.

VOICE AND ATROCITY TALES

Those who used voice in response to organisational change tell stories that are representative of atrocity tales (Bromley, Shupe and Ventimiglia, 1979), in which change led to the demise of their careers. Where the conversion story is an account of personal triumph, the atrocity tale is dark and sinister, and often abounds in expressions of anger, and even vitriol. In these narratives organisational change is associated with tales of workplace violence, including bullying, verbal abuse, inter-group conflict and psychological violence, which employees in this study believe to be directly linked to their actions in response to change.

Employees who tell atrocity tales argue that ‘expressing our fears to management led to our demise [P17]’. Furthermore, employees believed that using voice in response to change led to the removal of opportunities at work, responsibility and power, as well as an increase in ‘abuse [P20]’ and ‘aggression [P16]’ aimed ‘at staff by management [P9]’. These acts of aggression began as somewhat covert acts in many cases to the point that one employee commented that ‘we thought something was up but we were not entirely sure [P8]’. However, ‘it seemed that those who challenged were left out [P16]’ of decision making, ‘ignored [P18]’ and excluded from ‘normal day to day activities at work [P20]’.

Employees who sought the help of outside bodies such as unions and who attempted to seek information on behalf of staff felt that they were considered by managers as being ‘troublemakers [P16]’ and thus ‘targeted for elimination [P20]’ and retribution. However, all employees agree that ‘if you are seen as a stirrer [P1]’ during ‘times of organisational change [P8]’, ‘you had to basically suffer the consequences [P18]’. Consequently, ‘it takes a brave man or woman to be a rep of some sort and stand up to managers…in a situation of change [P16]’. Prior to change one employee recalls that employment relations were ‘a bit ordinary…but we were never treated as badly as we were during change [P9]’. The consequences of being a union or staff representative, or ‘simply being seen to be a troublemaker [P18]’ were ‘cruel [P16]’ and ‘absolutely unnecessary [P20]’. For example:

> Managers and their selective group of staff would pick on me all the time…I was alienated from my job…they would change operations and not tell me and then ridicule me for making a mistake…I was shut out of meetings that I was supposed to play a role in…and I was abused and called every name under the sun…why? Because I dared to challenge and stand up for myself and some of the other [staff] [P16].

Employees could not understand why their reactions to change were ‘met with such responses from management [P17]’. All of the respondents argue that they ‘were acting no differently from any other time at work [P6]’ and were ‘simply doing a job…not attacking managers as they seem to think [15]’. However, they recognise that ‘we were probably seen as people who could sway other people’s ways of thinking about change [P16]’. Another employees believes that:

> Because we were loud and in many ways in a leadership type role…they probably thought that if they can cut us down and get rid of us then they could do whatever they liked and treat workers however they liked…because to be honest most of the staff were either too scared or too stupid to stand up against anything that threatened their future or their jobs…That was my role…so automatically I was seen as the instigator of all trouble [P18].

Employees who were considered to be troublemakers during the period of organisational change were subjected to different types of punishment. One employee recalls being bullied at work and explains that:

> Every step of the way [I was] ignored or denied opportunities…I was also subjected to quite a significant amount of bullying…to the extent that on one evening I was working towards the end of my allocated time…[and] for an hour and three quarters was barred from exiting my door and was stood over by the executive director and told in words of one syllable or less that it would be much better if I left [P20].

Others recall being ‘reduced to tears [P16]’ by management aggression and ‘laughed at and ridiculed by supervisors because we had no job security [P5]’. One employee who intended ‘to work for the company for life’ indicated that prior to organisational change he ‘enjoyed good relations with…managers [P9]’. However, he was subjected to the removal of day-to-day responsibilities and ‘humiliation and out-and-out aggression [P9]’ by his manager for questioning his future job security.

> I was taken out of…where I worked and put in this shed with some other blokes that was probably six paces long by about twelve or so wide…and we had no work. We had to sit in that shed with no work…they just left us there and ignored us…but we were subjected to bullying and aggression and being laughed at because we has no power over our situation…I stayed in that shed like that for three years…until I could get another job somewhere else [P9].

Several employees expressed shock and disbelief at such treatment as they felt 'highly committed to the organisation [P9]', and simply 'wanted our concerns and fears communicated to management [P8]', rather than to 'cause any trouble [P11]'. However, Victor, Trevino and Shapiro (1993, p.255) suggest that management will punish those who are considered to be in violation of organisational norms, commenting that such punishment is justified for the sake of maintaining behavioural standards. Furthermore, one employee argues that management 'must have seen as to be misbehaving…or acting out against change…[and] saw fit to try and punish us for that [P16]'. Others add that 'there must have been a perception that we were being devious [P20]', or 'threatening [P18]', when in actual fact 'we were just trying to find out what was going on [P11]'.

Studies of organisational misbehaviour recognise 'the dark side of organisations' (Vaughan, 1999, p.271) and suggests that conflict and resistance caused by events such as change are a normal part of organisational life. Vardi and Wiener (1996, p.151) define organisational misbehaviour as 'any intentional action by members of organisations that defies and violates…shared…norms…and/or…core societal values…and standards of proper conduct'. While seeking information about the effects of change of employees may not be considered by many as a form as organisational misbehaviour, managers may regard it as a temporary aberration from organisational norms. Employees suggest that attempts to seek information were often met with comments from managers such as 'it is not your place to know [P20]', and the decisions made by management 'are none of your business [P16]'. One employee argues that she was accused of 'trying to make trouble…by asking what effect change would have on career security [P17]':

> My manager told me quite rudely that I was out of line and causing problems by asking what impact change would have on my job…she suggested that my behaviour was inappropriate and that I was a poor example for other staff who were acting according to the…organisation's standards. I was also told that this sort of behaviour…would cause other people to start acting up…which would, how did she put it…reduce the harmony of the workplace. What a crock of shit…all I was doing was asking a simple question…not planning the next bloody nurses strike for Christ's sake [P17].

Other employees in this study hold a perception that management considers deviant behaviour as temporary, and as such requires the restoration of harmony. One respondent suggests that 'conflict is seen to be a passing thing [P14]', while another adds that 'if problems arise…managers do whatever they can to eliminate these straight away…to get everyone back in harmony [P19]'. Another comments that 'whenever things get out of whack…managers act very quickly to restore order [P18]'. Two employees state that 'problems in organisations are just part of life [P16]' and a natural outcome of 'having different groups like managers and staff…who have different aims [P17]'. However, they recognise that 'poor behaviour is punished [P17]' or 'severely frowned upon regardless of the context [P16]'.

In summary, employees who used voice in response to change believe that the consequences it has had on their careers is unreasonable, and the actions of managers cruel. Although they were not necessarily resistant to change, a perception that management considered employees in this study to be recalcitrant exists. Therefore, employees who act in a manner that portrays loyalty to an organisation is likely to lead to a more secure employment future.

DISCUSSION

From the construction of conversion stories and atrocity tales, it is evident that voice as a response to organisational change is more complex than it appears within the literature. While the literature suggests that voice provides constructive feedback to the organisation, findings from this paper suggest that voice is destructive for those who use it as a way of seeking information or alerting management of their dissatisfaction. Employees in this study used voice as an attempt to alert management to lapses in organisational conditions, job security and organisational change. However, it is obvious from the narratives that voice was not considered by management as a feedback mechanism (Rusbult et al, 1988; Zhou and George, 2001), or an 'efficiency-enhancing function' (Keeley and Graham, 1991, p.352). Rather, it may be argued that voice was perceived by management as being 'dysfunctional [and a waste]…of energy that could instead go into performing the organization's missions (Mintzberg, 1983, p.446), or simply irrational and personalised behaviour seeking to enhance self-goals rather than organisational objectives. Such findings challenge the exit-voice literature reviewed earlier in this paper and draw attention to the theory that voice can imply a ‘presence of active-resistance’ (Deetz, 1998, p.159) regardless of whether or not employees are resistant to organisational change, thus leading to punishment in the form of exclusion, isolation, humiliation and bullying.

Further analysis of the narratives also suggests that suppression of voice, or remaining silent, is more complex than a display of loyalty. While this paper highlights a relationship between silence, obtaining rewards and the construction of a conversion story, it is noteworthy that the process of organisational change itself may provide a vehicle for employees to become loyal. Within the conversion stories, employees only display loyalty towards the organisation in their discussions of work life after change. Prior to organisational change, those who constructed conversion stories suggest that they were not particularly loyal to the organisation and that the process of change itself, provided the vehicle for loyalty. Therefore, it may be argued that findings from this study indicate that silence is a product of the personal benefits that could be gained from the process of change. This implies that the decision to become loyal to the organisation may be more complicated than a simple measure of individual commitment, that is highlighted in the exit-voice literature (Rusbult et al, 1988; Zhou and George, 2001), and worthy of further consideration.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on responses to organisational change from the bottom-up perspective and has argued that the use of voice and silence are far more complicated than the manner in which they are merited within the exit-voice literature. This study has challenged the argument that voice is a constructive response to dissatisfaction caused by change by providing evidence that employees are subjected to aggression, exclusion, humiliation and bullying in the event that they provide negative feedback to management, thus leading to the destruction of careers. Alternatively, employees who remain silent throughout the process of organisational change have benefited from career advancement and promotions. However, from this study it is evident that silence as a response to change it more complex than a simple act of loyalty towards the organisation. Findings from the narratives indicate that employees became loyal after receiving promotions and benefits, suggesting that the process of organisational change itself has provided them with the means to become loyal to the organisation. The complexity of voice and silence as responses to organisational change are worthy of further consideration.

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