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Managers' perceptions of intentional employee silence

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Abstract - Sammanfattning

Medarbetares tystnad och hur den uppfattas av chefer

Denna masteruppsats undersöker hur chefer och medarbetare i en organisation uppfattar tystnad på arbetsplatsen (att medvetet undertrycka åsiktsyttringar) och vad de anser är orsaken. Uppsatsen vill dessutom avslöja i vilka situationer en åhörare inte förmår upptäcka denna medvetna tystnad. Studien använder sig huvudsakligen av de vetenskapliga teorierna om en organisations interna kultur, meningsskapande, maktbalans och kritikens U-sväng.

Fallstudier som utförts vid Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB har gjort det möjligt att analysera tystnad i miljöer med olika former av kommunikationskultur. Den empiriska delen av undersökningen består av berättelser insamlade under 30 kvalitativa semi-strukturerade intervjuer med arbetsledare och medarbetare. Undersökningen visade att åhörare kan upptäcka tystnad genom att lägga märke till luckor i kommunikationen, men att tystnaden lätt missförstås och tolkas felaktigt. Dessutom förblir tystnaden, när den är förväntad, oidentifierad och obesvarad.

Nyckelord: medarbetares tystnad, självzensur på arbetsplatsen, organisationskommunikation

Tecken: 107 527

Managers' perceptions of intentional employee silence

This master thesis aims to gain an understanding about how managers and members in an organization perceive observed employee silence (intentional withholding ideas at work) and attribute meanings to it. In addition, it aims to reveal, in what situations observers are not able to identify the intentional silence. Organizational culture, sensemaking and power relations and U-turn in criticism are the main theoretical approaches used in this research. Case study of Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB allowed analyzing silence in different communication settings. The empirical part of this research consists of narratives, acquired during 30

qualitative semi-structured interviews by managers and employees. The study revealed, that observers can identify silence by noticing inconsistencies in communication. However, observed silence is easy to misinterpret and the meanings attributed to it are inaccurate. Finally, in situations, when silence occurs as an expected behavior it remains unidentified and unaddressed.

Keywords: employee silence, manager, self-censorship at work, organizational communication

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of intentional silence and self-censorship is possibly older the times once described by H. C. Andersen's fairy-tale "The Emperor's New Clothes". Seeing the emperor walking down the street naked, "nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything because that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool". Only one child in the crowd dared to point out that his majesty has no clothes on. In academic terms, the child broke a spiral-of- silence.

In this thesis - *employee silence* - refers to intentionally withholding ideas, information, questions and opinions with relevance to improvements in work and work organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Van Dyne et al., 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). I aim to find out how managers can identify employee silence and how they perceive it. In other words, I am curious if the emperor had a chance to notice the intentional silence of his aids and possibly avoid the unplea- sant walk...



Figure 1. Modern employee silence is as old as the times of "The Emperor's New Clothes", described by H. C. Andersen. Illustration from www.dealer-communications.com

1. 1 Problem

Research by Milliken et al.(2003) demonstrated that 85 percent of employees admit that they have experienced situations where they intentionally withheld business relevant opinions at work. As the study uncovered, intentional silence is not an occasional challenge which is typical for a few “problematic” organizations. Instead, it is a common and prevalent phenomenon in organizational life. However, there is not much knowledge about if managers and other colleagues (here called silence observers) are aware of this silence. Neither is it known how they perceive it. Hitherto, “hearing” and interpreting silence has only been discussed as a conceptual suggestion (Van Dyne et al., 2003) but it was not supported by empirical studies.

Organizational silence is somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, an open communication climate, employee involvement in decision-making and employee empowerment have been emphasized by both scholars and practitioners during recent decades. Openness and timely critical upward communication were also described as key to organizational success (Cheney et al., 2004) and included into corporate strategies. On the other hand, employee silence persists in spite of these efforts to make their voice more heard. Moreover, some studies show that those employees who engage in more challenging forms of voice are perceived to be worse performers by their managers and are promoted less often (Burris, 2012). This implies that in some cases managers might even expect a team member to withhold opinions which are critical or deviant from the majority (Harris & Sherblom, 2011).

There are several reasons to look at the intentional employee silence from the observer’s perspective. First of all, silence is hard to identify due to its hidden nature, since sometimes even the silent member is not aware of the silence (Kalvin, 2005). Secondly, even when identified, silence could be easy to misinterpret. For example, a manager whose employees intentionally withhold their questions or suggestions might assume that employees do not ask any questions since they agree with the decision. Later on those misinterpretations of silence lead to decisions and actions that might be problematic to implement due to the lack of the employee support for them. Misinterpreted and unaddressed silence might result

in long lasting, hidden conflicts that become burden for change implementation and long lasting dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is important to notice employee silence and address emerging silences as early as possible.

Even though both organizational members and managers can be observers of silence, this research focuses mostly on managers because they, according to the earlier studies, are exposed to intentional employee silence more often than other groups (Detert, Trevino, 2011). On the other hand, managers are expected to facilitate dialogue both vertically and horizontally, especially in knowledge-based organizations. It is both its both a crucial managerial skill and responsibility to consider multiple views of a situation and be aware of how others see situations. However, employee unwillingness to voice critical opinions, the task to identify the cases of silence might be even more difficult for managers, than for the other employees (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB, which is a Swedish affiliate of global pharmaceutical corporation Novo Nordisk, was chosen as the case for this research due to its knowledge-based profile and strong focus on employee empowerment. Employee voice and participation is one of the priorities in the company according to the senior management in the organization. Competitive business environment means that each late warning or employee's hesitance to speak up might not only violate the internal business standards defined by the company, but also be a costly mistake for the whole organization. The management's ability to foster dialogue and ensure that employees are willing to contribute with their opinions is therefore important. However, according to the senior managers, the communication climate within the organization has not always been open. Some internal surveys showed that employees were withholding their opinions regularly as recent as a few years ago, before the staff change on the top management level. It is unknown if employee willingness to withhold their opinions is still the case (even if the extent of it might be lower than previously), and if the managers are/would be able to identify intentional silence and how they would perceive it. It made Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB a very relevant case for this master's thesis.

1. 2 Aim and research questions

This thesis aims to gain a better understanding of what affects manager's ability to identify and interpret intentional employee silence. The knowledge of the processes and factors influencing the observer's perceptions of intentional silence should help in understanding why some cases of intentional silence remain unnoticed or poorly addressed. Moreover, it could potentially point towards the reasons why employee silence persists even in those organizations where employee involvement and empowerment, according to the top management, are in focus.

In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions will be answered:

- How do managers in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB identify situations of intentional employee silence?
- How do the observers' attributed meanings to silence differ from the initial meanings as described by the silent members themselves in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB?
- In what cases intentional employee silence in the company remains unnoticed and why?

1. 3 Delimitations

It is important to emphasize that this thesis focuses only on proactive withholding of opinions, and not on silence due to poor engagement or cases when opinions were not formed. The absence of voice does not necessarily imply silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Employee silence in this research refers to cases when employees had some work related opinions but intentionally decided not to share them.

The scope of this thesis includes only those cases of silence that occurred within the Swedish Novo Nordisk organization, and it does not include situations where employees withheld their opinions when communicating externally,

for example, with colleagues from Novo Nordisk headquarters and other units as well as to clients.

1 . 4 Structure

The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) consists of an introduction to the concept of intentional employee silence and an overview of the earlier research on it (2.1). The concept of silence observers is presented in 2.2. The subchapter also includes the main academic literature on the factors that affects manager's ability to acquire and perceive feedback. The framework is finalized by demonstrating the relationship between concepts of organizational culture, employee involvement, democracy at work and silence. Those approaches were later used when analyzing the findings of this thesis. Chapter 3 is devoted to presenting research strategy, methods for gathering the empirical material (3.1.-3.5) and analyzing it (3.6-3.7). Finally, the findings of the research show how silence observers could identify it (4.1) and what types of silence exists in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB (4.2). The deeper analysis of some specific silence cases within the organization, namely role silence and cross-functional silence (4.3), helped to reveal how meanings are attributed to silence by different members in the organization. The final part of the findings focuses on positive silence, which remained unrecognized among the observers (4.4). The concluding Chapter 5 turns back to the research questions and offers a discussion for future research and work with employee silence in the organizations.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces to the concept of intentional employee silence and earlier research on it. Most of the studies regarding employee silence focused on the perspective of the silent side, namely, why employees would choose to remain silent, what are their motives and what are the external factors affecting emerging climates of silence at work. The second part of this chapter should clarify the concept of “observer” used in this thesis. It also overviews the research that will help to understand the factors that affect manager’s ability to identify and interpret intentional silence. Finally, the derived theoretical framework at the end of the chapter should clarify, how theoretical approaches organizational culture, power and democracy at work will be used when analyzing how observers identify and interpret intentional silence at work.

2. 1 Concept and earlier research on employee silence

The phenomenon of silence, in form of intentionally withheld opinions, was first mentioned in the research of broader societal contexts, such as a right for freedom of expression, public opinion formation and social psychology. The most renowned theory on the reluctance to speak up is Noelle-Neumann’s (1974/1993) spiral-of-silence, showing that individuals would choose to withhold their opinions when they know or assume that the audience would not share their beliefs. In this case, intentional silence can even fall into a more strict definition of self-censorship which refers to “withholding of one’s true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion” (Hayes et al., 2005). Decision to withhold deviant opinions would lead to situations where only the majority voice will be present in the public debate. The phenomenon of spiral-of-silence is also relevant for this thesis. The spiral-of-silence in an organization is formed when individuals, who are in disagreement with the suggested strategies, choose to withhold their opinions, assuming that they are the only ones thinking differently than the rest. A common example of spiral-of-silence at work could be a situation when a

group of employees are unwilling to question manager's suggestions due to the fearful respect of authorities and assume that the majority of colleagues support decisions of the management. This situation would limit the chances that potential warnings or ideas will be voiced early in time and diminishes chances to prevent potential crisis.

In the research on organizational communication, early definitions of silence equated it with "loyalty". At that time, according to Shojaie et al. (2011, p. 1732), there was an assumption that "nothing was wrong if concerns were not being voiced".

The academic interest for employee silence rose together with the emergence of organizational theories (and practices) that emphasized the importance of upward communication, as a driving force of high quality decisions and a necessary part of successful management (Burris, 2012; Morrison, 2011). Creating an open organizational climate, where decision making is based on open two-way communication, instead of earlier emphasis on information transfer and communicating top-down, became a key to organizational effectiveness (Cheney et al., 2004). Literature on leadership styles shows the shift from the autocratic or visionary leadership towards employee involvement and empowerment (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Consequently, it affected communication styles: focus on top-down communication and information transfer shifted towards how to build a dialogue both vertically and horizontally within an organization (Heide, Johansson & Simonsson, 2012). The themes of whistleblowing, employee speaking up or withholding opinions at work became important (Lundquist, 2012). Scholars got interested in the reasons that lie behind a decision to withhold relevant opinions in organizational contexts. They started focusing on factors like organizational culture and climate, power, leadership styles, hierarchies, group processes as well as on individual differences that could affect employee willingness to express themselves freely.

An overview of research, related to employee silence, could be divided into three main groups:

- Silence as individual or collective phenomenon.
- Silence as expression of powerlessness or means of power.
- Silence in group (small team) communication.

Individual or collective silence

Some scholars see silence not as a collective phenomenon, but as individual behavior that derives from personality traits. Hayes et al. (2005) suggested that willingness to self-censor is a measurable construct and proved that there are significant differences in how individuals respond to test questions about their choice to withhold their opinions. Later research by Hayes (2007) showed that there is a variance in how individuals express their opinion in environments perceived to be hostile to that opinion. According to Detert and Edmondson (2011, p. 461), employee willingness to withhold their opinions can depend on implicit voice theories which are “knowledge structures that individuals use to avoid trouble that could arise from speaking up to authorities”. Those structures are not necessarily based on the previous experiences or existing knowledge, but rather on beliefs that lead to withholding the opinions for various self-protective reasons. Different individuals in the same organization do not necessarily share the same implicit voice theories, therefore, their level of openness might vary.

On the other hand, some scholars see that silence is a result of collective sensemaking “whereby employees together try to derive meaning about their workplace: its demands, constraints, and outcome contingencies” (Weick, 1995; Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 714). Providing negative feedback upwards could be an example of such situation, when employees believe that it is the manager who should provide feedback to those whose position in the organizational hierarchy is lower (Morand, 2000). Biesel and Arterburn (2012) conducted an empirical analysis where employee decision to withhold their opinions was a result of collective sensemaking processes. They found out that climates of silence emerge when cultural expectations can justify employee silence as a reasonable course of action.

This thesis does not prefer any of these approaches, believing that reasons for occurring silence within an organization often are multiple and colliding. Therefore, it is likely that it will be possible to indicate both individual and collective reasons for the intentional silence. In addition, this thesis is based on the assumption that there are a number of silences in each organization and that some of the silences could be of a more collective nature than the others. Observer’s ability to notice and interpret these silences is important in both cases regardless whether the silence is collective or individual.

Silence as power or powerlessness

Another way to look at silence is to see it either as a result or as means of power. Organizational power is conceptualized primarily as a struggle over meaning and defined in terms of the “ability of individuals and groups to control and shape dominant interpretations of organizational events” (Mumby, 2001, p. 595). The group, that has power, has control over meanings and is able to articulate meaning to its’ own interests in order to maintain and reproduce relations of power. Many scholars, who analyze silence, emphasize that power usually belongs to the senior management whose voice is the most heard in the organizations. Meanwhile other employees conform and accept interpretations and meanings suggested by the management due to respect of authority, self-protective or career reasons (Tourish, Collinson & Barker, 2009). Those who lack power are at a risk to become silent. Steven Lukes (1974) describes this risk in his three-dimensional model of power, where level one includes the most observable aspects of power – directions and compliance to them, level two - less observable aspects, such as people not expressing alternative viewpoints when they hold them (just like in employee silence and self-censorship) and level three - when someone is not considering and alternative viewpoint, even though the dominant view may not be in her best interest (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 257).

Analyzing intentional silence as means of power is less common. Van Dyne et al. (2003) pointed out, that silence can also be pro-social, when employees are not voicing their opinions due to loyalty to their colleagues. In addition, silence can be seen as strategic behavior and function as means of exerting power over others or resisting someone else’s power (Gardezi et al., 2009) instead of conforming. This way, potential speaker’s choice to remain silent has an influence on the meanings constructed in a dialogue where silence was a part of the conversation (Mazzei, 2007). Brown and Coupland (2012) illustrated how graduate employees chose to remain silent as a part of their career strategy: being silent and not saying what is “inappropriate” according to the graduates was their career choice. Burris (2012) showed that withholding critical communication from the managers could be a prudent decision, because employees who engage in more challenging forms of voice are perceived to be worse performers by their managers than employees engaged in more supportive forms of voice (Burris, 2012). According to the research, those employees who are withholding their critical

opinions from the managers have better chances to be promoted than those who are daring to disagree. Therefore, self-censorship, despite its negative impact on organizational development, could be seen also as a part of successful career strategy.

Silence in small team communication

Silence in small team communication is also relevant when analyzing occurrences of employee silence. Decisions to withhold an opinion depend on important reference groups, for example, those groups that one is interacting with on a daily basis (Hayes, 2007), where small working teams are the most common examples in organizations. Harris and Sherblom (2011) write that mistrust of people in positions of power in a group is hard to overcome for those who are accustomed to being marginalized. According to the scholars, diverse teams are known for higher potential for creativity, however, their communication is more challenging and bumpy when team members come from widely different sets of assumptions not only about the task but about the cooperation process itself. Since conflicting opinions are easier expressed in groups of social “equals”, it is possible to assume that there is higher risk for self-censorship in groups of people of diverse backgrounds. The more diverse a group is, the more uncertainty is produced and in turn the higher is the risk for misunderstandings, stereotypic communication and assumptions (Hecht, Jackson and Pitts, 2005). Earlier research showed that those group members who bring up new information are viewed less favorably than the members who communicate information that one already knows (Hogg and Tindale, 2005). Therefore team composition could be an interesting factor when analyzing cases of self-censorship in organizations.

To summarize, most of the research regarding employee silence and organizational silence focuses on the silent employee’s perspective: underlying reasons for intentionally withholding opinions, as well as issues and circumstances, when the intentional silence occurs. However, there is not much knowledge if intentional silence evokes any reaction among those, whose behavior might have caused the silence, as well as among those, whose decisions might affect working conditions as well as willingness to speak up or remain silent.

2.2 Concept and research on silence observers

“Observer”, according to Oxford Dictionary of English (2010), can be a “person who watches or notices something”. It also refers to “someone who regularly watches or pays attention to particular things, events, situations”. In a classic (for example, Shannon–Weaver communication model), “observer” would be understood as a receiver (Fiske, 2010). Just the message here is silence, non-communication – so decodifying of the message becomes much more challenging. In this master’s thesis the word “observer” is used to refer to members in the organization, who have encountered situations of intentional silence at work, namely, observed someone else to withhold their opinion. Observer is opposed to the “silent member” – a person who is intentionally withholding opinions. The term “observer” in this thesis helps not to automatically equalize observer with a manager since other members in the organization can also be observers of silence. Similarly managers, in some situations, might withhold their opinions and become silent members.

The main focus on managers as silence observers in this research depends on the expectations for manager’s role, as described in the literature: managers should ensure dialogue, inspire open discussions, collect and include different opinions in decision making and this way pave the path for eventual organizational changes (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

Even though there is a lack of research on how people exposed to silence perceive it, works regarding manager perceptions of critical voice as well as their ability to listen to employee voice will provide better understanding of the factors, that might affect their ability to listen and, consequently, identify eventual employee silence.

Among these works, research on managerial perceptions of critical upward communication and critical voice at work suggests, that managers can possibly be exposed to silence more often than other groups of employees. For example, Tourish and Robson (2006) analyse situations, when employees are reluctant to provide critical feedback upwards. Due to employee unwillingness to criticise decisions of the management, managers receive a relatively smaller amount of critical feedback, they develop inaccurate perceptions of the communication climate within their organization. Even when upward feedback occurs, Robson and Tou-

rish (2006) mean, it tends to be more positive than critical in nature. This way managers develop an inaccurate impression that the acceptance for changes and commitment to managerial goals is higher than what it really is. Hearing positive voices more often than warnings or criticism, managers get a biased view of the situation, which in some cases can even result in an internal culture of “no bad news” (thus – silence). Even dissenting voices in this case are expressed so mildly, since criticism (due to in-built beliefs or actual experiences) might result in lower rewards. It explains, why managers tend to see themselves as better and more frequent communicators than what their employees would describe them (Crampton et al., 1998, in Tourish 2006).

Some studies indicate that managers might (consciously or not) avoid, discourage or suppress critical feedback (Burris, 2012). Chang and Swann (2012) points out that seeking positive instead of critical feedback in both personal and professional lives is a tendency in human behaviour. Moreover, even when critical feedback is available, some managers tend to conceal negative organizational outcomes by suppressing information and covering up negative financial data instead of being a part of an open discussion how those obstacles could be overcome (Tourish & Tourish, 2012).

Secondly, managers might perceive critical upward communication as inaccurate due to self-efficacy biases, that make us believe that we (or a social group we belong to, in this case – management) are better than most of others, Tourish and Robson (2006) point out. In this culture, critical feedback can be perceived as an attack, and therefore, often unconsciously, managers are discouraging the expression of critical opinion, treating it as a threat to the vital interests of an entity.

It results in a situation, where management perceptions of the communication climate in an organization differ from those held by the non-managerial employees. Tourish and Robson describes it as a crisis of over-optimism, where the dichotomous approaches between management and outsiders or non-managerial employees and the absence of critical upwards communication are a causal factor in organizational problems

2. 3 Theoretical approaches for researching observed intentional silence

The most important concepts for the theoretical framework in this study are organizational culture, power relations and democracy at work. Combination of them should allow to analyze the empirical material and answering the research questions, namely, how observers identify silence, attribute meanings to it as well as see why silence gets noticed in certain situations and remains unidentified in the others.

Organizational culture - a system of common symbols and meanings in an organization – is one of the central concepts here. In the earlier research on employee silence, the silence was analyzed as a collective phenomenon, closely related to implicit voice theories and perceptions of what voices are accepted. (see 2.1). Observers are also affected by the culture, as it provides "a frame of reference of beliefs, expressive symbols and values, by which individuals define their environment, express their feelings and make judgements" (Alvesson, 2002, p. 5). Following it, culture influences, how observers perceive intentional silence and what behavior they would classify as silence. Both the decision to speak up or to remain silent, as well as management perceptions, what behavior (voice or silence) is expected in different situations, are closely related to organizational culture and the established norms.

It is important to note, that organizational culture is neither stable nor solid construct (Brown, 1998). To the contrary, it is under a constant development, constructed and co-constructed, affected by changes of staff, top management and other factors. In addition, certain subcultures within an organization might be formed. New employees might not necessarily be familiar with the organizational past that affects communication climate today, therefore their perceptions of it might be different in comparison to the old employees. For example, new manager, when observing and interpreting intentional silence, might miss some of the underlying reasons for it, since he or she are not familiar with the speaking-up traditions in the organization before. And, to the contrary, new employee might be able to compare the new working place with the previous professional experiences and identify, where the new organization is more or less open. It is also important to note that an organization is likely to have several, sometimes overlapping inter-

nal cultures, for example, cultures of different departments, formal and informal groups of staff and similar. An observer, when facing an intentional silence and making sense of it, is a part of all these different constellations. The meanings attributed to the observed silence are influenced by the cultural norms, that are typical for the organization, department, or smaller, subcultural groups that the observer belongs to. All those factors were held in mind while both collecting and analyzing the empirical material of this master thesis.

The second important aspect, when analyzing observer perceptions of employee silence, is democracy at work, level of employee involvement in decision making and participation (Deetz, 1992) and established channels and procedures for acquiring employee feedback. Participation here, following Cheney et al. (2004, p. 2012) comprises "organizational structures and processes designed to empower and enable employees to identify with organizational goals and collaborate as control agents in activities that exceed minimum coordination efforts normally expected at work". In a way, democracy at work is related to organizational culture - what types of involvement and participation are expected and perceived as a norm in the organization. An observer who, due to, for example, culturally established strong hierarchies in the organization, might not miss employee voice in certain situations and therefore be "blind" to their silence. Quality and amount of established feedback channels, as well as ensuring, that these channels are not smitten by intentional silence are an important tool for an observer to identify silence at an early stage. Managers (and other employees, exposed to intentional silence) in an organization, where high level of participation is expected, should perceive silence as unnatural, disruptive behavior and a threat for an effective work, thus likely they would notice silence earlier and easier.

Finally, observer's ability to notice silence, concepts of power and powerlessness are relevant. As mentioned in the overview of the earlier research regarding intentional silence, employee silence can be understood both as a result of powerlessness. However, silence should not be taken so straightforward as absence of power, as it can be part of the strategic behavior, point out Gardezi et al. (2009, p. 1392). Therefore, "neither speech nor voice are straightforwardly negative or positive". Silence might be means of extorting power over others, a reflection of relative powerlessness or a means of resisting power.

In this research it is important to understand, how silence observers, when interpreting silence, perceive their own power and the power of the silent employees. For example, according to Lukes (1986), “the outcomes of power should serve the interests of the powerful” (p.5). However, it is questionable, if a manager, whose employee is not sharing certain ideas or viewpoints will perceive himself as being powerful in this situation. Analyzing silence and power from the observer’s perspective might provide new insights regarding how both sides perceive power balance in the situation when someone intentionally withholds their opinion.

The above mentioned theoretical concepts suggested directions for the research of observed employee silence in this master thesis, that there later on included in both gathering the empirical material (interview questionnaires) and the analysis. Organizational culture, as perceived by the employees, defined what values, behavior, language, ethical codes, assumptions, history and attitudes are considered to be typical for the organization or certain departments and in what situations intentional silence might occur. Secondly, regarding democracy at work – expectations and channels, routines for employee involvement allowed to compare different forums and communication settings, for example, manager-employee meetings, department meetings, cross-functional communication and similar. The aim was to understand circumstances, when silence can occur. Finally, the concept of power allowed analyzing the attribution of meanings to observed silence and see underlying reasons for silence as perceived by the silent employee and the observer.

3. Methods

3. 1 Choice of the research strategy

Inductive inquiry should suit this type of research best, since the ambition of this thesis is to reveal and understand processes that influence observers' ability to identify and interpret employee silence. Each occurrence of silence is distinct and derives from some specific business context and culture. Moreover, actors who are involved in the situation of silence are individuals with unique experiences and personalities. An inductive approach should help minimize the risk that predefined assumptions would work as a procrustean bed, which would prevent from grasping some occurrences of or narratives about intentional employee silence in Novo Nordisk Skandinavia AB.

When it comes to epistemological and ontological considerations, interpretivist methods that focus on understanding (instead of explaining) of human behavior should be the most suitable here (Bryman, 2012). Employee silence and perceptions are social constructions and depend on implicit voice theories, sense-making processes, in-built beliefs and so on. The phenomenon would be hardly possible to objectify. Therefore silence and perceptions of it here are analyzed as social constructions that can be expressed in a form of narratives.

Qualitative methods are preferred for this thesis since they allow focusing on the specific circumstances of each silence occurrence without mixing the cases up. The research questions did not focus on the issues that might require quantifying, for example, how often intentional silence has occurred. Instead it focused on the qualitative aspects of the phenomenon – circumstances, meanings and interpretations of intentional employee silence, as perceived by the observers. These questions required in-depth qualitative analysis. However, some quantitative data in the form of internal employee surveys in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB was used as a secondary material when analyzing the findings (see 3.3 and 3.5).

3. 2 Research design. Case study

Employee silence and underlying reasons for it as well as management attention to it are closely related to the culture and norms, formal and informal hierarchies, structure, type of organization, personal relations and many other factors. Consequently, internal mechanisms encouraging or suppressing employee voice would differ depending on company structure and type. For example, managers for teams of low-skilled workers will have different expectations than those leading knowledge-based teams where each member has a very high and narrow professional specialization.

In order to avoid generalizations and acquire precise results, case study is the most suitable way to proceed in this research. As a bounded system, case study allows to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case in its natural setting and context (Punch, 2005). It should also provide as full picture as possible of the situations, where employee silence was identified in one specific organization. This study should be an exemplifying case, with an objective to capture the circumstances of everyday situations and examine key social processes (Bryman, 2012).

Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB, a Swedish affiliate of a global pharmaceutical corporation, was chosen as a case for this research for several reasons. First of all, it is a knowledge-based organization, where sharing information and looking for new innovative ways of working are in focus, as it is also expressed in the company's strategic documents. Highly-skilled employees are organized in a relatively flat hierarchical structure (15 managers out of 70 employees). According to the management, employees in this company are empowered and expected to contribute to constant improvements of the organization, thus democracy at work is a prerequisite for the success. Secondly, business processes in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB offer wide range of different communication settings, which allows to acquire richer insights regarding presence and perceptions of silence, that presumably might vary from one setting to another. Finally, the size of the organization allowed accessing all organizational levels: the top management (general

manager, members of the board) middle management and ordinary employees. It helped to grasp the variety of situations, where employee silence is present. Employee, manager and top manager narratives should allow to uncover how the same situation was seen from different perspectives. Potentially, it should provide deeper insights in the differences of sense-making processes related to meanings, attributed to silence within the same organization.

Differently than most of the previous studies, that focused on one of the perspectives, employee or management, this design aims to acquire a more holistic view and track down some issues, problems, situations and how they were seen by different organizational members. This attempt to find similarities and differences between how employees, their managers and members of the board reflect on employee silence at work can suggest new insights into the reasons of silence and perceptions of it.

3. 3 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews is the main method in this thesis, hoping to capture the richness of personal stories (Milliken et al., 2003). Individual conversations were supposed to maximize the chances to get personal views and reflections on situations where respondents recall occurrences of employee silence. The narratives with examples of situations when silence was observed are in focus. They should depict perceptions that different actors have regarding the communication climate in the organization. Differently than, for example, focus-group interviews, personal meetings, potentially allowed for more openness, as participation of more team members and group dynamics would potentially evoke hesitation to speak-up about some socially sensitive situations, that are common examples when discussing employee-silence. The respondents were assured of confidentiality.

Interviews (30 in total, out of it 12 manager interviews) were conducted at the company during June and September, 2013. Each interview took around from 45 to 75 minutes.

All the managers in the organization were asked to participate (80 percent participated). The sample of employees consisted of 1-3 representatives from each interviewed manager's team. In cases where several representatives from the de-

partment were interviewed, the positions of the employees were different in order to reach out to as broad spectrum of stories as possible. The interviews in different teams were conducted in anti-hierarchic order (interviewing 1-2 employees before talking to their manager).

In order to avoid negative associations or suggesting an answer, pointing towards specific problem, the terms "employee silence" or "self-censorship" were avoided in the questionnaires.

Most of the interviews opened with a general question about communication climate and openness in the organization (around 5 min.), and a reflection on how it changed through time. Answers to this question revealed perceptions of communication climate and culture in the company and what factors were found important for it. It also showed topics and issues that the interviewee found important to name. This open question also allowed to formulate some follow up questions later in the interview.

The following questions for employees and managers differed. Employees, were asked to remember, if they remember situations, where they intentionally did not share their opinions at work. This part covered issues about exercised silence and its motives and partly followed the structure used by Milliken et al. (2003).

The second part of the employee-interviews was about observed silence: if a person has observed somebody else to withhold their opinions and how did they identify it. To specify and help remembering situations, employees were asked to think about different communication situations: face-to-face, group, informal communication and cross-functional meetings. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the perceived motives of the silence.

Managers were asked about observed employee silence in different situations, how it was identified and addressed, how it could be prevented, and what are the motives behind the silence. An example of interview questionnaires can be found in appendixes No. 1 and 2.

3. 4 Informant interviews, observations, document analysis

In order to formulate final questionnaires for the interviews, as well as have a support material for the interview data analysis, several other methods and types of data were used: informant interviews, meeting observations and document analysis.

Informant interviews with the top managers in Corporate communication, facilitation, HQ HR and the German affiliate took place before the interviews at the Swedish affiliate. Those interviews allowed to outline some potentially interesting moments in organizational life, where situations of employee silence might occur. It also provided some potential insights into the communication challenges, often related to very fast growth, that a company might experience. Informant interviews also provided information about the tools and channels for employee feedback in the organization.

As much as the given access to the company allowed, the interview material was supported by five meeting observations in total (3 cross-functional, 1 whole company and 1 department meeting, during September-October 2013). The observations made during the meetings helped to enrich the interviews with questions, referring to specific meeting situations, as the task to recall situations where silence has occurred might have otherwise been rather challenging. Asking those questions might inspire the interviewees to provide more specific answers, as well as help them to remember similar situations.

In addition, several documents were analyzed. Novo Nordisk Way – the main strategic document of the organization, defining the main values and working principles in the company. Data from internal quantitative survey eVoice that paid a special focus on questions regarding employee openness and manager-employee communication in each of the departments. More qualitative data was available at Communication review, where, among other moments, cross-functional communication was named as a challenge.

3. 5 Reflections on data gathering

When analyzing interview material, according to Alvesson and Deetz (2000) it is important to have in mind, that their capacity to reflect reality and the subjective world of the interviewee is limited. In addition, it is important to understand that openness during interviews is determined by the situation and interview context. Therefore there is a risk for possible bias in the interviews, including inclination to give positive answers. In this research it could be expected, that interviewee willingness to preserve the image of integrity and professionalism will limit the openness when speaking about their own silence. Managers, in their turn, might tend to describe their communication routines as more regular than they are in reality. In addition, Alvesson and Deetz (2000) warns that interviewing might guide responses, as a person, interviewed as a “manager”, might identify with the specific role and produce answers, that he/she understands are expected from a manager.

3. 6 Analysis of the material

The excerpts from the interviews were thematically organized (Widerberg 2002), first of all, classifying narratives to the categories of ”Own silence” and ”Observed silence”. Then the narratives from both categories were compared trying to identify similarities and differences between described situations of silence. The stories were labeled and sorted into types of silence, depending on the reasons for silence (as perceived by the interviewee) and communication context (see more 4.1). If some cases of silence were only named by the silent members themselves but not by the observers, the type of silence was classified as unidentified silence (see Figure 2 in 4.1 and 4.4).

The second step of the analysis was to juxtapose stories on the observed and own silence and compare the meanings attributed to silence by different actors. In some cases, it was possible to track down how silence was perceived by several actors – from the top management, to middle manager, to colleagues and the silent employee. Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) here was used as a tool for under

covering detailed sensemaking process when encountering silence. Both the observer and the silent member are involved in sensemaking processes related to intentional silence. On one hand, silence can be seen as a result of sensemaking by the silent employee. Silence is an outcome of sensemaking processes that lead to the decision to remain silent. On the other hand, observer encounters silence as an ambiguous situation. Observer's sensemaking process is evoked when trying to make sense of silence and take a decision how to react to it. The narratives on own or observed silence were analyzed following the steps of sensemaking: flux - uncertainty when encountering silence (which helps identifying silence as an ambiguous situation), labeling, retrospective, presumption how events will unfold and reasonable course of action (see 4.1 and 4.3). This method allowed detailed comparison of the meanings attributed to silence.

Finally, concepts of organizational culture, democracy at work and power were used for interpreting the narratives on silence. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the context that affects the motivation for silence or the observers' ability to interpret it.

3. 7 Reflections on the method for the analysis

Analysis of the empirical material in this type of research is always influenced by the researcher's subjective judgement when deciding what issues to focus on as well as how those issues can be interpreted (Seale, C., 2004). In order to strengthen the validity of the research results, multiple sources were used, including informant interviews, meeting observations and internal documents (communication review and results from employee survey eVoice). The data of these documents encouraged to be more reflective and self-critical when interpreting the interview data. In addition, it motivated to focus deeper on some specific areas. For example, cross-functional communication was one of those areas as it was repeatedly appeared as challenging in different sources and not only in the interviews. Moreover, it helped not to limit the research questions by in many previous articles prevailing views that it is the closest manager who affects employee willingness to withhold their opinions. Both the survey data and the interviews showed that relations between managers and the employees in the company were

based on trust. However, according to the interviews some silence still occurred but in other, often more horizontal communication settings.

Member checks (Rudestam, 2007) were a part of the data gathering and analysis process. During several occasions some of the data and research findings were presented to the Organizational communication team in Novo Nordisk A/S headquarters. Even though this method should be used cautiously in order not to put the informants into the position of a co-researcher, the meetings provided some useful input in the form of observations that some of the trends of silence in Novo Nordisk Skandinavia AB were also typical for the other parts of the corporation.

4. Analysis and results

4. 1 Identifying silence

During the interviews both managers and employees were asked to give examples on experienced or observed situations when it did not feel safe to speak up. In order to inspire as many examples as possible, they were asked to reflect on communication within their own department, employee-manager communication, cross-functional communication and other types of settings. The following analysis is based on the interview answers to the questions:

- Have you been in a situation, when you did not feel it was safe to speak? What was the context? Why did you feel so? What did you do?
- Have you observed somebody else in such situation? How did you notice it? What did you think or do?

The interviews were analyzed focusing on descriptions of the observed silence situation and what made the respondents to notice the silence. The analysis showed that observers, when speaking about silence, first of all mention that they indicated a change in ordinary communication routines or encountered an unexpected behaviour. Following Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005), it should mean that those observers who notice silence, first of all notice change in the usual routines and experience uncertainty which evokes sensemaking.

For example, changed body language could be the first sign of emerging silence. Observers said that sharing open-office space with other employees can help to feel the atmosphere in the department and notice changes in social contacts at work: how often they happen, between who, how do they change. Some interviewees named that silence can occur even directly, when no one is sharing points of view after asking a question during meetings. The observer in this situation experiences uncertainty that leads to sensemaking and indicating that silence might be intentional. Another example: "When there are many different opinions in the room, you can observe that one of the discussion sides stops arguing, as if he/she lost motivation to do it". This comment indicates that the observer was able

to indicate silence, since he/she expected the discussion to continue. Consequently, in situations when observers do not classify situation as different from expected sequence of events, silence remains unnoticed and unidentified.

Secondly, the interviews revealed that observers tend to identify silence when they have access to different communication fora. When an observer notices that the same persons speaks differently in two different situations, he/she suspects that in one of the fora the speaker was insincere. The observers interpreted these inconsistencies as signs of emerging silence. Example:

In my department, we have a couple employees who never say much during the meetings (forum No. 1). They say only small, not important things. Whenever it is important, they are silent. So they can complain afterwards: "It is always so and so". I say: "Then you should bring it up!". "No, because no one is ever listening to me, no, I do not dare, no, it is not interesting for you" (...). And later on they speak with the colleagues around (forum No.2), that the taken decision was wrong, that it is never the way they want. (Employee, observer)

Another employee, who has both managerial and non-managerial experiences, noticed that for a non-manager it is easier to be included into informal social communication: "The day you become a manager you notice that some conversations stop as soon as you enter the room. It is so obvious". The importance of the access to informal communication fora was also described in the literature. Scott (1990) noticed that much of the creative resistance of subordinate groups takes place not in public but rather in discourse that occur "offstage" and is beyond the direct surveillance of those in power. The informal conversations should reveal the level of "offstage" resistance among disempowered groups, when, as Cheney et al. (2004, p. 268) described, employees "play the game" when the boss is around and "sing their own tune" in their own "space". These insights would imply that non-managerial observers might potentially have better opportunities to identify silence than the managers because non-managers have better access to both formal and informal communication fora - for example, coffee-break talks.

However, some information from informal conversations reach the managers indirectly, via other employees or, as described by one of the interviewees,

“just like a feeling that there are tensions in the wind”. An observation made by a manager: “After meetings there are discussions in small groups: “I felt so and so, but said nothing. I did not think it was the right timing to speak... What do you think?”. Even when managers do not have direct access to some parts of the informal communication, they perceive informal communication to be an important power in the organization. One member of the board said: “Conversations which create uneasiness and people who spread it might have more power than what I have”. Here the manager referred to the social power of informal communication. Organizational power is conceptualized primarily as a struggle over meaning and defined as the “ability of individuals and groups to control and shape dominant interpretations of organizational events” (Mumby, 2002, p. 595). The dissatisfied and silent employees might speak up in an alternative forum and encourage the resistance to management’s decisions among their colleagues. That is why meanings developed in the informal settings could potentially challenge the ones communicated by the management. It makes managers concerned about being able to observe informal situations and try to encourage the employees to express their concerns in more formal settings.

When someone does not dare to speak during the meetings, you can hear them talking afterwards. Therefore, it is important to have “big ears”. If you hear something, then you can ask to tell: what do you think? You should bring it up to your boss! We, board members, should listen a lot – not to spy, but feel the climate. Most of the information is available during the coffee breaks in the canteen. (Manager, observer)

However, claiming that presence of a manager in the formal settings and his/her absence during coffee breaks would imply that everyone feels free to speak up their real opinion during an informal conversation would be too simplistic. Willingness to adapt to a group is a strong social pressure (Hogg, Tindale, 2005) that might lead to withholding opinions exactly during the informal situations and not the opposite. Social pressures to “complain about something” was also pointed out by some of the interviewed managers. For example, if all the colleagues criticize prolonged working hours, it would be hard to voice a support for this decision.

On the other hand, some formal communication formats, for example so called one-on-one, individual meetings with the department manager, also can function as an alternative forum. Managers who were able to identify silence were sensitive for the cases when employees were hesitant to speak-up during the meeting but were more talkative when speaking alone to their manager.

”In my team we once had a discussion and found out that sometimes people feel opposition and have it hard to express (their opinion) when they are in minority (holding that opinion)(...)”, told one of the managers. However, sometimes employees themselves bring their (previously hidden) opinions to the manager’s attention during one-on-one conversations. The examples of situations when employees prefer to share their opinions not during the meeting but directly to the manager shows that potential speakers constantly (strategically) re-evaluate power balance and make decisions when, to who and how to speak up. However, formal hierarchical power in the organization here does not necessarily play the main role. Choice to talk directly with the manager might depend on other power constellations, both formal and informal, for example, within a project group or a department. Unwillingness to share the opinions when suspecting that the audience will disagree falls within the definition of self-censorship (Hayes, 2005). Unchallenged this behavior might lead to spiral-of-silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), when those who perceive that they think differently than the majority will not express their views, as it was observed in this example.

To summarize, access to more than one communication fora allows indicating potential cases of silence. Even though the observer is not able to see in which of the fora the speaker was open, noticing inconsistencies of communication allows the observer to be aware that in one of them silence has occurred.

The analysis of the interviews made it possible to conclude that in cases when observers neither identified unexpected turn in communication (as described in the beginning of this subchapter) nor noticed inconsistencies of communication when observing several communication fora, silence remained unidentified (more about it in 4. 6). For example, when a manager strongly expects everybody to agree with the suggested idea. After presenting the idea, silence in the meeting room is perceived as a support (which for the manager is an expected development of the events). If this manager does not have an access to an alternative

communication fora (where criticism for the idea occurs), he/she is unable to identify that the silence in the meeting room has occurred.

4. 2 Types of silence in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB

Interview excerpts about own silence were compared with the observer's interviews. When both the silent employee and the observer referred to the same (or similar) situation, it was possible to draw a conclusion that the silence got identified. In situations, where only employees admitted withholding their opinions, but managers (or other observers) could not refer to the same situations, it was possible to conclude that the silence remained unnoticed (more about it in 4.4).

Excerpts of the interviews, with stories about own silence or observed silence were classified, trying to identify "types" of intentional silence in the researched organization. Each type was named according to the reasons for silence, or circumstances, under which the silence has occurred. This part of the findings illustrates, that employee silence could be understood not as one, general construct. Instead, it consists of many situations where the reasons for silence differ depending on communication settings, forum, channels, if it is department or cross-functional communication and so on. Below there is a list of situations, classified, depending on the type of silence (reasons for silence). *Figure 2* illustrates the findings and shows what types of silence were identified and addressed by the observers, based on the interviews.

- *Large forum silence* refers to situations when employees are unwilling to speak in big (often – whole organization) meetings and prefer to share their opinions in a smaller setting, for example, approaching the manager directly after the meeting. Managers had it relatively easy to identify this silence (and their ability to notice this silence was also confirmed by the interviews with the employees). Good managers' recognition of this type of silence depended on the fact that they had access to both of the relevant fora: the large meetings and smaller, department or one-on-one, meetings. This silence was also well addressed, because managers, after identifying silence, asked additional questions after the meetings and often acquired viewpoints of the employees who were reluctant to speak in a bigger forum.

- *Role silence* – in the researched organization both managers and employees named that employees, who work with administrative tasks (professionally titled "assistants") tend to withhold their opinions, especially in formal meetings or larger settings. This type of silence was analyzed in detail in 4.3.
- *Self-censorship in groups* – situations when someone would restrain from sharing their opinion only in situations when assuming that the audience would disagree with that opinion. This type of silence was harder to identify in the cases when the observers expected perceived silence as an agreement or acceptance (expected development of the events). Alternatively, this silence can be hard to notice for the other members due to the symptoms of spiral-of-silence – the observer's believe that there are no opinions different than the one voiced in the group.
- *Cross-functional communication* – situations when employees from different departments interact. Despite both employees and the observers described cross-functional communication as challenging, this type of silence was poorly addressed and the accuracy of attributed meanings was not high (see 4. 3).
- *Old-conflict silence* – situations where some employees restrained from sharing their opinions due to some conflict or event in the past or experience when speaking up gave negative consequences. This type of silence was very difficult to identify for the observers. Especially the observers who are relatively new in the organization (and among those were several managers) were poorly aware of the conflicts and problems that the organization had before their time. Here it is important to note that conflicts in the past affect company culture (Alvesson, 2002), including perceptions about what information can be shared. Since some of the employees work in the company for many years, events in the past still affect current company's culture when it comes to speaking up.
- *Positive silence* – some of the interviewed employees told that they tend to remain silent and withhold critical voice because they do not want to be perceived as negative. Being positive and constructive is perceived as the most valued characteristics in the company. Managers were unable to identify this silence (or ignored it) - read more in 4.4.

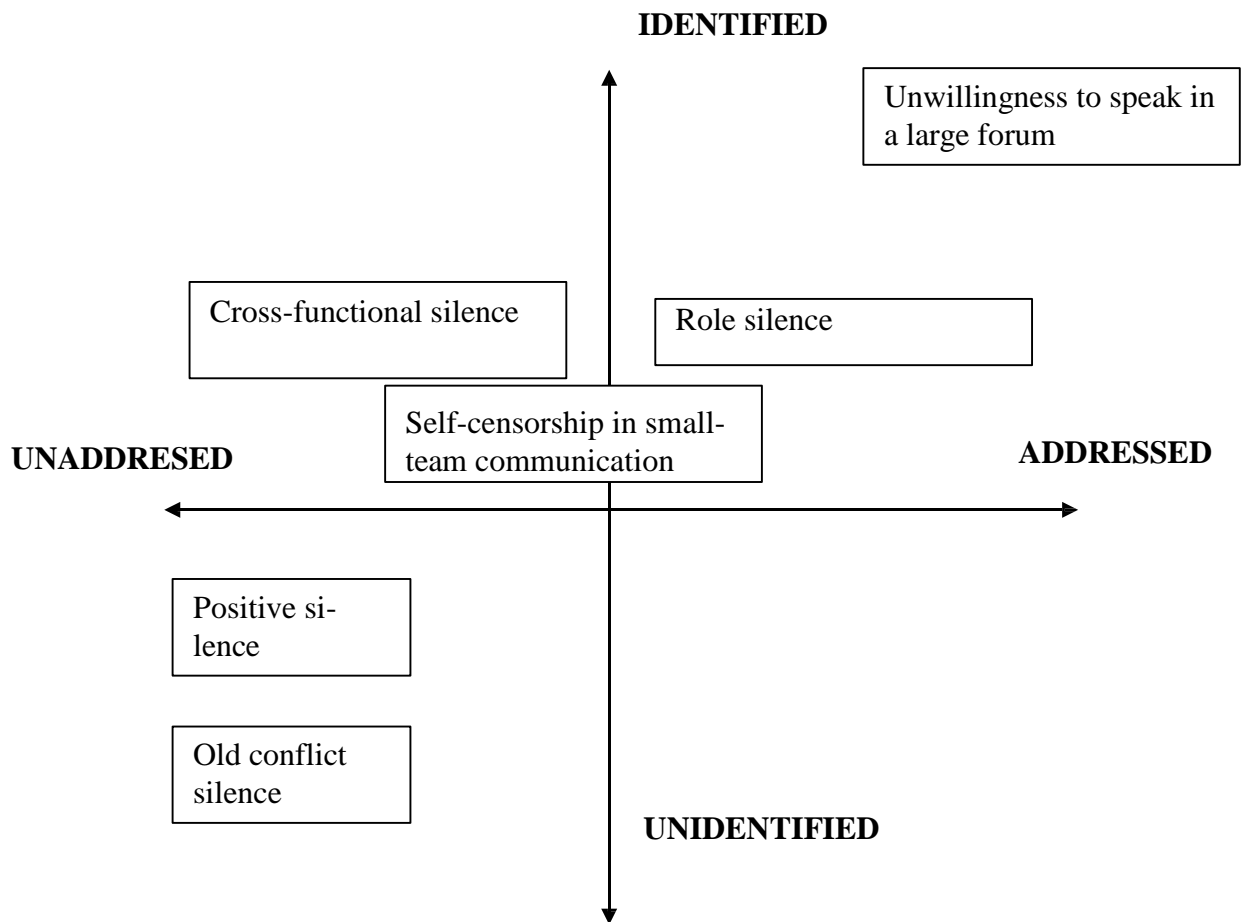


Figure 2. Intentional silence and how often it is addressed in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB, Swedish affiliate. Own figure.

After comparing the types of silence in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB and situations of silence described in the earlier research, it is interesting to note that speaking to the immediate manager, so often described by the other authors, was rather insignificant in this organization. This finding is supported both by the interviews (both managers' and employees') and by the employee survey results. In the cases where silence when communicating with the immediate manager occurred it was possible to classify it as positive silence.

Role silence, cross-functional silence and positive silence were chosen for a more detailed analysis in the following subchapters. On one hand, those types were the most specific for the researched organization, on the other hand the rich narratives on these silences allowed analyzing how meanings get attributed to silence and why in certain situations silence remain unidentified.

4. 3 Attributing meanings to identified intentional silence

When observers identify silence and their sensemaking process is evoked, they start attributing meanings to the observed silence. However, silence provides fewer behavioural cues than speech acts and the risk for misinterpretation is high (Van Dyne et al., 2003). In order to understand how the meanings were attributed to the observed silence, both groups of the narratives, those provided by the silent employees and those by the observers, were juxtaposed. Later, the attributed meanings were analysed using the perspectives of organizational culture, democracy at work and power relations, in order to understand how the actors attributed certain meanings to their own silence or to the silence that they observed.

Role silence

Role silence was the most suitable for further analysis, since it involved actors from all organizational levels in the affiliate – from the administrative employees themselves to middle-managers, and members of the board.

The interviews revealed that people who have administrative, assistant jobs in the organization often withhold their opinions. In this situation all the communicating sides, the silent members themselves and those observing silence (top management, middle-management, as well as other colleagues), were aware of the occasional intentional silence by the assistants. However, as analysis showed, meanings attributed to this silence differed.

A reflection made by one of the assistant employees introduces to the reasons that might lie behind the intentional silence:

It happens that I sit a meeting and feel, that now it is best to be quiet. (...) Maybe because I do not want to sound negative, or maybe... I think that it could be negative for me later. We had many occasions where people got

fired. So, when speaking to certain people, you are maybe not very open, or you are quiet... Saying nothing. (Employee, silent member)

The employee shared different factors that are important for him/her when it comes to openness at work. A theme of insecurity, related to observing how other people got fired in the past, was the most obvious in this narrative. In addition to that, later in the interview the employee also named several other factors: being shy and disliking speaking up in big fora; an experience of a conflict in the past when the employee got to take misattributed blame; the fact of having long experience in the company but missing some of the old colleagues and managers who were aware of his/her earlier achievements, and, finally, tough situation in the labor market in case of losing the job.

The decision to withhold some opinions at work can be seen as a result of sensemaking processes by the silent member – silence comes as a reaction to some encountered situation or circumstance. This reaction could be based on their own knowledge, earlier experiences and consultations with others (Maitlis, 2005). In the described situation it is also possible to distinguish different elements of sensemaking, as they were described by Weick (1995) and Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld (2005). Flux – uncertainty what the situation means and how different members in the group will react to his/her voice, as the employee does not feel he/she knows them well enough, labelling (“certain people” and uncertainty if the new colleagues could be trusted), retrospective (negative experience in the past when interacting with the “certain people” – taking misattributed blame for someone else’s mistake, observed firings of other colleagues), presumption about how events will unfold (“do not want to sound negative”, “it could be negative for me later”) and, finally, how all these considerations during the sensemaking process led to silence as a reasonable course of action: “it is best to be quiet”.

Sensemaking also helps to analyze how observers perceive encountered silence and attribute meanings to it. Earlier experiences and the current environment strongly influence observers’ sensemaking. Therefore, it is likely that different observers will attribute different meanings to the same observed situation of silence. In order to investigate it, a comparison of how two managers reflected on silence by administrative employees, follows.

A member of the board and department manager – regarding silence, that he/she noticed among administrative employees:

They (people who work with administrative tasks) do not value themselves so high. They do not think that their opinion is as much as product manager's (opinion). Sometimes they keep quiet. I know, I can see that they are thinking but they do not speak because they think: "Oh, I should not" (...) I think they do not regard themselves so high, both as a person and in their role. And it is not true, but that is the way they see themselves. (...) Their speaking up is important for the climate in the company. If I disregard their opinion they start (gossiping, complaining) at "fika" (coffee break) (...). In this sense, they are more powerful than what I am. (Member of the board)

This excerpt indicates, that the observer experiences a situation of uncertainty: "I see they are thinking but they do not speak". The manager identified a paradox, a situation of silence, where the observed behavior was not as he/she expected. The uncertainty inspires sensemaking, just as described by Weick et al. (2005) when the observer engages into labeling and attributing meanings to silence. The labels in this narrative relate the silence to the job titles: "they do not regard themselves both as *person* and in their *role*", "not as much as *product manager*". Retrospective and presumption parts here are interrelated, as the manager assumes that not addressed silence would result in gossiping and worsened climate, and this assumption could be based on previous experiences. He/she names, that unaddressed silence of this group could have negative consequences for the whole team or even the entire organization. Consequently, later in the interview, the manager reaches a conclusion that the silence should be addressed.

Comparison between the initial meaning of silence (described by the silent employee) and perceptions of silence by the observer (member of the board), shows that the meanings attributed to silence differed. Moreover, the observer attributes much fewer meanings than the silent employee does himself/herself.

Important themes in the employee's interview were insecurity, lack of trust for some of the colleagues and older conflicts that still influence behavior today. Silence, according to the employee's narrative, is a result of all those factors.

Even though silence here could be seen as a strategic choice, not speaking up in order to avoid negative consequences later, the fear of negative consequences (instead of, for example, hope for future benefits, as described by Brown and Coupland, 2012) indicates that the employee explains the silence as an expression of powerlessness.

The observer, a member of the board, interpreted the silence as both powerlessness and means of power. On one hand, according to the manager's interview, silence could be an expression of poor self-confidence and relatively lower professional position: "being not as much as someone else". The manager referred to hierarchies: maybe some members are not speaking up in a group because they do not value themselves as high as those people who are working in other positions. On the other hand, the manager pointed out that the silent employee holds social power. Silence in formal settings could transform into negative talks in informal situations and consequently affect the climate in the organization. It indicates, that the observer, when facing silence and being unsure about its' reasons, might see silence as a threat.

Analysis of other interviews of observers clarified that labeling and attributing certain qualities to "assistant role" was an important explanation for the observers when making sense of the silence. For example, several middle managers named that administrative employees are among those that tend to be less active in discussions because of their role.

A colleague, a role different than that of the assistant, remarked that the silence among assistants could be related to their personality, and, consequently, to their role:

It is possibly a personality issue. Or they (silent assistants) do not think that their opinion is important. They maybe do not like speaking in a group. Maybe that is why they chose this career – where presentation, skills of speaking up are not that important. On the other hand – maybe it is the reason why they cannot reach higher career just because of having this personality. (Employee, observer)

There is a risk that strong labelling, that people in certain roles normally demonstrate silent behavior can also lead to normative pressures to conform (Brown &

Coupland, 2005) and will potentially have silencing effect on the employees who are seen as “silent assistants”. Since an organization is socially constructed through interactions between people (Berger and Luckman, 1966), seeing silence of a particular group of people as an expected behavior might establish assistants’ silence as a norm. In this case, silence among this group of employees risks to become a part of the internal culture. Under such circumstances, both the assistants and other employees will not be able to identify that the voice from one particular group is absent.

However, it would be incorrect to say that all the observers were inaccurate when interpreting silence. The last narrative to be presented here is provided by a middle manager. The meanings attributed by this manager were significantly closer to the meanings by the silent employee.

Communication in our team (of assistants) is open and we can speak about both positive and negative things. But when it comes to communicating from our group upwards, I guess people have felt: “No, this you cannot do because it maybe will be consequences. Maybe losing job, but maybe that someone will be irritated.” (...) People get silent, and that is the worst what can happen. (...) They speak with other assistants, but not upwards, and it is my role to take it upwards. (...) (Administrative positions) are those, who are least visible and often people are not aware, what these employees are doing, even though they are so busy. (...) During financial cut-downs, those positions are most often being questioned. It can cause uneasiness. (Middle manager, observer)

The middle manager here acts as a link between the different actors, the silent employee and the member of the board. According to Sharma and Good (2013, p. 115), middle managers “separate and integrate the contradictions in the practices of the initiative to make sense and create integrated mental frameworks”. In this example the middle manager compares the meanings by the silent employee and the member of the board. She interprets that observers (including the member of the board) might be “not aware, what these employees are doing” and therefore have different understanding about the reasons behind the silence or voice (“get irritated”). On the other hand, the middle manager is aware of the concerns held

by the silent employee: “role questioned during financial cut-downs” and their fear to speak up. The middle manager recognizes and accepts the “simultaneous existence of contradictory forces” (Smith & Tuschman quoted in Sharma & Good, p. 105). The analyzed excerpt allows to see that the middle manager was able to identify tensions in both sides, that of the observer and that of the silent employee. The manager connects them to a new frame, which leads to an action – consulting employee voice and attempting to bring it upwards.

The analysis of how different actors attribute meanings to the observed silence not only revealed that the silent member and the observers interpreted reasons behind silence differently. In addition, it demonstrated that some meanings of silence, those held by the silent members themselves, did not get uncovered by any of the observers. In the analyzed situation the unnoticed reasons were related to personal experiences, specifically, the aftermath of an old-conflict and feeling insecure because of the lack of people who have had similar experiences in the company, such as ex-colleagues. The middle manager who succeeded to connect the perspectives of the silent member and of the member of the board should be able to address the silence when it comes to professional issues. However, as big part of the reasons behind the silence remain unknown for the observers, the employee well-being at work can still suffer, as well as the silent behavior might persist.

The attribution of meanings to the observed silence can be expressed in an iceberg model (*Figure 3*). The member of the board, who is a distant observer, names only a few and not very accurate meanings of the observed silence. The silent employee provides a wide range of meanings to the own silence. The middle manager is aware of both perspectives, connects and interprets the differences between them and therefore is able to act as a link between the silent member and the distant observer.

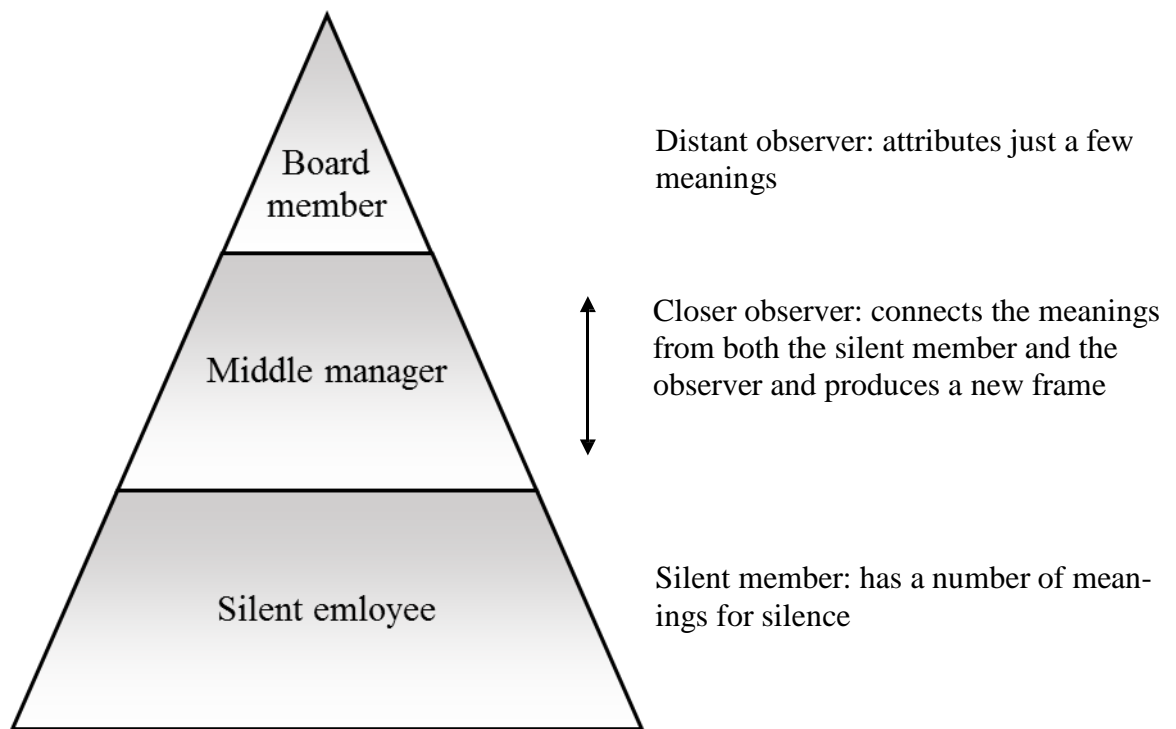


Figure 3. Iceberg of attributing meanings to the observed silence. The more distant the perspective of the observer the less accurate and the fewer meanings attributed to the observed silence. Own figure.

The “distance” between the silent member and the observer perspectives here not only refers to the formal organizational hierarchy but even to common experiences in terms of professional or even personal background. In comparison to the experience held by the member of the board, the middle manager’s professional biography was closer to the one of the silent employee. It allowed the middle manager to be able to relate to the reasons for silence.

The example also showed that misinterpreting silence can lead to situations when managers, for example, might criticize the employee for disengagement or not trying to step out of the comfort zone while the underlying reasons for silence will be missed or addressed incorrectly. Moreover, strong labelling and relating silence to a specific professional role indicates that there is a risk to rely on a ste-

reotype that silence could be an expected behaviour from those who have an assistant job.

Cross-functional silence

This type of silence refers to situations when someone tends to withhold opinions in teams where colleagues from different departments interact. Cross-functional silence, refers to horizontal communication within an organization (in contrast to often analyzed vertical, manager-employee communication), since cross-functional teams in organizations often do not have a formally defined hierarchy. Instead, a team consists of experts who represent different knowledge areas. Ideally, formal power and hierarchy in those teams, according to Aime et al. (2014), is less important. The power is shifting among team members based on situational demands. Members of the board in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB also expressed that “the right competences in the right situation, and not the loudest voice” should define power division in a cross-functional team. However, as indicated by internal document analysis (Communication review 2013), observations and the interviews, cross-functional communication in the organization was perceived as challenging. It motivated to pay closer attention to cross-functional communication as a forum where intentional silence might occur.

During the interviews, both managers and employees who are involved in cross-functional teams elaborated on this type of communication.

The interviews revealed, that there are a division between two units in the organization. Unit “A” is internally described as typically “quiet” in cross-functional communication, while unit “B” is those “taking space”. The employees from these units, according to the interviews, were also taking over these roles while communicating cross-functionally.

This is how one of the representatives from the “quiet” unit A elaborated on the reasons for silence:

We (unit “A”) are seen as a support function (implying that “B” are the leaders – researcher’s comment). It can happen that “B” representatives can be more direct in their communication and criticize others, while we cannot do it. This is the feeling. Even if we work for the same goal, it is

still that (...) “B” gets credit for all our income and therefore they get more space. (...) I am pretty sure others also feel the same. (Employee, silent member)

The employee feels that “B” unit gets more appraisal in the management communication (“B” gets credit for all our income”) which, according to the interviewee, normalizes that even in cross-functional communication “they get more space”). A feeling of unofficial, perceived hierarchy creates a situation where, according to the employee, one of the communicating sides gets more space than the other. Perception that the actors are not socially equal makes it harder to express conflicting opinions (Hecht, Jackson and Pitts, 2005). Just like in the first example of silence by the administrators, the silent actor explains the silence as caused by perceived powerlessness “we are seen as a support function”). This power perception leads to an in-built belief (implicit voice theory) that speaking against unit “B”, who are the “leaders”, is not an acceptable behavior.

In addition, the representative from the “silent” department assumes that “others also feel the same” meaning that other colleagues from unit “A” also experience unofficial hierarchies and power disbalance in this cross-functional team. For the employee the assumption that others feel the same way, consolidates and confirms that “A” ’s withholding opinions in cross-functional settings is logical behavior, practiced by many. This way the silence of the representatives from the unit becomes a part of the internal culture in the organization.

Representatives from “B” department in this case were silence observers as they were exposed to silence when working together with the representatives of “A”. However, the interviews showed that both managers and employees from unit “B” that was “taking space” did not feel that their department was being seen as privileged or leading. They described cross-functional communication as generally smooth. Difficulties in cross-functional communication, according to representatives from the “B” department might depend on personality traits by colleagues from “A”. People working in “A” were generally described as introvert. When reflecting on cross-functional communication, many interviewees named that colleagues from the “A” department are more analytic, need to think before speaking, while “B” department are extrovert, talkative, very driven and persuasive (see *Figure 4*).

Labeling “extrovert vs. introvert” indicated that those, exposed to silence, have experienced uncertainty and stereotyping, typical for communication in cross-functional communication and diverse groups (Hecht, Jackson and Pitts, 2005). In this situation, stereotyping functioned as an explanation for (possibly, identified) silence: according to the interviews, voices from the “extrovert” departments were louder and better heard in the cross-functional meetings, while “introvert” departments sometimes give up in presenting their arguments.

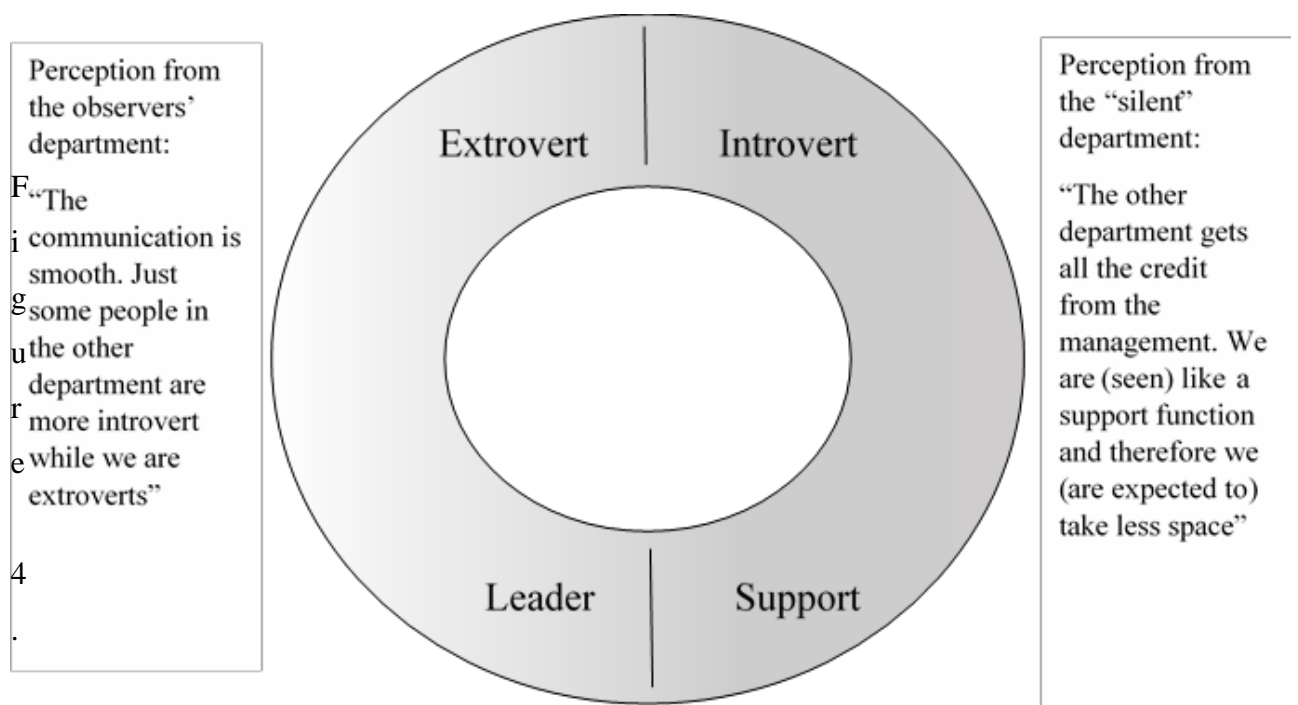


Figure 4. Attributing “labels” to another department in cross-functional communication. Own figure.

The comparison of the meanings attributed to silence by the silent members (“A”) and by the observers (“B”) shows that both communicating sides found an explanation for the occasional silence in cross-functional teams. Representatives from “A” expressed that lack of power in the organization and not belonging to a “leader” department, which gets more appraisal from the management, affects their willingness to speak up. Letting representatives from “B” take more space in cross-functional meetings was an expression of perceived powerlessness. Meanwhile, the representatives from “B” explained that their colleagues from “A” have

a more “introvert” department culture (and personality). This way, the observers confirmed that representatives from “A” can be expected to be quiet. Even though the observers from “B” were aware of possible silence, the explanation that silence is a part of the culture of “A” established it as a norm, an expected behavior which is not addressed. Here there is a risk for a vicious circle: the silent members are not expressing their feedback due to some “strong voices” in the cross-functional teams. However, without this feedback, those who are perceived as having “strong voices” are unable to reflect on their behavior and adjust it. Therefore the underlying reasons for silence remain persistent

Another example of challenges and eventual silence in cross-functional communication depends on seeking to adapt and converge with the group where different competences meet. An employee who was new in cross-functional meetings (where most of the members were top managers) but did not have previous cross-functional experience reflected:

Many times I felt myself very unsure and unease, because the discussions were not at all about something that I would be good at (...). Many times I felt useless (...) It is about worrying to say something stupid. (...) Others have many years experience in the industry and other way of thinking, which I still have to learn. They formulate themselves in certain terminology, and for me it is still following a feeling... So many times I was very careful and did not say what I meant, but afterwards it turned out that my ideas were not so bad. But I did not tell them. (...) After meeting, I used to ask my manager, and I still do it, and if she supports - I tell it next time. (Silent member)

Lack of shared knowledge and even vocabulary was among the main challenges in cross-functional communication as named by the interviewee. It is important to note that the employee in the presented example was new in his/her role. Therefore, communication accommodation theory (Heicht, Jackson & Pitts, 2005) could help explain why intentional silence has occurred. First of all, the example illustrates important moments of self-perception as being different (in a negative way) than the other team members (“the discussion not about what I was good at”,

“useless”, having less years of industry experience than most members of the group). Secondly, it shows unwillingness to diverge from the group. Quite the opposite - willingness to reduce dissimilarity (adapt the terminology). Finally, the silent member takes a decision to restrain from expressing opinion in the group and instead “test” his/her voice in a safer environment – with the direct manager. According to the interviewee, the manager had knowledge of both platforms – specific professional knowledge that was a common language within the department, and corporate knowledge – that was a language within the board meetings and cross-functional cooperation. The silent employee expected the manager to act as a link, but also as a filter, him/her and the board. The manager was expected to help to decide what subjects the employee should bring up when communicating cross-functionally.

Differently than in the first example on cross-functional silence, in this case silence observers (other members of the cross-functional team) acted more actively. Even though silence by a new member in a group might be an expected behavior, described in the previous research, this type of silence is not an accepted norm or part of the culture in the organization therefore it was addressed¹. Other members of the team (most of them were top managers) saw addressing this silence as a part of their role:

Of course, not everybody is asking questions or speaking up. Therefore I ask questions. It will either be a face expression, the way the person is sitting, that I go directly to that person. How do you feel? You do not seem to be sure? On the other hand, now I also have been in the organization long enough to know people who might have some questions so I try to make sure they are expressed. (Observer)

It shows, how a leader who is able to identify silence (because of an observed facial expression and body language, that is, because of the identified change during

¹ It is likely, that in the cultures (organizational, but even national) where new members are expected to listen and where the power-distance and respect for authorities is high (see, for example, Hofstede, 1997) managers observing the same behavior by the new employee would not address it because they would perceive this silence to be a norm.

the communication situation) attempts to address it and stir the debate, in order to include more voices into the discussion. Through active asking, he/she attempts to prevent or break spirals of silence at an early stage.

However, active questions do not necessarily prevent all cases of silence. For example, difficulty to provide opinion that differs from the rest of the cross-functional team is well described in this excerpt:

Even when asked directly, if I am unsure that I am in line with others... and if the others are in agreement. (...) In these cases it is not so that I directly speak up but maybe tell first to my own manager. He/she says – but it was really good, you should tell it, so I speak up the next time. (Employee, silent member)

Therefore, in order to include new, alternative opinions, the case showed it to be important to ensure a combination of different channels for the employee to speak up. First of all – addressing silence when it is observed in the meetings. Secondly, ensuring alternative channels for expressing opinions through the direct managers (Nielsen, (2009); Rouleau, 2005).

4. 4 Unidentified silence

If employees told about withholding their opinions in certain situations, but managers were not referring to the same situations as silent, it was possible to conclude that employee silence remained unidentified. Positive silence is one of those examples. Positive silence here refers to cases when employees are withholding critical opinions in order not to be perceived as inflexible, complaining and negative by their managers and colleagues (observers).

The interviews showed that this type of silence was rather common among the employees in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB. Some interviewees even defined it as a prevailing business culture:

Today everybody is worried about their job. I do not think that someone would like to be a complicated person at work these days. Sometimes I read articles in “Dagens Industri”: what is more important – working skills or being positive, happy and nice. And this being nice and positive is more important than being competent in many working places (...). I think that today you do not want to be a complainer. And I think it is so in all the companies. Being a complaining person is troublesome (...). (employee, silent member)

As the example shows, perceptions of what behavior is considered to be professional and preferred derive not only from the internal company communication but also from discourses that extend the limits of the organization (for example, from the mass media).

Sociologist Rasmus Willig (2013) points out that being positive is an overwhelming requirement that encompasses not only the Western corporate world (Novo Nordisk A/S would be a classical example of it) but even the labour market in general. He analyzed reasons for the emerging employee self-censorship at work that persists despite focus on employee empowerment and engagement. Willig (2013) pointed out that managers tend to equalize engagement to being positive. Being critical is not perceived as engagement. Often used

phrases like “seeing the solution instead of a problem”, which are so common in corporate communication material, is an example of this attitude.

According to the quoted interviewee, pressure to be positive is even visible in the specific vocabulary used in corporate communication, both written and spoken. During the informant interviews for this thesis, one of the interviewed top managers corrected the interviewer, replacing word “problem” with “challenge”, as “problem” is not acceptable in the ambitious, future oriented organization. He explained that “problem” sounds too negative, whereas “challenge” is a part of the process, a task to be solved and a more suitable word for the corporation. This observation suggests that employees are expected to converge with the positive corporate vocabulary and accommodate particular communication style (Hecht, Jackson & Pitts, 2005).

The situation is two-folded. On one hand, following social constructionism and the idea that things are talked into reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966), management awareness of vocabulary and communication styles, especially in management communication, can contribute to framing and promoting a certain culture and a particular set of values of the company. The management that promotes positive vocabulary supposedly see that this is the way to maintain the ambitious spirit in the company. On the other hand, the artificial absence of “negative” words does not imply that there are no occasions for criticism. However, the perceived pressure that only certain vocabulary is “accepted” creates tensions. The employees choose only certain words for their communication, withhold critical thoughts (not to sound negative) and become a part of this by the management imposed spiral-of-silence where only those words that are perceived as positive are welcome. Those employees, who have critical thoughts, would choose to withhold them, because of the impression, that the audience (other employees and the management) are not sharing their concerns. Alternatively, they would express criticism in unofficial fora in order not to fall into the management’s disfavor. This way employee silence is a side effect of the over enthusiastic official communication in the company. Moreover, in cases when employees decide to withhold their criticism when speaking in the formal communication fora it becomes harder for the management to understand the concerns employees might have. However, those unexpressed concerns would still affect the performance of the company.

One of the interviewees drew attention to the fact that the frustration related to the perceived requirement to communicate using the Novo Nordisk's positive "corporate slang" is well illustrated by an ironic note posted on the coffee machine in the office:

There is a note on the espresso machine in our office asking to empty the milk container so the milk will not get sour (Swedish: sur) over the weekend. And somebody wrote by hand next to it: "say "little sad" instead, as "sour" sounds so dreary" (Swedish: "sur" låter så trist, det blir "lite ledsen"). (Employee interview)

However, other interviews even indicated that the expectation for being positive is perceived as top-down imposed communication rules. In cases when employees had critical thoughts but neither wanted to sound "negative" nor wanted to fake their enthusiasm, they intentionally chose to remain silent:

One would not like to be negative. Everybody is supposed to be happy. And everybody should be "in". We, who are maybe not that (driven), we maybe become even more silent. (Employee, silent member)

According to this employee, he/she prefers to stay silent and restrain from critical voice instead of pretending to be positive without meaning it. Criticism is equalized to being negative. This narrative illustrates how "dangerous critical thoughts lead to inside alarm and outside silence" (Willig, 2013, p. 89).

In the described situations, managers were not only the observers but also co-creators of the situation where only positive voices were perceived as welcome. However, during their interviews managers barely named that employees would try to withhold their critical opinions in order to avoid being seen as negative or inflexible. It shows that observers were not able to identify this type of intentional silence. After being presented with the theoretical concept of "positive silence", employees not sharing their opinions because of their fear to sound negative or not flexible, managers often would start elaborating that negativity and complaining is a behavior that is not welcome in the organization. Both managers and employees mentioned that the critics are expected to offer an alternative solution to

the upcoming problems (“challenges”). Criticism without suggesting alternative actions is considered to be non-constructive. If alternative solutions are not suggested, both managers and employees expressed that there is an expectation for “accepting situation” (Swedish: “gilla läget”). Thus, opinions should be voiced only when they are “constructive”. A few examples from managers’ interviews:

- *If you take responsibility and see things you do not like, it is very good you point it out if you are actually taking responsibility of getting it fixed. If you just complain and do nothing about it is no good. That is how I view it. It is fine, but do something about it (member of the board)*
- *I am open for observations and ideas. (...) But I do not like complaining. (I do not like) when one has no ideas how it should be done instead (and) does not contribute in a constructive way (...). If one sees a problem, ok, what is your suggestion how to do instead or how we should discuss it together (...). I see that sometimes it is important to speak out, but I do not like it. No. It takes energy instead of creating energy (...). It is destructive for the team as a whole. (middle-manager)*

According to the interviews, employees who are not suggesting solutions, are not living up to the management expectations. Recently, several scholars pointed out a possible relation between empowerment and employee self-censorship (Grint, 2010; Willig, 2013). Distance between management and employees has faded due to employee empowerment and network cooperation in organizations (Grint, 2005). A leader for empowered employees is more of a coach, and empowered employees have freedom (and are expected) to find solutions for the problems. Grint (2010) warns, that a shift towards more distributed leadership might destabilize the nature of leadership, excluding the most vital elements of it and placing heavy demands on a follower. Distributed leadership, according to Grint, can be compared to losing a scapegoat – a leader, who, in traditional hierarchies has privileges, but also responsibilities when something goes wrong. Empowerment provides both freedom and expectations for the employees to solve the emerging problems instead of bringing them further.

Management interviews show that there are strong expectations for the employees to suggest their own solution:

I often encourage people and ask: if you think something is so (wrong), we should bring it up. What is your dream? How would you like to have it instead? What do you think we can do, in order to reach it? Can we do something in order to reach your goal? (member of the board)

This interview excerpt is a good example of management at a workplace with empowered employees. The purpose of this style is to share the leadership and make sure that more ideas are being communicated upwards, as well as improve employee self-confidence, engagement and responsibility. However, the flipside of it, as the interviews showed could be that some employees will hesitate to bring up the problems if they are not ready to offer some solution or course of action. As Willig (2013) writes, in cases when employees are only ready to point out the problem but yet are unable to suggest the solution they risk to be perceived as incompetent. Willig calls it a U-turn of criticism. The critic who openly points out a problem at the same time criticizes himself for not being able to solve these problems. Therefore, employees feel strong personal responsibility to solve the challenges by themselves and to restrain (or postpone) their critical communication, thus, remain silent. Empirical findings in this research confirm and illustrate those theoretical observations.

5. Conclusions

This thesis analyzed intentional employee silence from a perspective of the observer and aimed to find out how managers exposed to silence identify and perceive it. Silence here was seen as an integral part of dialogue, because non-communication also bears certain meanings. Even though earlier research proved that there is a lot of managerial blindness to critical upwards communication, there is little known if there is a similar blindness toward intentional employee silence. This master's thesis demonstrated that employee silence often remains an unnoticed part of the conversation. Even when silence is identified, clashes and misattributions when interpreting it are likely.

Identifying unexpected changes that take place during communication process, or identifying inconsistencies of communication in several different fora are the factors helping to identify intentional silence. This research showed that there were two main ways for the observers to notice silence. First, noticing an unexpected turn in a communication process allowed the observers to classify situation as silence. If observers suddenly noticed altered body language of their conversation partner, unforeseen end of the discussion or lack of questions during a meeting, they experienced uncertainty. The uncertainty resulted in sensemaking that lead to a conclusion that intentional silence has occurred. Another way to identify silence was to identify inconsistencies when observing how the same person communicates in several different fora. When the information communicated by the same person in two different fora differs, the observer is able to conclude that in one of the fora intentional silence has occurred. Therefore, access to more than one communication forum can increase the chance that observers will be able to identify intentional silence correctly.

Silence remains unnoticed in situations when an observer expects certain reactions to his/her communication and perceives silence as an expected development of the events. If the events develop according to the expectations, observers tend to ignore the absence of critical voice. For example, if a manager expects

that his team will accept a decision, an employees' silent reaction will not be perceived as intentional silence. Instead the manager will interpret silence as an agreement and a logical development of the events. Sensemaking will not be evoked and the silence will remain unidentified.

However, in situations when agreement seems to be unanimous, the risk not to identify hidden silence is extremely high, because individuals tend to withhold their opinions if they assume that they are the only ones thinking differently from the group (spiral-of-silence). Ideally, it should mean that managers should always question easily reached consensuses, ask additional questions in order to encourage opinion variety and stir up a critical discussion to maximize the chance that all the members will take their chance to participate. However, interviews with practitioners and top level managers showed that decision making already takes more time than initially intended. Pressures for efficiency and multitasking as well as work overload in the corporate world are high. The suggestion for habermassian debate, where all opinions would be encouraged, voiced and discussed several times might be perceived as an ideal, but not as a solution for every day communication practice in a corporation. Nevertheless, manager awareness that the spiral-of-silence often is formed behind at a glance harmonious discussions might prevent costly situations where, for example, employee resistance to change becomes visible only at a late stage of the implementation.

Observers attribute fewer meanings and different meanings to silence than the silent members themselves. Even in those cases when observers were able to identify intentional employee silence, the meanings they attributed to the silence were rather different from the meanings held by the silent members themselves.

This thesis demonstrated how observers make sense of employee silence. The sensemaking can be compared to a certain filter, when only those reasons that derive from shared experiences, information, values or meanings between the silent member and the observer. Different observers, depending on their profile and position in the organization, tend to focus on different meanings.

The case study showed the importance of the middle manager's role of when it comes to interpreting intentional silence. This position was unique, as middle managers were able to reflect on both top management and individual employee perspectives. By connecting those perspectives, making sense of them and producing a new frame to explain reasons for employee silence, some middle

managers in the case proved to be some of the most precise observers when attributing meanings to employee silence. However, some of the meanings, especially those of more personal nature, or the ones that derive from experiences long time ago, remain undiscovered and therefore unaddressed.

When applying this finding to organizational communication, it is important to note that meanings of silence cannot be simplified to one or two reasons because the reasons behind silence are often complex and consist of both collective (organizational culture, climate) and individual (personality, personal conflicts, experiences, personal beliefs, implicit voice theories and other aspects). It is possible to conclude that meanings attributed to silence are never complete and that they are never one hundred percent accurate, as the new reasons affecting sense-making processes and decisions to speak up or remain silent add up every day.

Employee self-censorship can come as a side effect of empowerment and the attempt to be perceived as positive and flexible. Findings in this thesis supports the concept of U-turn in criticism (Willig, 2013). Employees feeling strong personal responsibility both for their achievements but also for solving the challenges might restrain (or postpone) their critical communication, as this communication would imply that they are incapable of solving the problem.

Both managers and employees in Novo Nordisk Scandinavia AB claimed that only so called “structured criticism” is appropriate, meaning that criticism should include suggestions for the solutions. Otherwise sharing critical opinion is perceived as complaining and being negative. Due to this norm, some employees admitted avoiding sounding “negative” and withholding (or postponing) their communication.

The members in the analyzed organization perceived the importance to be positive and flexible at work, where even “negative sounding” words are explicitly excluded from the everyday vocabulary used by the top management. The effort to speak positively is a logical continuation of social constructivism logics, according to which things can be talked into reality. However, it is doubtful if communication that is free from negative words will yield the desired results. This type of communication risks to be perceived as unconvincing “corporate propaganda”. Instead of creating a climate of engagement and positive attitude, it might result into a spiral of silence in the official forums or move to the informal corridor talks in form of unexpressed, self-censored concerns. Therefore, it is im-

portant, that the expectations for being flexible and positive would not create new, hard for management to identify spirals of silence in the organization. These concerns might backfire in forms of employee reluctance to change, disengagement or worsened psychological well-being in the long run.

When it comes to the future research on managers as silence observers, it is important to note that generalizability of the case study might be limited. Employee silence depends on a number of factors that might be unique for the chosen organization and its' culture as well as depend on national business culture. On the other hand, comparing how the respondents reflect on their own and on the observed silence should reveal if intentional silence remains unnoticed and if there are inconsistencies when attributing meanings to it. Therefore, even if the types of silence or the extent of it will be different in other organizations, the method applied in this thesis could hopefully be suitable for conducting similar research in the future and expanding the current knowledge on silence observers.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide (employee)

Communication climate and background

I would like to know a little bit more about your department and your job. Can you please tell how long you have been working here and describe your job?

How would you describe organizational climate when it comes to opportunities for employees to be involved and provide feedback in your organization? Has it changed? What contributed to it? What is good? What is challenging?

The order of the questions below was free and depended on the interview flow. Follow-up questions were possible.

Own and observed silence

Tell me about a time when you experienced a situation in which you did not feel it was safe to speak up? What did you do? Why did you feel so?

Can you give me any examples when you wanted to share something with a leader but you did not? What took place? What was the issue/business content?

Tell me about a time when you (or someone else) were not sharing the information and chose to wait.

Can this waiting depend on communication platform?

Have you observed someone who did not feel safe to speak up? Why do you think it happened? How did you react? How did others react?

How is it possible to notice that someone is not voicing an opinion? Have you ever noticed others where not voicing their opinion?

Voicing opinion in different communication settings, forums and circumstances

How easily do you express your opinion at work, do you think?

Tell me about a time when you (or someone you observed) did speak up (perhaps in a difficult situation or about a difficult issue).

Can you give me an example where you raised an issue, despite you knew, that others in your team might disagree with you?

Would you raise an issue to manager's manager?

Through what channels and in what settings are you most comfortable to express your suggestions, feedback, criticism?

What is the difference when providing feedback to your direct manager and in a meeting?

How smooth is cross-functional communication? Is there any hierarchy between departments?

General

Why, do you think, it can be hard (or easy) to speak-up at work?

How satisfied are you with the opportunities to provide feedback at your work? In your team? To your manager? Organization in general?

How formal channels contribute for you when providing feedback (eVoice survey, whistleblower, etc.)?

How can external factors (market, sales, profit, job-market) affect willingness to speak?

Danish sociologist Rasmus Willig writes that these days employees want to seem flexible and positive and therefore they restrain from speaking up. What are your thoughts?

Optional questions (if relevant)

During the all-organization meeting we saw a presentation where people were not able to understand the graphic but nobody (except of the general manager) asked a question. Why? Why did you decide not to ask?

During a cross-functional Bollplanket meeting several challenges in cross-functional communication were named. What do you think about it?

What do you think about Bollplanket and your cross-functional cooperation there?

Appendix 2. Interview guide (manager)

Communication climate and background

I would like to know a little bit more about your department and your job. Can you please tell how long you have been working here and describe your job?

How would you describe organizational climate when it comes to opportunities for employees to be involved and provide feedback in your organization? Has it changed? What contributed to it? What is good? What is challenging?

The order of the questions below was free and depended on the interview flow. Follow-up questions were possible.

Observed silence

Tell me about a time when your employees had it hard to speak-up? What happened? Please give an example.

How did you notice it? What did you do?

Why was it hard for them to speak-up, you think?

Have you ever noticed that the employees would have it hard to speak-up to you? What happened?

Have you ever noticed that the employees would have it hard to speak-up in meetings? What was the business context and communication platform? Why do you think it was hard to speak-up?

Are there any types of employees that have it harder to speak-up than others?

How would you describe them?

Why do you think it can happen that people have it hard to speak up to their manager?

How smooth is cross-functional communication?

Is there a hierarchy between departments?

What methods do you use in order to acquire employee ideas and opinions?

What communication routines do you have in your department? How often do you have department meetings and 1:1 meetings, etc? How sufficient it is?

Own silence

Tell me about a time when you experienced a situation in which you did not feel it was safe to speak up? What did you do? Why did you feel so?

Only for middle-managers

How do you see your role between the board and the employees?

Have it happened that you communicated upwards an idea by your employee even when you did not believe the idea was good? Please give an example.

Only for members of the board

What is the role of the middle-manager when it comes to employee feedback?

How sufficient is the feedback that you get from your middle-managers?

General

How can external factors (market, sales, profit, job-market) affect willingness to speak?

How formal channels contribute for you when providing feedback (eVoice survey, whistleblower, etc.)?

Danish sociologist Rasmus Willig writes that these days employees want to seem flexible and positive and therefore they restrain from speaking up. What are your thoughts?

Optional questions (if relevant)

During the all-organization meeting we saw a presentation where people were not able to understand the graphic but nobody (except of the general manager) asked a question. Why? Why did you decide not to ask?

During a cross-functional Bollplanket meeting several challenges in cross-functional communication were named. What do you think about it?

What do you think about Bollplanket and your cross-functional cooperation there?