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Why Do Organizations Remain Silent? Leadership Failure, Organizational Audibility, and the Concealment of Workplace Harm

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ABSTRACT

Research on organizational silence has explained why employees withhold information more extensively than how reports that have already been raised lose credibility, context, and practical force inside organizations. This study aims to explain how leadership failure turns knowledge of workplace harm into silence, concealment, and recurring harm. A literature-based conceptual review was conducted by comparing arguments and findings on employee voice, organizational silence, leadership, retaliation, underreporting, normalization of deviance, and institutional betrayal. The analysis shows that employee voice does not necessarily produce organizational audibility, defined as the organizational capacity to keep information open to examination, credible, traceable, and connected to actors with authority to act. Leadership failure weakens audibility when reports are separated from their context, reporters are discredited before their claims are examined, or procedures continue without a clear route to decision. Concealment does not always require an explicit order to suppress facts; it can develop through retaliation, fragmented case handling, managerial inaction, and data reduction that removes patterns of harm. These responses cultivate learned futility, shape how other employees assess the costs of speaking, and allow repeated deviations to appear normal. The article develops the Leadership-Mediated Silence–Concealment Spiral and the silence-as-safety fallacy to explain how low reporting figures may be misread as evidence of safety even when they are partly produced by declining trust in the organization.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace harm almost always leaves traces before an organization formally recognizes a problem. Employees witness breaches of procedure, hear recurring complaints, or experience harmful treatment themselves. Some of this knowledge circulates informally; other concerns enter official reporting channels. Meta-analytic evidence has linked exposure to workplace bullying with substantial psychological, physical, and occupational consequences (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Although workplace bullying does not encompass every form of workplace harm, the evidence suggests that organizations face more than a simple lack of information. The harder question is what becomes of knowledge about harm once it is available.

Hotlines, compliance offices, employee surveys, and whistleblowing procedures are routinely presented as evidence of organizational openness. Their presence can suggest that employees have a safe space in which to speak. Yet being able to submit a report is not the same as having it believed, examined, and connected to a decision. Information may be carefully recorded and still remain an administrative document that changes nothing. Reporters may receive a formal response without learning whether the substance of their concerns was investigated. Research on corporate whistleblowing policies similarly indicates that the existence of a formal reporting system does not, by itself, establish its capacity to detect and address wrongdoing (Lee & Fargher, 2013). The number of reporting channels alone therefore cannot establish that an organization is willing to identify and address the sources of harm. Procedural openness may coexist with institutionally sustained indifference.

Research on organizational silence has identified many reasons why employees withhold information. Fear, perceived futility, employment insecurity, and witnessing the poor treatment of colleagues recur across the literature (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). These explanations matter because silence may be a reasonable response to unequal employment relations. Even so, the emphasis on individual choice often brings the analysis to an end once an employee either speaks or remains silent. What follows the submission of a report has received less sustained attention. A complaint may be acknowledged, transferred between offices, repeatedly returned for additional documentation, and gradually stripped of urgency. After passing through several managerial levels, a safety concern may be reframed as a communication problem. Employee voice alone cannot explain what happens when information encounters organizational authority, reputational interests, and procedures that are not necessarily neutral. Psychological safety likewise addresses the possibility of raising a concern more directly than the institutional fate of information after that interpersonal risk has been taken. When voice is treated as the end of the process, the organization appears passive, even though its response may determine whether harm is interrupted or allowed to recur.

An employee may speak while the organization remains silent. This condition is difficult to explain when voice is treated as the final outcome. Employee voice denotes the act of raising a concern, communicating knowledge of risk, or requesting corrective action. As information moves through an organization, however, it may lose context, supporting evidence, or practical weight. Organizational audibility describes the organization's capacity to keep information about harm credible, traceable, open to examination, and connected to actors who have authority to respond. Low audibility does not always entail an explicit refusal to listen. A report may be recorded as a personal conflict, a performance issue, or an isolated incident even when the evidence indicates a broader pattern. This weakening of information after disclosure constitutes post-voice silencing. Concealment, in turn, is an organizational outcome in which knowledge of harm loses its capacity to shape action. Delay, misclassification, conflicts of interest, and routine administrative practices can produce that outcome without a centralized plan to suppress facts. Recent reviews of employee voice and silence support a broader analytical approach that extends beyond the initial decision to speak or remain silent (Morrison, 2023). Audibility thus concerns more than whether an organization receives complaints politely. What matters is whether information remains sufficiently intact to influence an authorized decision.

Leadership is decisive because leaders shape the movement of information, assign credibility to testimony, and determine whether a reported event warrants further examination. Research on implicit voice theories indicates that employees and managers rely on taken-for-granted assumptions about when speaking is appropriate and whose input is legitimate (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Leadership failure, as understood here, is not confined to abusive conduct or personal incompetence. It also occurs when leaders allow a report to lose its meaning before it has been properly examined. The failure is epistemic when testimony is judged by an employee's status rather than by the quality of the information provided. It acquires a moral dimension when harm is treated as a minor disturbance that does not warrant remedy (Kadir & Mappaselleng, 2025). A manager may be approachable and willing to talk, yet still fail to protect the integrity of a report when independent review, protection for the reporter, and clear follow-up are absent. Interpersonal warmth is therefore an inadequate measure of leadership quality in responses to workplace harm.

Research on destructive leadership commonly examines burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention, and meta-analytic findings confirm that destructive leadership is associated with a broad range of harmful employee outcomes (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Studies of occupational safety and organizational wrongdoing, meanwhile, devote greater attention to underreporting and the normalization of deviance. Reviews of organizational misconduct also show that wrongdoing depends on organizational processes, power, and systems of social control rather than on individual misconduct alone (Greve et al., 2010). The connection between these fields remains underdeveloped. Leaders' control over information often appears as background context rather than as a mechanism that explains why harm can be widely known yet absent from official organizational knowledge. Concealment is consequently better understood as a governance outcome, not merely as a conscious decision to hide facts. Retaliation, diminished credibility, and procedures that cease to serve a corrective purpose can yield the same result even without a centrally designed plan.

This study develops a conceptual account of how leadership failure transforms knowledge of workplace harm into silence and organizational concealment. It examines processes both before and after employees speak, especially those through which a report loses credibility or becomes detached from the authority needed to act. Drawing on a conceptual literature review, the study brings organizational audibility and post-voice silencing together in the Leadership-Mediated Silence–Concealment Spiral. This framework shifts attention away from employee courage and toward the organization’s capacity to preserve knowledge of harm until corrective decisions become possible. The central question is not only why employees remain silent, but also how disclosed information is rendered practically powerless.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a conceptual literature review to bring together research on organizational silence, employee voice, leadership, retaliation against reporters, and workplace harm—areas that have largely developed in separate fields of inquiry. Conceptual reviews are suited to clarifying constructs, integrating dispersed theoretical conversations, and developing new relationships among established ideas (Jaakkola, 2020). The primary materials for this study are peer-reviewed journal articles, including older publications retained when they remain theoretically foundational. The units of analysis are concepts, arguments, and findings that explain how information about workplace harm is communicated, received, evaluated, altered, or left without follow-up.

The selected literature was compared according to how each source explained the organizational journey of information about harm. The analysis focused on the risks of speaking, the changes a report underwent after submission, leaders’ responses, and the consequences for recurring harm. Similarities and differences across sources were synthesized thematically to distinguish voice, silence, organizational audibility, and concealment. This form of integrative synthesis is intended to generate theoretical insight by examining relationships and tensions across previously separate bodies of literature (Torraco, 2005). The synthesis also identified recurring forms of leadership failure and clarified how silencing and concealment contribute to the recurrence of workplace harm. Peer-reviewed journal literature provided the basis for developing the concepts and model. The review does not claim to encompass every relevant publication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Organization That Does Not Hear: From *Employee Voice* to *Organizational Audibility*

Speaking does not necessarily mean that employees have conveyed everything they know to the organization. Workers often disclose only what feels safe, soften their language, or defer information that might threaten managerial interests. Voice and silence can therefore coexist. Although the literature distinguishes them as conceptually different responses, both can arise from distinct motives and may coexist within the same organizational situation (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Employees calibrate what they say to the risks they anticipate. As a result, organizations may receive reports that have already been narrowed before they enter any formal process. Information is present, but it may no longer be complete enough to reveal the source of harm or the links among events that employees have already recognized.

Much of the organizational silence literature is stronger in explaining why employees withhold information than in tracing what happens after information is reported. Exploratory evidence shows that employees commonly avoid upward communication when they expect negative consequences or believe that speaking will be ineffective (Milliken et al., 2003). A complaint may nevertheless be accepted without open rejection and then move from one office to another until responsibility becomes unclear. A safety report may be reclassified as a communication problem. Recurring events may be recorded as separate cases, causing the relationship between them to disappear. No prohibition on speaking is required, yet the report’s capacity to affect a decision gradually declines. Such a process can be described as post-voice silencing. The term does not refer to every organizational response that disappoints a reporter. Rather, it identifies circumstances in which disclosed information loses context, weight, or a credible route to follow-up before receiving proper examination. Employees may still receive an official answer, allowing the organization to appear administratively responsive. That response may nevertheless close the matter without explaining how the evidence was assessed or why corrective action was considered unnecessary. Such experiences shape later decisions. Silence in subsequent situations may arise from an employee's experience of the organization rather than from personal fear alone. Even when a case is formally closed, the reasons for closure may remain too opaque for employees to determine whether the process was fair.

Psychological safety remains important because employees need sufficient interpersonal security to disclose errors, objections, or unwelcome information. Yet the concept primarily explains whether someone is willing to take an interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 1999). Managerial openness similarly concerns initial access to conversation more than the quality of what follows (Detert & Burris, 2007). A manager may be approachable but lack the willingness or organizational support needed to preserve the integrity of a report. Information may then end in a reassuring conversation while the source of harm remains unchanged (Kadir, 2026b). The distinction is consequential: psychological safety helps explain how voice emerges, whereas audibility concerns whether the substance of that voice survives until the organization makes a decision.

Organizational audibility refers to the capacity to preserve information about harm so that it can be examined, traced, and connected to actors with the authority to respond. The concept is not equivalent to an approachable manager, a large number of reporting channels, or the reporter's satisfaction with the final outcome. Organizations are not required to accept every allegation as true. A complaint may be found unsubstantiated after an independent and procedurally fair investigation without that outcome constituting silencing. Research on organizational justice confirms that procedural fairness depends on how decisions are reached, not only on whether a particular party receives a preferred outcome (Colquitt et al., 2001). A different problem arises when a report is weakened before it can be properly tested. Misclassification may turn a structural problem into a personal dispute. A conflict of interest may allow the party implicated in the complaint to influence how the matter is handled. Employees may repeatedly be asked for further evidence even when the organization has much greater access to the necessary records. The burden of inquiry is then shifted almost entirely onto the reporter. Low audibility develops through such processes. The boundary matters because audibility should not become a general label for every dissatisfaction with organizational decision-making. Its analytical value lies in explaining why a report may be administratively received yet never given a fair opportunity to shape action. Audibility depends not on whether the reporter obtains a desired outcome, but on whether the information is given a genuine opportunity to be examined.

The credibility of a report is not always determined by the quality of its evidence. Employment status, seniority, or proximity to senior management may affect whether a person's account is considered plausible. Research on expertise in work groups shows that status shapes whether knowledge is recognized and used, even when relevant expertise exists elsewhere in the group (Bunderson, 2003). The reduction of informational value because of the reporter's organizational position can be understood as epistemic downgrading. The problem is not that every report made by a low-status employee must be correct. Rather, the standard of proof may shift according to who is speaking. Managerial summaries that have lost important detail can be treated as more objective than the knowledge of employees who encounter the hazard directly. Organizations may therefore possess substantial local knowledge while allowing only a small portion of it to become a legitimate basis for action. Audibility is consequently not only a communication problem. It also concerns the unequal distribution of credibility inside the organization.

Reporting figures are difficult to interpret. An increase in complaints may signal worsening conditions, greater trust in reporting channels, or both. Conversely, a decline does not necessarily mean that a workplace has become safer; employees may simply have concluded that reporting changes nothing. Evidence from occupational safety research indicates that production pressure can reduce accident reporting even when underlying risk has not disappeared (Probst & Graso, 2013). Official speaking-up data can therefore show that report volume and response quality are distinct measures, but cannot by themselves prove concealment. Organizational silence develops as knowledge remains available while the prospect of its being believed and acted upon steadily narrows. Low reporting should never be treated automatically as evidence of effective leadership, since that interpretation may itself obscure harm not yet recognized institutionally.

2. Leadership Failure as an Infrastructure of Concealment

Reports of workplace harm do not move through an organization on their own. Someone decides whether a matter should be escalated, who is qualified to investigate it, and whether the findings warrant changes to existing practice. Whistleblowing research has long treated organizational response and authority relationships as central to whether disclosed wrongdoing receives attention (Near & Miceli, 1985). Leadership failure becomes visible in these decisions. It does not always take the form of abusive conduct or an objectionable personal style. Failure also arises when leaders let information lose its meaning, neglect to protect reporters, or leave findings disconnected from corrective action. Under these conditions, the damage extends beyond the manager–employee relationship. The organization's capacity to recognize harm also weakens: reports remain on record but have no practical consequence. Seemingly administrative decisions can thus determine whether a hazard is recognized as a shared problem or confined to local knowledge.

Retaliation against a reporter is almost always observed by more people than the person who experiences it directly. A sudden decline in performance evaluations, restricted access, or a deteriorating relationship with a manager becomes a lesson for other employees. They need not be treated in the same way to understand the cost of speaking. Research on responses to interpersonal mistreatment shows that employees who raise concerns may face social and organizational retaliation after speaking (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Retaliation therefore operates as a signal. The treatment of one reporter becomes an unofficial message to the entire unit. Nevertheless, not every negative evaluation that follows a disclosure should automatically be classified as retaliation. Timing, changes in the pattern of treatment, and the plausibility of the organization's explanation still require examination. The problem becomes clearer when post-reporting harm is allowed to continue without reasons that can be tested. Other employees then learn that formal non-retaliation policies carry little practical meaning (Kadir, 2026a). Workers with greater job security may still seek alternative channels. Contract workers are more likely to limit their involvement because losing employment or a managerial reference carries more serious consequences. Such differences demonstrate that power shapes who retains room to speak after the consequences of reporting become visible.

A report may also be weakened without its factual content being directly denied. Attention shifts from the reported event to the character of the person who raised it. Employees are described as overly emotional, difficult to work with, or personally hostile towards the reported party. The question of what happened is replaced by an assessment of the person speaking. Research on employee voice indicates that challenges to managerial interests are more likely to produce negative evaluations than statements that support existing arrangements (Burris, 2012). The reporter's credibility may therefore be questioned before the substance of the harm has received proper examination. The facts are not necessarily rejected, but their value has already been reduced. Such judgments also shift the burden of proof. Reporters must first establish that they deserve to be believed before the organization is prepared to examine the event itself.

Procedures remain necessary to prevent decisions from being based on untested allegations. Difficulties emerge when procedures divide a matter so thoroughly that no one retains responsibility for addressing it. A complaint may move from human resources to an ethics office and then return to a leader who was previously involved in the matter. Each unit handles a narrow part of the case, while the relationship between events is never examined. Research on critical upward communication has shown how information can be distorted as it passes through organizational hierarchies and managerial sensemaking processes (Tourish & Robson, 2006). The burden of proof may also be transferred to employees even though the organization has greater access to documents, records, and witnesses. Repeated delays give evidence time to disappear and reporters time to leave. Such circumstances can be described as procedural containment when procedure repeatedly reduces context, urgency, and the likelihood of action. Not every lengthy inquiry falls within this category. Some reports genuinely require careful investigation. The distinction depends on whether responsibility is clear, reasons for delay can be examined, and a credible path towards a decision exists. Where these conditions are absent, procedure contains the report rather than resolves it. The organization appears active while the source of harm remains unchanged. Delay then ceases to represent caution and becomes part of the way the organization avoids decisions that threaten its reputation or internal interests.

Facts may be accepted while their moral significance is diminished. Bullying can be recast as a matter of communication style, and safety risks as an ordinary cost of meeting production targets. Such shifts in language reduce pressure on the organization to act. Once an event is defined as normal, leadership responsibility contracts as well. Research on the acceptance and perpetuation of corruption explains how rationalization, socialization, and routine can make harmful practices appear compatible with ordinary organizational life (Anand et al., 2004). Leadership language is not merely terminological: the categories used in meetings and internal reports shape whether an event is treated as harm that must be stopped or as a minor disturbance manageable without deeper change.

Information may weaken further when it enters managerial summaries. Employees' experiences are compressed into figures or marked with a status indicating that a case has been closed. Some simplification is unavoidable, but details concerning duration, recurrence, and power relations often disappear. Leadership failure is active when information is deliberately suppressed. A more passive form appears when leaders accept visibly incomplete summaries without requesting clarification. Research on moral disengagement helps explain how organizational actors can distance themselves from the consequences of harmful conduct and treat questionable practices as administratively acceptable (Moore et al., 2012). Failure may also be embedded in performance systems, especially where managers are rewarded for keeping complaint figures low. These forms do not remain neatly separated. A leader may never order the alteration of data yet still benefit from a report that makes the unit appear safe. Concealment then develops without a centralized plan and without a single actor controlling the entire process.

Concealment takes shape when known facts become disconnected from organizational recognition and corrective action. An organization need not deny that an event occurred. It may be enough to define it as an isolated case, undermine confidence in the reporter, or leave the matter trapped in procedure. The facts remain stored but no longer create an obligation to respond. Research on managers' aversion to employee voice suggests that defensive concerns can make leaders less receptive to information that threatens their competence or self-image (Fast et al., 2014). Leadership failure then becomes an unwritten rule governing the value of a report. When employees assess a later incident, they consider more than the substance of the problem: they remember how earlier reporters were treated and adjust their willingness to speak to the risks already on display. The resulting climate of silence outlasts the employee who first experienced retaliation.

3. The Silence–Concealment Spiral and the Recurrence of *Workplace Harm*

A report that ends without explanation teaches a different lesson from one rejected after an open and credible examination. Employees do not simply feel disappointed by the outcome. They may begin to conclude that organizational channels cannot change the situation, particularly when similar experiences recur or when other reporters encounter the same dead end. Such a condition can be described as learned futility: the belief that organizational mechanisms no longer serve a useful purpose even though employees remain capable of speaking. Learned futility differs from learned helplessness, which is more closely associated with a personal sense of powerlessness. Research distinguishing different forms of employee silence confirms that perceived futility is a specific reason for withholding information rather than a general absence of agency (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). One report that fails to produce the desired decision is not enough to create this belief. Futility develops when handling is repeatedly opaque, reasons for closure cannot be examined, and the source of harm remains unchanged. Experiences following disclosure reinforce the belief that voice will make little difference. Later silence grows from memory of how the organization acted, rather than from an employee's character or an assumed lack of courage. The organization thereby produces credible reasons for employees to withhold information.

The treatment of one reporter quickly becomes shared knowledge. Research on whistleblower retaliation shows that organizational power and post-disclosure consequences shape both the reporter's experience and the meaning that others attach to speaking up (Rehg et al., 2008). Employees notice who retains support after speaking and who gradually loses access to management. This information travels through ordinary conversation without ever becoming written policy. Responses, however, are uneven. Workers with greater job security or union support may seek another channel; contract workers tend to proceed more cautiously; some professionals continue to report because their roles impose ethical obligations. At the group level, supervisor undermining can also weaken a shared voice climate and reduce the expectation that speaking will be supported (Frazier & Bowler, 2015). Organizational position thus shapes how much risk a person can bear once those who speak begin to face doubt or disadvantage.

Dispersed silence makes a collective problem appear personal. One employee may believe that only they object to a particular practice, while colleagues reach the same conclusion because no public disagreement is visible. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when the silence of others is mistaken for acceptance even though objections may be widespread (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Fragmented case handling reinforces this misunderstanding. Reports are dealt with separately, preventing connections between experiences from becoming visible as a pattern. Reporters may not know whether similar complaints have been submitted elsewhere. Leaders who examine each case in isolation can then describe the problem as an individual difficulty rather than as the consequence of a long-standing work arrangement.

Hazards that do not immediately produce a crisis are easily treated as acceptable. Targets continue to be met, work is completed, and a procedural breach that caused no injury yesterday is used to justify repetition today. Research on the organizational roots of mistake, misconduct, and disaster explains how repeated deviation can become normalized when adverse consequences do not occur immediately (Vaughan, 1999). Deviance no longer appears exceptional because the organization repeatedly escapes its worst possible consequences. Not every minor breach will become a source of serious harm. The problem becomes entrenched when deviations continue, warnings lose weight, and short-term success is allowed to conceal accumulating risk. Leadership shapes the direction of that process. Senior actors set performance pressures, accept compromises initially described as temporary, and decide whether information from frontline employees is serious enough to warrant changing practice. Once reports lose audibility, the absence of a major incident appears to confirm that earlier decisions were correct. Concealment and normalization then reinforce one another. Weakened information makes deviation appear safe. Practices assumed to be safe, in turn, make later reports easier to minimize. Internal reasons for change gradually disappear even though the source of danger remains and warning signs continue to arise from the same working conditions.

Low complaint figures can deepen this error. Report volume is not a direct measure of harm because reporting depends on trust, risk, and employees' prior experience. The silence-as-safety fallacy describes a situation in which management treats a low number of complaints as evidence of workplace safety without asking why employees have stopped speaking. A decline may, of course, reflect genuine improvement. Complaint figures must therefore be considered alongside safety conditions, employee turnover, post-reporting experiences, and the reasons employees use informal channels or leave the organization. Without that context, apparently favourable data may conceal problems that have never received adequate attention.

For employees already exposed to harm, organizational failure can impose an additional burden. The institution expected to protect them instead allows a report to stall or casts doubt on the reporter. The literature describes such experiences as institutional betrayal, particularly when an institution on which people depend fails to prevent or respond adequately to wrongdoing (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Trust declines, other employees become less willing to speak, and complaint figures fall. Management may then read that decline as evidence of safety. At this point, the spiral closes: leadership responses to one report shape the choices of later employees, while data produced by silence are used to preserve existing practices. More reporting channels will not interrupt this process while organizational audibility remains weak, post-disclosure protection is unavailable, and the reasons for closing cases cannot be scrutinized.

CONCLUSION

Organizations remain silent not only because employees fear speaking, but also because information about harm can lose practical force before it informs a decision. Employee voice does not automatically produce organizational audibility. Reports may be accepted, then minimized, detached from their context, or contained within procedures that never lead to correction. Leadership failure is central because leaders determine whose account is credible, how a report is classified, and whether findings reach those with authority to respond. Concealment need not begin with an explicit instruction to suppress facts. Retaliation, diminished credibility, fragmented case handling, and managerial inaction may be enough to sever knowledge from action. As these experiences recur, employees come to see reporting as futile. Complaint figures decline and may then be read as evidence of organizational safety, even though low reporting can instead signal a loss of trust.

The study's principal contribution lies in the concepts of organizational audibility and the Leadership-Mediated Silence–Concealment Spiral. Together, they redirect attention from employee courage to the organization's capacity to preserve information in a credible, actionable form. Leadership quality cannot be judged solely by interpersonal openness or the number of reporting channels available. Protection after disclosure, transparent follow-up, and the willingness to connect dispersed reports into broader patterns matter as well. Because this is a conceptual study, the proposed model neither estimates prevalence nor establishes causal relationships. Future research should examine organizational audibility across sectors, investigate employees' experiences after reporting, and test whether follow-up quality affects the recurrence of workplace harm. The central problem is not simply an absence of employee voice, but an organization that strips information of its force before it can alter a decision.

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