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Supporting Safety Culture in Academia: Safety Communication Barriers

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In the last decade, we have heard of multiple disturbing academic laboratory accidents resulting in significant injury and property damage. When these hit headlines, it can spur self-reflection across academic institutions. The unfortunate truth is that safety in academia tends to be problematic. Accidents happen regularly even if they do not make headlines, with post-accident analyses typically revealing systematic safety failures. As a result, the concept of safety culture has come into the spotlight.

Safety culture is not a single policy, program, or procedure. It is comprised of the assumptions, attitudes, values, and behavioral norms that employees within an organization share regarding workplace safety (1). A proactive safety culture – where systems are in place to promote safety and mitigate potential hazards – is cultivated through actions of individuals at all levels in an organization. Department chairs, even those outside of STEM, play a key role in supporting safety as a core value.

Communication is a key pillar in a strong safety culture (2). Unfortunately, many accidents have occurred because no one spoke up. In safety conversations, stakes are high. Issues of hierarchy, an institutional history of punitive approaches, and norms of placing blame bring charged emotions to complex situations. Across industries, regardless of geographical location, employees only speak up 39% of the time they see something they feel is unsafe (1). Why the silence?

The main types of employee silence and voice are acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial (4). In acquiescence, individuals express concerns (or stay silent) because they feel like their opinion won't make a difference. Defensively, individuals express concerns (or keep them quiet) out of fear and self-preservation. While prosocial silence involves withholding information in service of the group, prosocial voice involves expressing information to facilitate problem-solving and improvement. A specific form of prosocial voice is employee safety voice, or "communication motivated toward changing perceived unsafe working conditions" (5, p. 320).

To facilitate safety communication, it is important to understand what might contribute to various forms of employee voice (and silence) in one's organization and work to support expressions of prosocial employee voice. Each of the following are conditions that are likely to *suppress* prosocial safety voice.

University level:

- **Organizational injustice**: Faculty and staff witness forms of **distributive**, **procedural**, and **interactional** Injustice that make them distrust messages from leadership and feel their voice would not be heard, even if expressed.
- **Lack of safety role models**: There is no one in a leadership role to look to for cues about appropriate safety voice behavior.
- **Unclear or deficient reporting system**: Even if individuals are motivated to voice concerns, many will not without a simple, easy-to-navigate process of doing so.

- **Low openness to feedback:** If individuals observe cases of leadership ignoring, silencing, or acting defensively toward feedback, they will be discouraged from providing it themselves.
- **Lack of communication of expectations**: Uncertainties or inconsistencies in the university's message about what voice behavior it expects will make it hard for individuals to choose a course of action that is consistent with university safety goals.
- **Lack of training on safety skills/competencies:** Faculty may not have the right skill set necessary to identify risks or enact safety behaviors, making it difficult to know when to speak up or how to effectively do so.
- **Incentive and policy systems that penalize voice/reward silence**: Many times, organizations state that certain behaviors are desirable while inadvertently making said behaviors very difficult for individuals to engage in. If university policy is written to reflect one course of action, but in practice another course of action is often taken, employees will be unclear about their expectations and choose to stay silent.
- **Systems of power that prioritize financial status or reputation**: Unacknowledged systems of power are often the greatest barriers to organizational culture change efforts, especially when the desire to *appear* safe overrides the need to address threats to safety.

Department level:

- **Low quality relationship with direct supervisor**: The quality of the relationship one has with their leader is linked to employee comfort in expressing concerns to leadership.
- **Lack of support from coworkers**: If faculty feel alone in voicing safety concerns or that their colleagues will not be supportive, they are more likely to remain silent themselves.
- **Low psychological safety:** Faculty who fear that generally displaying vulnerability in the group will be threatening or force them to face ridicule, exclusion, or other undesirable group consequences are unlikely to speak up. Individuals who stay silent or simply agree with others out of fear are demonstrating defensive silence and defensive voice, respectively.
- **No opportunity to express voice:** Many times, individuals are interested in sharing their safety-related thoughts, opinions, and solutions, but have not been provided an opportunity to do so.
- **Sense that voice betrays the group**: This represents the motivation behind employee prosocial silence. Faculty may not speak up to authority because they are hesitant to violate norms of engagement. This can also explain why values misalign with actions, where speaking up is recognized as valuable but action is not taken because the person fears offending someone engaging in unsafe behavior.
- **Group norms of silence and blame**: If there has been a history that everyone in the department always stays quiet when asked for feedback or that the expression of safety voice is something *that simply is not done around here*,

individuals are discouraged from disclosing safety issues. Similarly, if there is an unspoken rule that *someone is to blame*, people will avoid speaking up.

- **Norms of retaliation:** Faculty may fear formal or informal punishment for calling attention to safety issues. As a core motivation of defensive voice and silence, this involves a fear that saying something will lead to negative consequences, such as a threat to their standing within the department.
- **Normalization of deviance**: There is a natural tendency for people to take shortcuts, bypass procedures to save time, or otherwise justify lapses in safety behavior, which may decrease the sense that something needs to be voiced in the first place. Faculty may finish tasks in spite of a safety concern to maintain productivity. Through diffusion of responsibility, the more people that witness the safety issue, the less likely that any single faculty member will report. This **bystander effect** can also lead to **confirmation bias** where faculty can rationalize their own inaction because of the inaction of others.

Individual level:

- **Low perceived control or sense of ability to make an impact:** This is at the core of acquiescent silence or voice,. Faculty may be reluctant to contradict an authority figure that has directly or indirectly ignored the problem because there is a perception that nothing is going to change.
- **Role ambiguity or conflict:** If faculty are unsure about their role when it comes to safety, or certain safety behaviors conflict with other roles that are important to them, they may not act on a desire to express safety voice.
- **Low tolerance for organizational dissent:** Many individuals experience discomfort when they are engaging in behavior that conveys disagreement with others, often authority figures, in their organization.
- **Low error orientation, improvement orientation, or situation awareness:** If an individual does not perceive a safety issue or identify salient areas of improvement in their environment, they would not have anything to voice a concern about. Faculty can experience discomfort when new information conflicts with their existing ideas. In this scenario, they tend to act to alleviate this **cognitive dissonance**. Faculty may ignore hazards, justifying it with their trust in the institution.
- **Lack of knowledge/awareness of voice expectations**: Faculty and staff may not be aware of what the expectations are for voicing safety ideas or concerns. They may have a limited understanding of the breadth of issues that warrant discussion, or messages about safety communication may not be clear.
- **Low sense of responsibility and ownership**: Often a result of group norms or a lack of empowerment and education, individuals may feel like it is *someone else's* job to speak up about safety, deferring to a safety authority figure.
- **High workload and stress**: It can be draining, time consuming, and often overall difficult to engage in effective employee safety voice behavior, even when there is a positive safety culture in place. Academia is demanding, leading to chronically high levels of stress. This makes it more challenging for individuals to have time or energy to focus on safety, especially when other urgent matters

abound. Faculty may feel like they cannot "afford" down time in their laboratory for safety concerns.

Employees who are skilled at having crucial conversations are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death from unsafe conditions (2). However, only one third of employees report safety concerns (1). Alarmingly, over 90% of employees with responsibilities involving chemical, physical, or biological risks know of a safety issue that has not been reported (2). Does this apply to faculty in your department?

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