

Destroying a culture of silence

For my Recent Development article, I read the article titled, “Companies will perform better if employees are not cowed into silence” from *The Economist*. The article published in the January 2019 edition of *by Bartleby* speaks about the benefits of speaking up, not necessarily to challenge authority but rather, to validate your own questions about the process that you are doing. The article gives various examples on how a culture of silence creates chaos in business, such as Boeing, Volkswagen, and Wells Fargo, all of which have had major crises in their company history. The author of this article also speaks about how important creating a psychological safe space within an organization is, rather than seeing it as a place where every decision is challenged, and whistleblowing is encouraged.

While personally I can see the benefit behind validating concerns of employees, I am dubious about the factual evidence that this author has provided for the credibility of this article. The author gives various sources on miscommunication in the work place that has caused multiple crises, however, there aren’t any sources to show where crises could have been avoided by an increase in communication, or where productivity can be increased by questioning the process’ that they are involved in. Another issue with the article is how far it derails from the main argument that the author posed at the beginning of the article. About halfway through the article, the author seems to be overconcerned with defending all the points around their argument, such as creating a psychological safe space, and the importance of viewing this process as questioning rather than whistleblowing and fails to defend her main contention of the benefit of

questioning your superior in a productive and respectful way. The author also fails to give advice on how to ask questions to improve the projects you are working on, rather, they just give various studies showing how fear and miscommunication have derailed major projects and caused various catastrophes throughout the business world. So, while the concept that the author has presented is very interesting and has an appealing title to it, the authors lack of evidence fails to deliver some sort of beneficial content that the reader can take into their company and improve their business lives. The sources that the author brought up to elaborate on miscommunication in the workplace are interesting to read. For example, how Volkswagen was caught up in the diesel scandal because their engineers devised a method to fool regulations into thinking that they were under the diesel regulations. The author of this article wrote about how a former Volkswagen employee depicted their development branch as a culture of fear and intimidation. Ferdinand Piëch, a longtime manager at Volkswagen was caught boasting about telling engineers how they had six weeks to improve the bodywork fitting on pain of dismissal. In the circumstances, engineers were understandably unwilling to mention the bad news on emissions standards and instead worked around the problem. This is where the author, in my opinion, provided a valuable piece of knowledge on what exactly a toxic/fear-inducing work environment looks like in comparison to a productive and healthy workplace with behavior that is optimal for achieving long term success. Overall, the author makes some valid arguments about toxicity and mis-management in the workplace that overall leads to worse behavior and overall worse productivity throughout the company.

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<https://www.economist.com/business/2019/01/12/companies-will-perform-better-if-employees-are-not-cowed-into-silence>