ORGANISATIONAL SILENCE AND PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN LAGOS STATE

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Abstract

This study focused on organisational silence and performance of selected small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Lagos State. The objective of this study is to empirically examined the concept of organisation silence and its outcomes on SMEs operating in Lagos State. Survey research design was employed in this study. Primary and secondary data were used in this study. The target population covers SMEs registered with Nigerian Association of Small & Medium Enterprises (NASME). 100 copies of questionnaire were administered to members of NASME (Lagos State Chapter) as a sample size. 71 copies were duly filled, returned and valid for this study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data collected. Spearman rank correlation was used to test the hypothesis of this study. $r = 0.70$, which 70% level of relationships. The result of the analysis revealed that organisational silence has effect on performance of SMEs in Lagos State. The study recommended that employees should be allowed to participate in decision making that will affect them should be recognized in such a way that will motivates them to break their silence for effective communication.

Keywords: Organisational Silence, performance, Organisational Culture, Participatory Leadership Style, SMEs

1. Introduction

Employees in an organisation are the main source of critical factors for change, productive innovation and learning as well as organisational success (Karaca, 2013). Although, most employees have some vital thoughts and ideas about the organisation, they prefer to remain silent either for the known and unknown elements. Business entity in today’s turbulence business environment however, needs employees to constantly share their ideas, beliefs, knowledge and experience freely to achieve organisational success (Liu, Wu & Ma, 2009 cited in Karaca, 2013).

Organisational silence is a behavioural choice that can deteriorate or improve organisational performance (Karaca, 2013). Excluding its emotionally difficult expression, silence can convey approval and sharing or disfavor and opposition, thus becoming a pressure mechanism for both individuals and organisations.

All organisations (small, medium and large) are struggling hard to cut their cost through every possible mean in recent era of hectic competition (Fatima, Salah-ud-Din, Khan, Hassan & Hoti, 2015). They are building more demands and expectations from their employees including taking initiatives, taking responsibility due to the presence of change, being proactive during severe competition, meeting higher customer expectations, and being more quality focus. Zehir and Erdogan (2011) stated that employees have different ideas and opinions to improve their work and organisation but keep such information. Thus, this may hinder the continuous existence of such organisation (Fatima, Salah-ud-Din, Khan, Hassan & Hoti, 2015).

Silence is the absence of voice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). The employees remain quiet about certain important aspects of the organisation. Fatima et al., (2015), identified some major causes of organisational silence which includes lack of organisational political skills, fear and embarrassment and implicated friends. Morrison and Milliken (2000), revealed that organisational silence is the collective occurrence in which little voice raise is included in response to the presence of an issue because of the negative reaction.

For organisations prosperity and stability in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), it is very pertinent to examine the issue of silence in business work place as a major hindrance to organisational outcomes. Hence, through silence, employees hold down fears about problematic personnel and organisational issues including, awkwardness, absence of ethical responsibility, decreased chance for raising voice, diminished political skills (Nielsen, 2003) cited in Fatima et al., 2015). Therefore, this study investigates the effect of organisational silence on the performance of SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria.
Statement of the Problem

The literature of organisational silence is grounded on the recent research studies carried out by Morrison & Milliken (2000); Milliken & Harlos (2001) cited in Akbarian, Ansari, Shaeni & Keshitaray, (2015). Moreover, organisational silence has generated negative organisational outcomes over the years (Aylsworth, 2008). One of the elements that cause conflict in an organisation be it small, medium or large enterprises is the dominance of silence culture in organisation. When this culture is dominant, there will be apparent paradox in which some employees know the facts about organisation issues but do not care to speak about it (Morrison & Milliken, 2000 cited in Talimasebi, Sobhanipour & Aghazarari, 2013).

Morrison and Milliken (2000) cited in Aeen, Zarci and Matin (2014), in their study proved that organisational silence may include cognitive incompatibility, and therefore, reduce motivation, commitment and satisfaction. Studies by Liu et al. (2013); Fatimah et al. (2015), have focused on organisational silence on organisational citizenship behaviour; organisational silence and organisational commitment; role of organisational silence on organisational success and so on, but there is a probable dearth in knowledge in carrying out a study on organisational silence and performance of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria. Thus, this study investigates this phenomenon in selected SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the effect of organisational silence on performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study are to:
1. examine the effects of quiescence silence on the performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State.
2. examine the effects of acquiescence silence on the performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State

Research Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant relationship between organisational silence (quiescence & acquiescence) and performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State

2. Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

Organisational Silence

Early definitions of silence equated it with “loyalty” and the assumption that nothing was wrong if concerns were not being voiced (Bagheri, et al., 2012). According to Van Dyne and LePine (1998) employee voice is generally related to contextual Performance. Motowidlo and Scoter, (1994) cited in Fatima, Salah-ud-Din, Khan, Hassan and Hoti, 2015 were of the opinion that “organisational silence” blocks organisations from hearing their members’ voices. Many scholars have conducted research on this subject. Morrison and Milliken (2000) pointed out that organisational silence is the common choice made by organisation members despite all research extolling the virtues of upward information for organisational health (Fatima, Salah-ud-Din, Khan, Hassan & Hoti, 2015).

Pinder and Harlos (2001) recognized that the phenomenon of employee silence might take on different meanings depending on its underlying motives. They distinguished silence in two forms, such as “quiescence” and “acquiescence” silence. In terms of “quiescence” silence represented it deliberate omission, while “acquiescence” silence is based on submission. Organisational silence is an inefficient process which can waste all organisational efforts and may take various forms, such as collective silence in meetings, low levels of participation in suggestion schemes, low levels of collective voice and so on (Nikmaram, et al., 2012). Organisational silence refers to the collective phenomenon of comment or to very little action in response to the major issues facing the organisation (Henriksen & Dayton, 2006).

Organisational silence occurs when employees intentionally withhold their knowledge and ideas regarding organisational issues (Tulubas & Celep, 2012). They believe that many organisations have been involved in solving a major puzzle and that is, most people know the fact about certain problems of organisation but do not have the courage to express those facts to their supervisors (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Organisational silence has also been defined as “consciously refrain from expressing ideas, information and beliefs about work.” Organisational silence may result in lack of feedback, information and ideas and alternatives analysis and thus the organisation is damaged from organisational processes of low effectiveness (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).
Silence is not only defined as not to speak but also defined as not to write, not to be present, not to hear and to ignore. Silence also includes talk or text without credit. Moreover, silence may refer to censoring, suppression, marginalization, trivialization, exclusion and other forms of discount (Hazen, 2006). Bowen & Blackmon (2003), applied "Spiral of Silence" theory developed by Noelle-Neumann in context of public opinions in organisational concept. This theory explains how the opinions of majority overcome and opinions of minority weakened. They suggest that understanding of people about the ways of dealing with the problems in working group significantly effect on organisational voice. Specifically, people express their opinions when they believe that their position is supported by others, and they remain silent otherwise (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

Comprehensive understanding of organisational silence phenomena requires knowledge of the researches on "voice and silence in organisations". In order to achieve this objective, three periods of research on sound and silence will be reviewed. First period (from 1970s until 1980s middle): in this decade, the main focus of researches was on the concept of sound. Second period (from 1980s middle until 2000): the main focus of researches was on" Speaking Up" in this decade. However few attentions paid to the silence behaviour during this decade. Current period (from 2000 to now) in which main focus is on silence concept (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009).

Why employees are silent

Employees prefer to remain silent due to some organisational factors (Redding, 1985). From the view point of organisational theorists like Argyris (1977), Morrison and Milliken (2000) contended that organisational silence is a product of forces within the organisation and forces stemming from top management that systemically reinforce silence. In brief, their model departs from organisational antecedents and arrives at one effect: organisational silence. They believe that managers’ fear of negative feedback and the set of implicit beliefs that they hold about their employees give rise to certain structures, policies and managerial behaviors. These, in turn, aid to the development of a “climate of silence” which is enacted and reinforced by employees’ collective sense-making.

Some academics have tried to explain the reasons for organisational silence with internal and external realities of companies such as administrative, personal and organisational factors (Milliken et al., 2003; Premaux, 2001; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Eroglu et al., 2011).

Richard (2003) listed the factors that cause the silence in organisations as follows:

1. Fear
2. Embarrassment
3. Narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility
4. Implicated friends
5. Lack of opportunity for voice
6. Lack of organisational political skills.

It seems the most common factor causing organisational silence and intensifies climate of silence in the organisation is fear. Fear of Employees and fear of managers; Employees fear of reprimand, punish, missing any rewards or even dismissal and managers fear of negative feedback. For employees there is risk of isolation too. Because of these kind of fears, organisational culture dominants climate of silence in organisation. So there was not even an opportunity to voice. Also Lack of self-confidence of employees can create organisational of silence because they are shy of talking.

Deniz and et al. (2013), studies adds to the body of knowledge about the relationship between the concepts and in the light of related hypothesis, significant and negative relationship between affective commitment and one of employee silence dimension (defensive silence) has been supported by empirical analysis. Another factor refers to employee relations. Perhaps they fear damage to their relationships, so they are silent. The lack of interpersonal skills might be facing an employee with a negative attitude of manager. Thus, lack of organisational political skills of the managers and the employees will lead to organisational silence. Now, if the employee has had a bad experience gets worse. So it seems the manager’s behavior can be an important component for the employees to have a voice or silence.

Types of Silence

Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) differentiate three specific behaviors based on three employee motives. They introduced three types of silence as followings:
• Acquiescent Silence,
• Defensive Silence, and
• Pro-social Silence

**Acquiescent Silence**

When most people label another person’s behavior as ‘silent’, they often mean the person is not actively communicating. As noted above, however, the study limits our conceptualization of silence to situations where employees have relevant ideas, information, and opinions and yet choose not to express these ideas. The studies do not view silence as the mere absence of voice and instead propose that different forms of silence are driven by different employee motives. Drawing on Pinder and Harlos (2001) conceptualization, the first form of silence the study considers is Acquiescent Silence. The study defines Acquiescent Silence as withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions, based on resignation. Thus, Acquiescent Silence suggests disengaged behavior that is more passive than active (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

**Defensive Silence**

Pinder and Harlos (2001) used the term Quiescent Silence to describe deliberate omission based on personal fear of the consequences of speaking up. This is consistent with Morrison and Milliken’s (2000), emphasis on the personal emotion of fear as a key motivator of organisational silence. It is also consistent with psychological safety and voice opportunity as critical preconditions for speaking up in work contexts. Building on the work of Pinder and Harlos (2001); Morrison and Milliken (2000), they defined Defensive Silence as withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions as a form of self-protection, based on fear. Defensive Silence is intentional and proactive behavior that is intended to protect the self from external threats. In contrast to Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence is more proactive, involving awareness and consideration of alternatives, followed by a conscious decision to withhold ideas, information, and opinions as the best personal strategy at the moment (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

**Pro-social Silence**

In developing this notion, the study draws on the Organisational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) literature which describes Pro-social forms of employee behavior. The study defined Pro-social Silence as withholding work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organisation—based on altruism or cooperative motives. Like organisational citizenship, Pro-social Silence is intentional and proactive behavior that is primarily focused on others. Like OCB, Pro-social Silence is discretionary behavior that cannot be mandated by an organisation. Like Defensive Silence, Pro-social Silence is based on awareness and consideration of alternatives and the conscious decision to withhold ideas, information, and opinions. In contrast to Defensive Silence, Pro-social Silence is motivated by concern for others, rather than by fear of negative personal consequences that might occur from speaking up (Van Dyne, et al. 2003).

**Outcomes of Employee Silence**

Employee silence has many effects on the employees themselves. Indifferent employees are often products of ignored employee silence. They tend to feel like cogs at machinery factories, developing the attitude “to get along, go along”. Another example of such effects on employees is articulated by Bagheri, et al. (2012), who says that “employee silence affects the personal well-being of employees, increases stress,” and causes them to “feel guilty, where they often experience psychological problems, and have trouble seeing the possibility of change”.

Indifferent employees cause the organisation to lose money and function poorly. Unfortunately when major monetary losses are detected in organisations, managers tend to react by trying to recover the loss, overlooking the fact that employees have become indifferent as a result of unaddressed employee silence. More often than not employees who are not doing their share of the work are also not speaking up with the problems they see, leading to a perpetual cycle of employee silence (Joinson, 1996). Employee silence is extremely detrimental to organisations often causing an “escalating level of dissatisfaction” among employees, “which manifests itself in absenteeism and turnover and perhaps other undesired behaviors” (Bagheri, et al. 2012).

If employee silence does occur, communication suffers and as a result harms the overall functioning of the organisation. In an article entitled “Get Talking” author Chris Penttila says, “Employee silence is killing innovation and perpetuating poorly planned projects that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line” (Pentilla, 2003). By silencing, in various ways, managers are able to achieve at least three outcomes. First, these managers are able to construct and maintain the discursive, if not physical, separation of personal and
professional. This is an approach that some managers indicate that they learned from mentors. Second, managers perpetuate the façade of a singular, unproblematic commitment to the organisation—a commitment that is not now, nor in the foreseeable future, affected by a personal commitment such as eldercare. Third, through absolute silencing these managers protect their organisation from learning about and potentially having to develop responses to help their employee manage these difficult, personal problems (McGowan, 2002).

It is not easy to break silence climate of employees and their managers. The behavioral cycles that maintain organisational silence will be hard to break in part because they are not subject to direct observation or discussion. To prevent silence from characterizing their organisations, leaders should not only permit, but reward, employees who come forward with sensitive or risky information, and should create formal mechanisms through which employees can speak up anonymously if they wish to do so. Otherwise, undesirable reactions may elicit from employees, such as not valued, lack control, and cognitive dissonance (Reichers, et al. 1997). Organisational silence can have detrimental effects on decision-making and processes of change by blocking alternative views, negative feedback, and accurate information.

Small and Medium Enterprises

There is no universally accepted or formal unique definition of what constitutes Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Economic literatures do not agree to any uniform yardstick to measure the size of SMEs as the concept varies. Although, there is a consensus that either inputs such as power consumption, number of employees, quantum of raw materials and output like-total number of production can be quantitatively used to measure such size (Ajonbadi, 2002).

The terms Small, Medium and large are relative and differ from industry to industry, country to country and there is no unique or universally accepted definitions of these terms. It is important also to recognize that definitions change over a period of development. What was large in 1950s may be regarded as Small today (Obadan & Ayodele, 2009).

Adekoya (2016), defined SMEs as one in which total cost excluding cost of land but including working capital not exceeding ₦10million. The National Economic Reconstruction Fund established in 1989 defined SMEs as those fixed assets other than land including cost of investment do not exceed ₦10million (Lawal, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory

Cook, Cheshire and Rice (2013), identified the social exchange lies between two parties, which is consisting on the trade. Individuals weigh the potential benefits and risks of relationships. The theory is of the view that when the risks outweigh the rewards, individuals cease or abandon that relationship. The implication of this is that due to the restricted rules and procedures prevailing, within the organisational climate, employees feel fear and decided to keep silent. This feeling causes them to be limit in their concerns regarding the organisation.

Empirical Studies

Zehir and Erdogan (2011) surveyed in their study the association between organisational silence and leadership behavior in case of ethical leadership. Further, they examined the employee performance through these variables. This examination is based on a survey of 714 people who work for national and multinational companies in Turkey to compare relationship between the factor analysis, reliability, correlations and regressions. Consequently, all hypotheses were supported and positively related.

Vakola and Bouradas (2005), explored organisational silence as a fluid occurrence located between silence and voice. In addition, Vakola and Bouradas studied the behaviour of individuals who choose to remain silent within certain organisational contexts and situations. While Morrison and Milliken analysed the collective level of silence, Vakola and Bouradas focused on the consequences of silent behaviour within the context of organisational change. The choice remain silent based on the situation is important for leaders to acknowledge and understand.

Research Methods & Materials

Survey research design was adopted in this study. Primary and secondary data were used to gather information for inference in this study. The target population covers SMEs registered with Nigerian Association of Small &
Medium Enterprises (NASME). However, the survey was carried out on the registered SMEs with NASME, Lagos State Chapter. This association comprises of majorly owners/managers of SMEs. Purposive sampling technique (non-probabilistic sampling technique) was used to select the sample from the population. This allows the researcher to select respondents that possess requisite information about the subject matter to answer the research questions. A structured five Likert scale questionnaire (self developed) was design to elicit information from the respondents. Content validity was adopted to ascertain the validity of the instrument designed for this study. The cronbach alpha of the internal consistency of the research instrument is 0.898. 100 copies of questionnaire were administered to members of NASME, Lagos State Chapter (September, 2017) using convenient sampling technique. This is because monthly meetings of registered members are held at Ikeja and not all members normally attend. 71 copies of the questionnaire were duly filled, returned and valid for this study. Thus, 71 percent is the rate of returned.

Analysis of Variables

Table 1: Organisational Silence

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Silence simply mean; no speaking, no writing or allowing employees expressing the views</td>
<td>16 (22.5%)</td>
<td>48 (67.6%)</td>
<td>7 (9.8%)</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Organisational silence is no longer perceived as a sign of obedience, respect or humility but a form of social withdrawal and negative reactions by employees</td>
<td>26 (36.6%)</td>
<td>40 (56.3%)</td>
<td>3 (4.2%)</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Employees are not deprived the chances to identify problems and take proper decision</td>
<td>15 (21.1%)</td>
<td>35 (49.3%)</td>
<td>10 (13.5%)</td>
<td>6 (8.5%)</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Employers creates a platform for employee to air their voices within the organisation for effectiveness</td>
<td>10 (13.5%)</td>
<td>36 (50.7%)</td>
<td>10 (13.5%)</td>
<td>11 (15.5%)</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Organisational silence leads to employees’ intention to hide their ideas that may provide benefits for the organization</td>
<td>26 (36.6%)</td>
<td>44 (61.9%)</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
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Table 2: Performance of SMEs

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<td>6.</td>
<td>Good labour/management relationships leads to higher productivity of workers of SMEs</td>
<td>29 (40.8%)</td>
<td>28 (39.4%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Employees participation in decision making help them achieves organisation goals and objectives of SMEs</td>
<td>14 (19.7%)</td>
<td>43 (60.6%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Organisation that encourages participation of their employees, airing their voices outperforms those that do not.</td>
<td>16 (22.5%)</td>
<td>30 (42.3%)</td>
<td>20 (28.2%)</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>SMEs gives motivation of workers the necessary attention</td>
<td>14 (19.7%)</td>
<td>35 (49.3%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
<td>4 (5.6%)</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>A better working condition enhances the efficient use of resources in obtaining the greatest output.</td>
<td>19 (26.7%)</td>
<td>40 (56.3%)</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37</td>
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Source: field survey, September 2017

The data collected through the administered copies of questionnaires were subjected to detailed analysis. Tables 1 and 2 give a description of the frequency and percentage figures of the data collected. Table 1 revealed the importance of organisational silence while Table 2 summarizes measures of performance of SMEs. The summary
of outcomes of the analysis revealed that respondents give credence and importance to organisational silence and performance of SMEs.

**Hypothesis**

**H₀**: Thereis no significant relationship between organisational silence (quiescence & acquiescence) and performance of SMEs in Lagos State

**Table 3 Summary of Hypothesis Testing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/n</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Spearman Rank Correlation = r</th>
<th>t-test statistics</th>
<th>Degree of freedom</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Hypothesis 1</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3</td>
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The critical value of ‘t’ with 3 degree of freedom at 0.05 significance level is 2.35. The empirical value of 5.8 is greater than tabulated value of 2.35, the study rejects H₀, at 0.05 and accept H₁. The result of the spearman rank correlation is 0.70. This is 70% relationship between the dependent and independent variables. This implies that there is a significant relationship between organisational silence (quiescence & acquiescence) and performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State.

**Discussion of findings**

The findings of this study show that there is a significant relationship between organisational silence (quiescence & acquiescence) and performance of SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria. This result is in tandem with the studies carried out by Mumudah (2012); Nongo and Darius (2012). These studies have similar outcomes in their findings that organisational silence has a positive influence on employee’s commitments. The study also revealed that there is a direct relationship between the two variables which is also supported by social exchange theory propounded by Cook et al (2013). The theory is of view that when risks outweigh the rewards, individuals cease or abandon that relationship.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the result of the analysis, organisational silence has significant effect on the performance of selected SMEs in Lagos State. A way to eliminate organisational silence is creating a more and appropriate communication climate at the work place and encourages procedural justice. Procedural justice creates trust and provides favorable contexts for employees to speak up. In organisation which participation level is low, there should be a new organisational system based on greater participation of employees in decision making process. Theoretically, senior managers with different assumptions ought to be able to design different types of organisational system that, overtime, will be successful in eliciting honest upward communication. They must break silence culture and found a voice climate until employees are encouraged to participation. The main cause of organisational silence is fear which should be reduced. Job instability increases this fear sense; fear of deportation that is why employees' job stability and security must be guaranteed.

Manager’s behavior can be an important component for employees to have a voice or silence even in Small and Medium Enterprises. Some personal features of managers are very good for an effective communication that they must enrich these features. For example, they must be able to accept the truth. Managers/owners and supervisors have to create workplace where employees will feel safe to express their views and will be encouraged to offer their ideas and suggestions. If employees perceive their managers and most importantly their supervisors either as they are not interested in hearing the truth or they will attribute their causes of speaking up behavior to their wrong source, they will probably choose to remain silent.

**References**


