BREAKING THE SILENCE: HOW GROUP COHESION AND PROACTIVE PERSONALITY SHAPE VOICE WITHHOLDING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

For years, research on employee silence has painted a familiar picture: dysfunctional relationships stifle voices, preventing employees from speaking up (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014). While this remains true, our study challenges the simplicity of this assumption. We explore how group cohesion—a key indicator of interpersonal relationship quality—doesn't follow a linear path when it comes to silence. Instead, the relationship bends and twists, forming a curvilinear pattern that depends on one crucial factor: proactive personality. Drawing from data collected in a health insurance firm, we reveal a striking dynamic. Silence thrives at both ends of the cohesion spectrum for those with a low proactive personality. Whether relationships are weak or intensely strong, these individuals withdraw, speaking up only at moderate levels of cohesion. But for those that score high in proactive personality, the story flips. These employees find their voices in both extremes, quieting only when relationships settle into a moderate, unremarkable state. These findings challenge the traditional belief that positive relationships always suppress silence while negative ones always fuel it. The paper reveals a more complex truth where the nuances of personality transform how individuals navigate the social fabric of their workplace, proving that silence is not merely a symptom of dysfunction but a reflection of deeper psychological currents.

Keywords

Group Cohesion; Social Harmony; Employee Silence; Employee Voice

Introduction

Silence is rarely empty. In organizations, it carries weight—unspoken ideas, unvoiced concerns, and opportunities lost before they can even surface. When employees withhold their thoughts, the consequences ripple outward, stifling innovation, preventing crises from being averted, and slowly corroding trust between individuals and the organization itself (Graham, 2002; Perlow & Williams, 2003). At its core, employee silence, "the withholding of ideas, suggestions, or concerns about people, products, or processes that might have been communicated verbally to someone inside the organization with the perceived authority to act" (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009, pp. 166–167), is not just an absence of speech but a powerful force that shapes workplaces in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Traditionally, scholars and practitioners alike have blamed dysfunctional relationships for this silence. When relationships deteriorate, when trust erodes, when conflict festers, employees keep their thoughts to themselves. This assumption makes sense. Why risk speaking up if the social landscape feels dangerous? It stands to reason that silence thrives in the shadows of poor relationships (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014).

But what if this assumption is only half the story? What if silence isn't merely a response to bad relationships but also a consequence of good ones? It's easy to imagine a toxic workplace breeding fear-induced silence, but what happens when relationships are too strong? When cohesion is high, when bonds are deep, when teams function as tightly woven collectives, do employees feel free to speak their minds—or do they feel trapped in unspoken expectations of harmony, reluctant to disrupt the delicate balance of the group?

This is where the paradox emerges. The same social fabric that should empower employees to speak up can also weave a silent consensus, a quiet conformity that keeps dissenting voices at bay. High group cohesion can, paradoxically, become a cage where members are so invested in belonging that they hesitate to introduce conflict, challenge dominant perspectives, or suggest unpopular changes. This is the very essence of groupthink, a

phenomenon where "members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Janis, 1991). When relationships are too strong, silence may be just as likely as when they are too weak, begging the question: When do high-quality relationships encourage voice, and when do they suppress it?

Conversely, the assumption that poor relationships always breed silence is equally flawed. True, employees working under dysfunctional conditions, whether due to abusive supervision, lack of trust, or interpersonal conflict, may choose silence as a form of self-preservation (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014). But some employees respond differently. In the face of adversity, some choose to push back. Some speak up not despite poor relationships but because of them. The very dysfunction that might silence one employee may ignite defiance in another (Lebel & Patil, 2018). Thus, the question extends further: When do poor relationships lead to silence, and when do they spark voice?

The answer to both paradoxes may lie within the individual. Specifically, proactive personality, a trait that distinguishes those who take initiative, challenge norms, and persist in the face of adversity (Bateman & Crant, 1993), could be the missing piece of the puzzle. For highly proactive employees, high group cohesion may not be a deterrent to voice but a foundation strong enough to withstand dissent. These individuals may perceive a highly cohesive group as an environment where ideas can be challenged without lasting damage to relationships. When cohesion is low, proactive employees may feel little obligation to preserve relationships that barely exist, leaving them free to voice their concerns without hesitation.

On the other hand, employees low in proactive personality may see both extremes—high and low cohesion—as risky environments for speaking up. In highly cohesive teams, they may fear disrupting harmony, risking social exclusion, or disappointing those they consider close allies. In low-cohesion teams, they may lack the confidence to assert their views in an unpredictable social landscape. Instead, they may find themselves safest in the middle ground, where relationships are neither so strong that they demand conformity nor so weak that they fail to offer any social security at all.

Thus, we propose that group cohesion follows a curvilinear relationship with employee silence. For those high in proactive personality, silence follows an inverted U-shape: they are most likely to speak up at the extremes, where either social bonds can withstand dissent or where relationships are too weak to matter. For those low in proactive personality, the pattern flips into a U-shape: they are most comfortable speaking up at moderate levels of cohesion, where the risks of voicing are neither too great nor too uncertain.

This study makes several key contributions to the field. First, it challenges the simplistic assumption that poor-quality relationships are the primary cause of employee silence. While prior research has emphasized this point (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014), the findings suggest that this is not a universal truth—particularly for individuals high in proactive personality, who may find voice even in adverse conditions.

Second, the paper contributes to the literature on proactive personality by showing that its effects on silence are not as straightforward as previously assumed. While proactive individuals are often thought to be "relatively unconstrained by situational forces" (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 105) and persistently driven to voice their concerns regardless of context (Cunningham & De La Rosa, 2008), our findings suggest that even these individuals are influenced by the social environment. They do not simply speak up in all conditions but instead navigate group cohesion in ways that strategically shape their voice behavior.

Third, the study expands the research on employee silence beyond the well-trodden terrain of leader-member relationships. Much of the existing literature has focused on how silence and voice emerge in response to direct supervisors (Burris, Rodgers, Mannix, Hendron, & Oldroyd, 2009; Holley, Wu, & Avey, 2019; Weiss, Kolbe, Grote, Spahn, & Grande, 2018). While these dyadic relationships are important, they fail to capture the broader social context in which employees operate. Focusing on group cohesion, the study introduces a perspective that recognizes teams as complex, dynamic entities where interpersonal relationships shape silence in ways distinct from the supervisor-employee dynamic.

Finally, the paper contributes to the growing research on group cohesion by identifying a crucial boundary condition: proactive personality. Cohesion is often celebrated as a driving force behind teamwork and enhanced performance. However, the findings challenge this conventional wisdom, revealing that cohesion is not universally advantageous and, in some cases, may even stifle critical dialogue and independent thought. By revealing the curvilinear relationship between cohesion and silence—moderated by proactive personality—the study provides a new lens for understanding when group cohesion becomes a force for voice and when it becomes an enforcer of silence. See Figure 1 for the theoretical model.
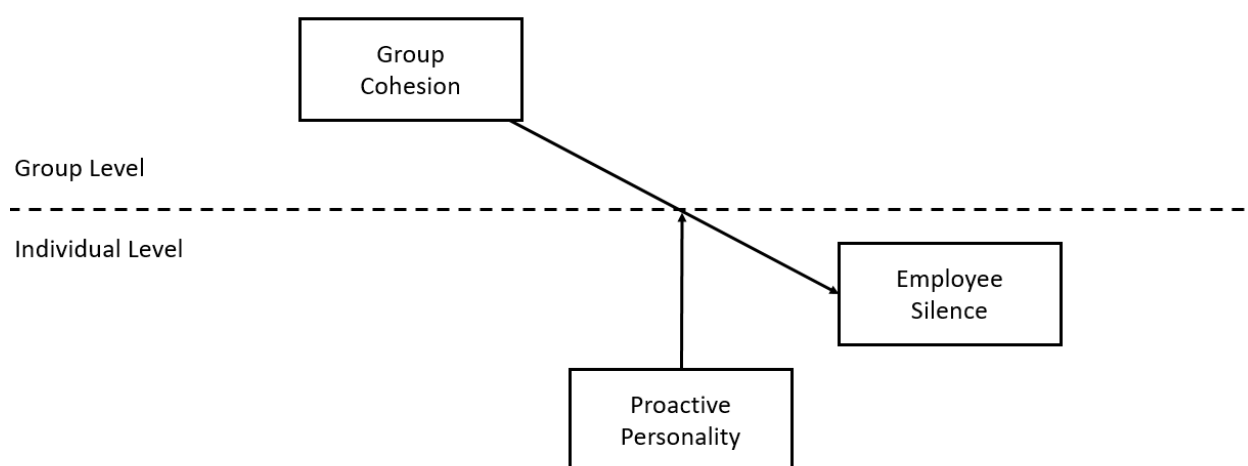
Figure 1. Model Depicting the Quadratic by Linear Effect of Cohesion on Employee Voice

Theory and Hypotheses

Employee Silence: A Deliberate Choice

Silence is often mistaken for absence—absence of thought, absence of insight, absence of concern. But in organizations, silence is rarely empty. It is a decision, an intentional withholding of ideas, observations, or warnings that might have shaped the course of work, improved processes, or even prevented disaster. Pinder and Harlos (2001) describe employee silence as more than just a passive lack of voice; it is a calculated choice to suppress information that could be beneficial to the organization. Employees do not simply fail to speak—they weigh their options, gauge their environment, and, in many cases, decide that speaking up is not worth the risk.

But how does an employee arrive at this moment of hesitation? Silence does not emerge in a vacuum. Before an individual chooses to withhold their voice, they must first recognize an issue, form thoughts on it, and then find themselves standing at a crossroads: to voice or to remain silent (Miceli et al., 2008). What makes this moment particularly complex is that silence is not always about fear. Silence is strategic, guided by social cues, cultural norms, and unwritten rules (Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Silence can be an act of self-preservation and a safeguard against conflict.

When employees hold back their insights, innovation stagnates, small issues snowball into larger crises, and disengagement takes root (Detert & Burris, 2007; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Given these risks, organizations should, in theory, work tirelessly to eliminate the conditions that foster silence. Indeed, research suggests that silence is less prevalent in workplaces that promote positive climates, benevolence, and prosocial behavior (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). And yet, silence persists. Despite well-intentioned leadership and policies designed to encourage openness, employees routinely calculate the risks of speaking up and choose to keep their thoughts to themselves (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008).

Much of the existing literature has focused on leadership, psychological safety, and organizational culture as drivers of silence. However, an often-overlooked yet crucial factor is the role of group cohesion—the glue that binds teams together and dictates how individuals interact with one another. If employees experience their work environment through the lens of their social relationships, their silence or voice decisions are just as likely to be influenced by their peers as by their leaders. Cohesion, as we explore below, is a force that can be both liberating and constraining, encouraging some employees to speak up while pressuring others to stay quiet.

The Paradox of Group Cohesion

Hirschman (1970) was among the first to recognize that speaking up is not just about sharing ideas—it carries real interpersonal risks. Van Dyne, Cummings, and Parks (1995) built upon this idea, arguing that voice is inherently challenging because it can disrupt relationships, introduce tension, or provoke retaliation. Employees who choose to speak must consider whether their words will strengthen or weaken their social standing. These risks exist at both extremes of the cohesion spectrum, albeit for different reasons.

In tightly knit, highly cohesive teams, the expectation is that members will support and trust one another. Psychological safety should, in theory, be high, making voice easier. However, cohesion also comes with a cost—strong social bonds mean that employees have much to lose if they disrupt the group's harmony. Dissenting views, critical feedback, or unpopular opinions risk breaking the unspoken agreement that team members will protect one another's sense of belonging. The greater the cohesion, the greater the pressure to conform, creating an environment where silence becomes an act of preservation rather than disengagement.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, low-cohesion teams lack the deep interpersonal connections that might otherwise provide a sense of safety. In these settings, trust is minimal, and employees may view speaking up as a dangerous gamble—one that might make them an easy target for criticism or exclusion. Yet, low cohesion can also be paradoxically freeing. If social bonds are weak to begin with, there may be little reason to fear their deterioration. In such cases, speaking up carries no greater risk than staying silent.

This dual nature of cohesion—its ability to both stifle and encourage voice—complicates the traditional assumption that stronger relationships always create more open communication. Instead, cohesion functions as a social signal, providing employees with information about how much they stand to lose or gain by speaking up. The clearer the social stakes, the more predictable the behavior. It is in the ambiguous middle ground—where cohesion is neither strong nor weak—that employees may struggle the most to determine whether silence or voice is the safer path. However, cohesion alone does not determine this choice; individual differences, particularly in proactive personality, play a defining role in shaping how employees interpret these social cues.

The Interaction Between Cohesion and Silence When Proactivity Is High

Proactive employees are not content with the status quo. Defined as individuals with a stable disposition toward initiating change (Bateman & Crant, 1993), proactive employees are the ones who challenge norms, seek opportunities for improvement, and persist in the face of obstacles. They consistently demonstrate higher task performance, stronger learning behaviors, and greater engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors (Fuller & Marler, 2009). More importantly, they believe they can control their circumstances, exhibiting a high internal locus of control (Parker et al., 2010).

For proactive individuals, silence is rarely the default response, regardless of cohesion. When cohesion is low, proactive employees view this not as a deterrent but an invitation to take charge. In the absence of strong social bonds, they see an opportunity to reshape their environment, to impose structure where it is lacking, and to create positive change through their actions. Silence, to them, represents inaction—a failure to assert control.

When cohesion is high, proactive employees interpret this not as a constraint but an enabler. Rather than viewing strong social ties as a reason to remain silent, they see them as a foundation upon which they can challenge ideas without jeopardizing relationships. From a social identity perspective, individuals are motivated to maintain and enhance their self-worth (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Proactive employees leverage this sense of belonging to reinforce their influence, believing that their contributions will ultimately serve the collective good.

Thus, for proactive individuals, the relationship between cohesion and silence follows an inverted U-shape: silence is lowest at both high and low levels of cohesion.

Hypothesis 1a: When proactive personality is high, the curvilinear relationship between group cohesion and employee silence will take the form of an inverted U-shape, such that silence will be lowest under conditions of both high and low group cohesion.

The Interaction Between Cohesion and Silence When Proactivity Is Low

For individuals low in proactive personality, the dynamics of cohesion and silence take a different course. These individuals are more risk-averse, less likely to take initiative, and more inclined to prioritize self-preservation over challenging the status quo.

When cohesion is low, these individuals experience the workplace as uncertain, even hostile. Lacking a strong sense of efficacy, they do not see themselves as change agents. They retreat into silence, believing that voicing concerns will only expose them to unnecessary risk.

When cohesion is high, a different form of silence emerges. Here, the absence of voice is not about fear but about deferring responsibility. In a group that already seems to function well, low-proactivity employees assume that others will handle problems and make necessary decisions. They do not feel personally compelled to intervene, and without the same internal drive as proactive individuals, they choose silence over engagement.

Unlike their proactive counterparts, these individuals exhibit a U-shaped relationship between cohesion and silence: silence is highest at both extremes, with moderate cohesion providing the safest space for participation.

Hypothesis 1b: When proactive personality is low, the curvilinear relationship between group cohesion and employee silence will take the form of a U-shape, such that silence will be highest under conditions of both high and low group cohesion.

Methods

Organizational Setting and Participants

The study drew its sample from a not-for-profit insurance provider in the eastern United States, an organization responsible for serving approximately 400,000 members. Employees across a diverse array of departments—customer service, marketing, sales, human resources, and IT—were invited to participate. With the support of human resource executives, 352 employees were contacted via email, ensuring voluntary participation and guaranteeing confidentiality. Of those invited, 246 employees responded, yielding a participation rate of 70%. A subsequent comparison between respondents and non-respondents on key variables, such as team size and department, revealed no systematic differences, suggesting a representative sample.

To maintain the integrity of the study's focus on work groups, 42 individuals were excluded from the final analysis following established research conventions, which define a work group as consisting of a supervisor and at least two other members (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). This refinement resulted in a final sample of 204 employees distributed across 64 distinct groups, producing an effective response rate of 58%.

The composition of these teams varied, with group sizes ranging from 2 to 9 members, averaging 4 per team. A majority of the participants were female (59%), while supervisors were predominantly male (63%). The demographic profile of respondents reflected a largely homogenous workforce, with 90% identifying as white. Additionally, 82.7% of participants reported holding at least a bachelor's degree. Notably, within each team, an average of 80% of members contributed data on the group-level variables of interest, ensuring robust representation within the study.

Measures

Unless otherwise specified, all survey items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). All responses were self-reported.

Group Cohesion was conceptualized as a level-two variable, assessed using the six-item scale developed by Podsakoff and MacKenzie (1994). This scale captures the strength of interpersonal bonds within teams. Sample items included, "There is a great deal of trust among members of my team" and "The members of my team regard each other as friends." Given that group cohesion is a shared team perception, we applied Chan's (1998) consensus model, assuming a high degree of agreement across group members' perceptions (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Aggregation to the group level was supported by an interrater agreement index $r_{wg(j)}$ of .90, surpassing the commonly accepted threshold of .70 for sufficient within-group consistency (Totterdell, 2000). Additionally, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was .88, further confirming reliability, while Cronbach's alpha for the group-level measure was .89.

Proactive Personality was assessed using the ten-item scale developed by Seibert, Crant, and Kraimer (1999), which captures an individual's tendency to take initiative and drive change. Sample statements included "Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change" and "I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition." The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .83.

Employee silence was measured using a five-item scale adapted from Brinsfield (2013), designed to capture the deliberate withholding of information that could impact organizational functioning. Example items included, "In general, I withhold ideas from my boss for changing inefficient work policies," "I do not speak up about difficulties caused by the way managers and subordinates interact," and "I keep quiet in group meetings about problems with daily routines that hamper performance." The scale exhibited high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .81.

Several control variables were incorporated into the analysis, as prior research suggests they may influence employee voice behaviors and, by extension, employee silence. Specifically, we accounted for an individual's tenure within the organization, as longer tenure is associated with greater familiarity with group norms, deeper integration into organizational culture, and stronger interpersonal connections—all factors that could influence both group cohesion and voice behaviors (Edmondson, 1999).

Additionally, gender was controlled for due to established research indicating that men and women may engage in voice behaviors at different rates and that they place varying degrees of importance on interpersonal relationships (Blau, 1977). Given the potential for gender-based stereotypes to influence both workplace interactions and silence behaviors, its inclusion as a control variable ensures a more precise understanding of the key relationships in our study.

Analysis

The paper follows a well-established approach in team research in exploring how team dynamics shape individual behavior. It investigates the influence of higher-level factors—such as group cohesion—on employee silence. Because individuals within the same team do not operate in isolation, their behaviors and perceptions are interwoven, making it essential to account for the inherent interdependence within teams (Mathieu & Chen, 2011).

Ignoring this nested structure would be like analyzing puzzle pieces separately without considering how they fit together.

The study employs multilevel modeling to unravel these complex relationships, a statistical technique designed to handle hierarchical data and distinguish between individual and team-level effects (Hox, 2010; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Taking careful steps to refine our analysis. Team-level variables, such as group cohesion, were grand mean centered, ensuring that our interpretations reflected meaningful deviations rather than arbitrary fluctuations (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). At the same time, individual-level traits, like proactive personality, were group-mean centered, allowing personal tendencies to be isolated from broader team influences.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
Level 1 - within team						
1. Gender	0.41	0.49	-			
2. Tenure	10.34	7.86	-.11	-		
3. Proactive Personality	5.33	0.69	-.06	-.17*	(.83)	
4. Employee Silence	2.53	0.96	.04	.23**	-.31**	(.81)
Level 2 - between team						
1. Group Cohesion	5.42	0.67	(.88)			

Estimated correlations from two-level model of relevant study variables.
Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

All analyses were conducted using SAS, a powerful tool adept at handling the complexities of multilevel data. Unlike traditional statistical techniques, such as repeated-measures ANOVA, which assumes uniform sample sizes, multilevel modeling embraces the natural variations in team compositions (Hox, 2010). This flexibility was particularly important as the number of individuals nested within each team varied.
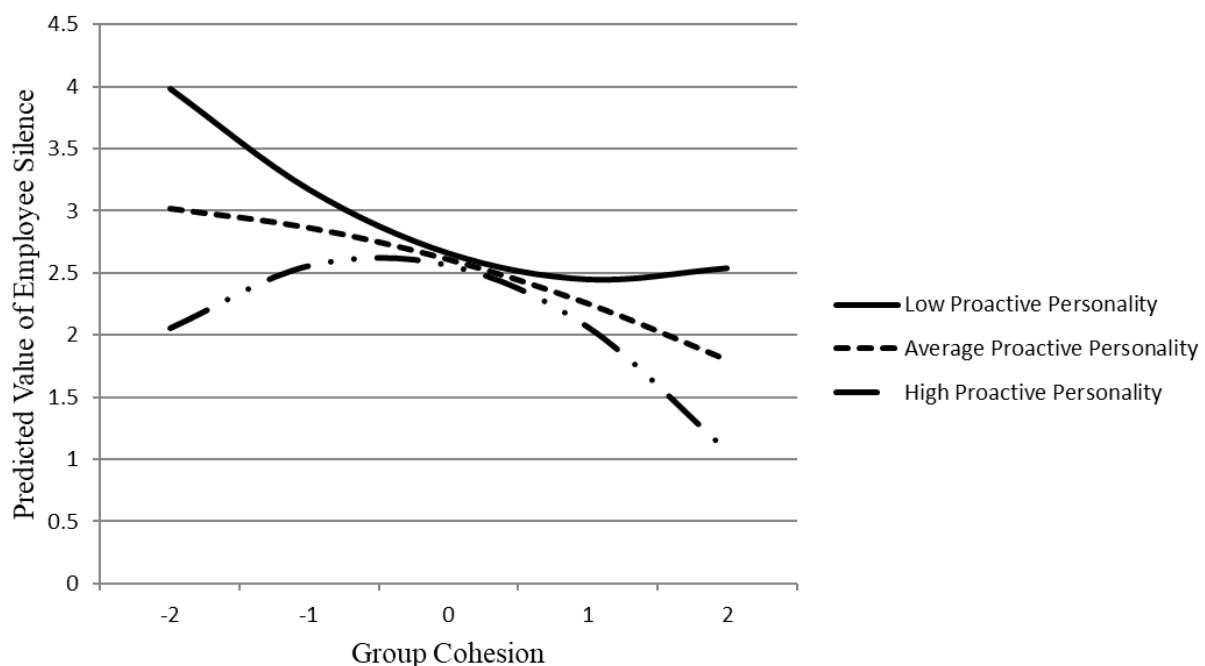

Figure 2. Quadratic by Linear Interaction Effect

Table 1 reports the study variables' means, standard deviations, and correlations. Following recommendations (e.g. Le, Oh, Robbins, Ilies, Holland, & Westrick, 2011), hierarchical polynomial regression analyses was used to test the hypotheses. Predictors were entered into the regression equation at five hierarchical steps, in the following order: (a) the control variables, (b) group cohesion, (c) quadratic term of group cohesion-squared, (d) the moderator variable proactive personality and the interactions between proactive personality and group cohesion, and (e) the interactions between proactive personality and the quadratic term group cohesion-squared. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

	M1		M2		M3		M4		M5	
DV = Employee Silence	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Constant	2.61***	.09	2.54***	.09	2.57***	.11	2.57***	.11	2.57***	.11
Gender	.15	.22	.14	.22	.14	.22	.12	.21	.09	.19
Tenure	.04**	.01	.04**	.01	.04**	.01	.03*	.01	.03*	.01
Group Cohesion			-.29**	.09	-.33**	.12	-.33**	.12	-.33**	.12
Group Cohesion²					-.04	.07	-.04	.07	-.05	.07
Proactive Personality							-.38*	.16	-.08	.18
GC x PP							.23	.17	.01	.18
GC² x PP									-.43**	.15
R²	.21		.34		.34		.39		.43	
R² Change			.13				.05		.04	

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 2. Hierarchical Multilevel Analyses Predicting Employee Silence

Hypothesis 1a stated that when proactive personality is high, the curvilinear relationship between group cohesion, and employee silence will be an inverted u-shape such that employee silence will be lowest under conditions of high, and low group cohesion, while Hypothesis 1b suggested that proactive personality is low, the curvilinear relationship between group cohesion, and employee silence will be a u-shape such that employee silence will highest under conditions of high, and low group cohesion. To test this hypothesis, we accessed the significance of our quadratic by linear interaction term in predicting employee silence (Model 5). The relationship was significant (b = -.43, SE = .15, p < .01). Next, the quadratic by linear interaction slope was plotted for both low (-1 SD above the mean), and high (+1 SD above the mean) proactive personality as depicted in Figure 2.

A simple slope analysis was conducted using the Johnson-Neyman Technique and tools developed by Miller, Stromeyer, & Schwieterman (2013) to further interpret the nature of this cross-level interaction. The standard deviation was used to identify employees as either low (one standard deviation below the mean) or high (one standard deviation above the mean) in proactive personality at the within-team individual level (i.e. between-person variable). The simple slope analysis revealed that the relationship between group cohesion and employee silence when proactive personality was low (one standard deviation below the mean) was significant when group cohesion was two standard deviations below the mean (β = -1.01, p < .05), one standard deviation below the mean (β = -.69, p < .05), and when group cohesion was at the mean (β = -.38, p < .05). However, this relationship was not significant above the mean score of group cohesion. For high proactive personality, the relationship between group cohesion, and employee silence was significant for group cohesion scores two standard deviations below the mean (β = .79, p < .05), one standard deviation above the mean (β = -.78, p < .05), and two standard deviations above the mean (β = -1.31, p < .05). Results of the simple slope analysis are shown in Table 3.

	β				
Moderator	X (2 SD low)	X (1 SD low)	X (mean)	X (1 SD high)	X (2 SD high)
Low Proactive	-1.01*	-.69*	-.38*	-.06	.25
High Proactive	0.79*	.27	-.26	-.78*	-1.31*

Note. X = Group Cohesion. *p < .05.

Table 3. Tests of Simple Slopes

Discussion

Workplaces thrive on communication—on the free exchange of ideas, concerns, and feedback. But silence, the absence of voice, often speaks just as loudly. These findings suggest that for those high in proactive personality, the relationship between group cohesion and silence follows an inverted U-shape—they are least likely to remain silent when cohesion is either very low or very high. At low levels, these individuals see an opening, a chance to introduce change in an unstructured environment. At high levels, they feel safe enough to voice concerns without fear of damaging relationships. In contrast, for those low in proactive personality, the pattern reverses, forming a U-shape—silence peaks when cohesion is at its weakest and, intriguingly, shows signs of rising again when cohesion is high. These individuals are hesitant to speak up in fragmented teams, but even when cohesion is strong, they do not necessarily feel emboldened to voice their thoughts.

The results illustrate that personality dictates how people interpret the social world around them. Highly proactive individuals push forward in either chaos or harmony, while their less proactive counterparts remain silent

when faced with uncertainty or, paradoxically, when relationships are too tightly woven. This finding has important implications.

One of the key contributions of this study is its challenge to the long-standing assumption that better relationships always mean less silence. Traditional research on workplace communication often assumes a linear connection—strong relationships should encourage openness, while poor ones should foster withdrawal. But reality is not that simple. The effect of group cohesion on silence is far from universal; it hinges on how individuals interpret and react to their social environment.

For proactive employees, the old rulebook does not apply. While past research suggests that negative relationships drive people into silence, our study shows that proactive individuals do not necessarily retreat when relationships are weak. These individuals are not deterred by weak relationships; they thrive on the challenge, using voice as a tool to shape their environment.

At the other end of the spectrum, high cohesion provides a different kind of freedom—a foundation of trust and security that allows proactive employees to challenge the status quo without fearing retribution. In this scenario, cohesion is not a constraint but an enabler; it does not silence but strengthens their voice.

For less proactive employees, however, the story is different. While previous research has assumed that high relationship quality encourages all employees to speak up, our findings suggest otherwise. For them, strong social bonds are not necessarily an invitation to voice concerns but rather a reason to avoid disrupting group harmony. While it was not statistically significant within our sample, the slight upward curve in silence at very high cohesion levels for low proactive individuals suggests that if cohesion were measured at even higher levels, we might observe an increase in silence driven by a growing fear of disrupting group unity. This phenomenon presents an intriguing area for future exploration.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

No study is without limitations, and ours is no exception. One key constraint is that our data were collected cross-sectionally, meaning we cannot draw definitive causal conclusions about how group cohesion and proactive personality influence silence over time. Future research should introduce temporal separation between the predictor and outcome variables, allowing researchers to examine whether shifts in cohesion lead to corresponding shifts in silence, providing stronger evidence for causality.

Another limitation is that we focused exclusively on employee silence, without directly measuring employee voice. While silence is meaningful on its own, it exists in a delicate balance with voice—the decision not to speak is just as important as the choice to do so. Future research could integrate supervisor-reported measures of voice to determine whether managers perceive these patterns in the same way employees do. Additionally, researchers could explore how cohesion influences different types of silence, such as defensive silence (withholding ideas out of fear) versus prosocial silence (withholding ideas to benefit the group).

Another important avenue for research involves isolating relationship strength as a standalone construct. While our study measures cohesion as a broad social construct, not all strong relationships function the same way. Strong but negative relationships may suppress voice differently than weak but neutral ones. Future research should examine relationship strength separately from cohesion to determine how different qualities of interpersonal connections shape silence.

While proactive personality plays a key role in shaping silence, it is possible that prosocial motivation, approach/avoidance tendencies, and self-monitoring could act as additional moderators. For instance, employees high in prosocial motivation may respond to weak cohesion differently than those with a more self-focused orientation. Similarly, avoidance-oriented individuals may choose silence even when cohesion is high, preferring to minimize personal risk at all costs.

Finally, leadership matters, and much of the existing literature on silence and voice focuses on the dyadic relationship between employees and their supervisors. Future studies could explore whether leader-member exchange (LMX) exhibits a similar curvilinear effect on employee silence. Additionally, the interaction between group cohesion and LMX could provide deeper insight into how team dynamics and leadership styles work together—or against each other—to shape workplace communication.

Conclusion

At its core, this study challenges the assumption that strong interpersonal bonds always encourage open communication. By integrating insights from both voice and silence research, we reveal that proactive personality fundamentally alters the way employees experience their social environments. Some see weak cohesion as a challenge to overcome, while others see it as a reason to withdraw. Some view strong cohesion as a license to speak freely, while others fear rocking the boat. These findings highlight the subjective nature of workplace experiences—the same environment does not mean the same thing to everyone. Employees do not passively react to their relationships; they filter them through the lens of their own personalities, motivations, and identities. Whether through leadership interventions, tailored team structures, or initiatives designed to encourage self-

efficacy, the goal should not simply be to strengthen cohesion—but to ensure that all employees, regardless of personality, feel empowered to speak.

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