# Exploring the Association between Weak Leadership and Employees' Silence

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of the study is to assess the association between weak leadership behaviors and employees' silence. The study is conducted in the 9 public sectors in the three zones of Amhara Regional State (Central Gondar, West Gondar and South Gondar). 400 questionnaires were distributed and 320 questionnaires were collected back. To measure the extent of employees' perception of weak leadership behaviors and employees' silence in the workplace, two adapted instruments were used and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The main finding indicates that most employees (60%) prefer to be silent in the organization. A significant number of employees (59%) perceived weak leadership behaviors in their organization leaders. The result also shows that the degree of influence of weak leadership on the extent of employees' silence in their organization is only 8.9% at p value of 0.03.*

*Keywords:* *Weak, Weak Leadership, Silence, Employees Silence*

## INTRODUCTION

Most employees in many organizations feel reluctant to raise issues or voice their concerns to their organization and withhold information. This withholding of information behavior of employees might affect the organizations' decision making and error-correction measures (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tamuz, 2001). According to Ryan & Oestreich,( 1991) employees are often do not share information that could be interpreted as negative. Many researchers raise different reasons for employees' silence. For example, According to (Oppel, 2002) the culture of intimidation might lead employees' feel not confident enough to raise these issues. Thus, this study in particular, tries to assess how employees' perceptions of weak leadership influence the degree of employees' silence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership behavior that violates the rightful and lawful, justifiable and interests of the organization or the employees are destructive (Sackett & DeVore, 2001).weak leadership is a repeated and weak behavior of a manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization and employees. According to Ståle, Einarsen, et al, (2007), weak leadership undermines and sabotages the goals, tasks, resources, and the effectiveness, of the organization, and a s well as, the motivation, well-being or satisfaction of employees. Week leadership behavior might be intended to cause to harm, as a result of thoughtlessness, insensitivity, or lack of competence (Ma, Karri, & Chittipeddi, 2004). Weak leadership behaviors have two destructive directions, one directed toward subordinates and the other behaviors directed toward the organization. Destructive actions directed towards the organization are such as, working on goals other than those defined by the organization, (Lipman-Blumen's, 2005), and destructive actions that is targeted at subordinates, are behaviors, such as, "abusive" (Tepper, 2000). A supervisor may fail to protect the welfare of subordinates, in a working environment or may fail to provide the subordinates with valuable information or feedback (Neuman and Baron, 2005).

According to S. Einarsen et al. (2007), leaders may act poorly on one dimension, while behaving constructively on the other. A leader who acts in accordance with the goals of the organization may still harass subordinates. A manager who acts against to the legitimate goals of the organization may be supportive of the interest of subordinates (ibid).

The study conducted by Lombardo & McCall, (1984), finds that among 73 managers, 74% of them had experienced intolerable or destructive behaviors. Namie & Namie, (2000), also found that 89% of those experiencing bullying into work perceived leaders as the main destructive. Studies like these clearly document that weak leaders may actively behave in a destructive manner towards subordinates. Sabotage, corruption, and theft behaviors among managers have been also documented (Keller man, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). In this study, weak leadership behavior is treated in terms of (*Machiavellian, Abusive, Narcissism, and Authoritarian*).

Machiavellian behavior:- this weak leadership behavior is adapted from Nicolo Machiavelli, (1523) book, "Prince". Machiavellian leader always wears a mask and does not show his truer self. Machiavellian leader acts against his promise; he guards himself, and strives to make everyone recognize him in his actions greatness. He believes to be feared is much safer than loved (Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, 1979).

Abusive behavior: - Abusive leadership is the hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior of leaders which does not include physical abuse (Tepper, (2000). Abusive Leader forced to act aggressively in order to achieve some other goal. He exercises power to serve his own interest by dominating to achieve what he wants, manipulates others to gain his purpose and wants to win at any cost (Baron & Neuman, 1998).

Narcissistic behavior: - Narcissistic leader is a person that requires excessive admiration, has a grandiose sense of self-importance, and who is ignorant (Judge, and Robins, 2007). He likes to be the center of attention. He spends a lot of time look at himself in the mirror a lot. He excessively dreams and considers himself a person of many talents (ibid). According to Fischman & Ortiz, (2002b), narcissism in the organization manifests of in the form of focusing on lowering the others by being aggressive, and directed towards getting power through the manipulation of relations with other people.

Authoritarian behavior: Authoritarian leader asserts absolute authority and control over subordinates and demands unquestionable obedience from subordinates (Blake, & Mouton, 1985). He has little or no allowance for cooperation or collaboration. Authoritarian leader expects people to do what they are told without question or debate. When something goes wrong he tends to focus on who is to blame rather than concentrate on exactly what is wrong and how to prevent it. Authoritarian leader is intolerant of what he sees as dissent (ibid).

Employees' Silence: - Employees' silence is intentionally withholding information on issues related to the job or workplace (Çakıcı, Ayşehan, 2007; Pinder, &Karen, 2001). Employees often have ideas, information, and opinions to improve work in organizations. Instead of exercising to speak up and express their ideas, information, and opinions; often employees engage in withholding their ideas, information, and opinions (Botero Isabel C. et.al, 2003). According to Morrison and Milliken, (2000), Employees' silence can be either Acquiescent or Defensive or Pro-Social motives. These aspects of employees' silence:

Acquiescent Silence: Acquiescent Silence is disengaged behavior based on resignation. It is a silence of employees when they are aware of available alternatives (options) to change or improve the situation in the organization, but they feel reluctance to speak up (Pinder, Craig C.Karen P. Harlos, 2001). Employees' Acquiescent silence means they are resigned from the current situation and are unwillingness to speak up, to engage, or to attempt changing the situation, or believe that they do not make a difference, and they disengage and do not contribute ideas or suggestions to the organization (Ibid).

Acquiescent silence may also mean employees' submission or deeply felt acceptance of organizational circumstances and reflects "a taken-for-granted" notion of the situation and limited awareness of the existence of other alternatives (Pinder, Craig C.Karen P. Harlos, 2001). It is also mean intentionally passive behavior (Botero Isabel C. et.al, 2003).

Defensive Silence:  Defensive Silence is self-protective behavior based on fear.  According to Schlenker, and Michael,(1989), It is proactive and intentional behavior of withholding  relevant information, ideas, or opinions, because of fear and for the sake of self-protection from external threats. It is a conscious decision to withhold ideas, information and opinions (Pinder,& Karen,2001). Athanassiades (1973) suggests that it is a silence in a form of instrumental, self-protective behavior.  Employees most likely filter information that they convey upward, when they lack trust in their supervisor (Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974).

As Sprague & Ruud, (1988) suggested employees may withhold information in order to never n create conflict with superiors or "rock the boat", because superiors are often intolerant of criticism and dissent Saunders, et.al, (1992), also argues that employees' willingness to speak up work-related concerns and suggestions to their superiors depended on how approachable and responsive they perceived their supervisors to be. Perceived organizational support, norms, and the quality of one's relationship his/her senior management lead employees to be silence (Ashford et al., 1998).

Pro-social Silence: Pro-social Silence is employees' silence that is proactive and other-oriented, based on altruism and cooperation.  According to, Botero Isabel C. et.al, (2003), It is the conscious decision to withhold information, and suggestions based on full awareness and consideration of other alternatives. It is employees' withholding work-related opinion information, with the objective of benefiting other people or the organization. It is a silence motive intended to protect the organization and another individual (Brinsfield, Chad, 2009).

### Weak Leadership and Employees' Silence

There are various reasons, why people in organizations make the decision to be silent (Morrison and Milliken (2003).One reason may be the "mum effect", individuals have a general reluctance to convey negative information because of the discomfort associated with being the conveyor of bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970). Powerful norms and defensive routines within organizations often make employees to be silence what they know (Argyris, 1977). Lack of experience or working in lower levels affecting employee silence (Milliken et al, 2003); organizational norms (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003); non-existence of a participative organization culture (Huang et al, 2005); and hierarchical structuring and lack of *feedback* (Morrison and Milliken, 2000),  are some of the organizational factors causing employee silence.

Despite the numerous researches mentioned above and others factors suggested that leads employees often feel uncomfortable raising issues, problems and concerns to their superiors, there is much that we do not know about why people often remain silent. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to see the relationship between weak leadership behavior and employees' silence.

## RESEARCH METHODS

To address the objective of the study quantitative approach was employed.  The study is designed to conduct a descriptive survey and explanatory design. The subjects of the study are employees and lower managers (supervisors) of zonal level public sectors, (Education, Health and Agriculture) in the three zones i.e. Central Gondar, West Gondar and South Gondar**.**  The target population of the study is 826 employees; of the three public sectors in the three zones (Amhara region civil service annual report, 2018). Sample size of the study was 400 participants to represent the target population. The sample is proportionally distributed to the three zonal public offices based on their total employee size. At the end only 320 useable questionnaires were able to be collected. Two instruments were used to measure the characteristics of weak leadership and employees' silence in the organization. 5 Point Likert Rating Scale, ranging from 1 *for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree,* is used for rating by the respondents. However, to simplify the data analysis processes strongly disagree and *disagree* and as well as, *strongly agree and agree* were combined.

Perception of weak leadership behavior was measured by a research instrument adapted from  instruments used by research scholars ( Kellerman, B., 2004; and S. Einarsen et al., 2007). This instrument has 17 items.

Each of the dimensions has the following number of questions: *Machiavelli behavior (4); Abusive behavior (5); narcissistic behavior (3); and Authoritarian behavior (5).* The *Validity Test* of the instrument is conducted by means of Factor Analysis. All the 17 items are factor analyzed. Principal components analysis of the test reveals the presence of 7 components with Eigen values exceeding 1.00 which are obtained using the Varimax Rotation Algorithm having a cumulative percentage of 69.7 percent. The *Reliability test* of this instrument is checked by Cronbach's Alpha, and the result is found to be.749.

To measure the extent of *employees' silence,* research instrument is adapted from the instrument developed by Morrison & Milliken (2003). This instrument has 14 items. Likert 5 Point Rating Scale, ranging from *1=not at all, 5= always* is used. The validity of the instrument is tested by means of Factor Analysis. All 14 items were factor analyzed. The Principal components analysis reveals the presence of 5 components with Eigen values greater than1.00 which were obtained using the Varimax Rotation Algorithm having a commutative percentage of 59.7 percent. The Reliability test of the *employees' silence* instrument is conducted by means of Cranach's Alpha, and the result of the test show 0.694.

Therefore, both instruments used to measure both variables are above the cut point, 0.5 for Factor analysis, and 0.6 for reliability test.

## RESULT AND DATA ANALYSIS

As Table 3, below reveals the information obtained from the data analysis shows that 189(60%) of respondents confirms their perception of weak leadership behavior in their organization. The other 81(25 %) did not dare to voice their perception, while the remaining 49(15%) of respondents did not perceive any weak leadership behavior in their sector.

Even when we see the extent of respondents' perception prevalence among the elements of weak leadership behaviors that is, Machiavellian behavior 193 (60%) Abusive behavior 175 (55%) Narcissistic behavior 200(63%) and Authoritarian behavior 196(61%) are perceived.

Regarding employees' silence, 189 (59%) of the respondents confirm their perception of withholding employees' concerns, or prefer to be silent. The other 84 (26%) of respondents remains indifferent to admit their perception. Only 46 (15%) of the respondents admitted their perception about employees speak up or voice their concern.

In terms of each type of silence this study shows that Acquiescent Silence 196(61%), Defensive Silence 186(58%), and Pro-social Silence 189 (59%) of respondents perceived their prevalence.

From this study we can understand that many of the leaders of the subject government organizations are perceived as experience weak leadership behaviors and most employees are withholding information, issues or their concerns.

Table 3.1: Frequency Distribution of Weak Leadership Behavior and Employees' Silence

| | Machiavellian behavior | | Abusive behavior | | Narcissistic behavior | | Authoritarian behavior | | Weak leadership | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | f | % | f | % | F | % | f | % | F | % | | | | |
| 1 | 53 | 17 | 39 | 12 | 39 | 12 | 56 | 18 | 49 | 15 | | | | |
| 2 | 74 | 23 | 105 | 33 | 70 | 22 | 67 | 21 | 81 | 25 | | | | |
| 3 | 193 | 60 | 175 | 55 | 200 | 63 | 196 | 61 | 189 | 60 | | | | |
| | Acquiescent Silence | | Defensive Silence | | Pro-social Silence | | Employees Silence | | | | | | | | |
| | f | % | f | % | F | % | F | % | | | | | | |
| 1 | 42 | 14 | 42 | 14 | 49 | 16 | 46 | 15 | | | | | | |
| 2 | 81 | 25 | 91 | 28 | 81 | 25 | 84 | 26 | | | | | | |
| 3 | 196 | 61 | 186 | 58 | 189 | 59 | 189 | 59 | | | | | | |

1: Disagree, 2: Neutral, 3: Agree

## Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 4, weak leadership has positive and statistically significant association with employees' silence (r=.314), Pro-social Silence (r=.368) at (p<0.01). ), but has statistically insignificant association with Acquiescent Silence and Defensive Silence. On the other hand *Abusive behavior* (r=.214) at (p < .05) significantly related to Pro-social Silence (r=.239), (p < .05). Moreover, Defensive Silence has no significant association with *Machiavellian behavior*, Abusive behavior and *Narcissistic behavior* dimensions of weak leadership.

The results from Table 4 also reveal that the relationship with dimensions of weak leadership behavior, Narcissistic behavior (r=316) with employees silence and (r=, 378) at (p<0.01), level with Pro-social Silence. Authoritarian behavior (r=.296) at (p<0.01) with employees silence, Defensive Silence(r=.267) at (p<0.05) and with Pro-social Silence(r=.299) at (p<0.01), But Machiavellian behavior does not have significant association with employees silence and its dimensions.

Table 3.2: Correlation between Weak Leadership Behavior and Employees Silence Variable

| | Employees silence | Acquiescent Silence | Defensive Silence | Pro-social Silence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Weak Leadership | .314** | .143 | .207 | .368** |
| Machiavellian behavior | .114 | .121 | -.052 | .182 |
| Abusive behavior | .214* | .088 | .163 | .239* |
| Narcissistic behavior | .316** | .157 | .198 | .378** |
| Authoritarian behavior | .296** | .124 | .267* | .299** |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Variance Explained in Employees Silence by Weak Leadership

Results of the regression analysis in Table 5 shows that ($R^2$ = .099, adjusted $R^2$ = .089) at P < .003. That is, only *9 percent* variance of the current level of employees' silence is accounted for the manifestation of weak leadership. The stepwise algorithm chooses Narcissistic behavior (in terms of Weak leadership variables) .The result of the *Beta analysis* in Table 5 also reveals that Narcissistic behavior, emerged as the first significant predictor ($\beta$ =.302, P < .004).

Table 3.3: Regression Analysis and Beta Analysis

| Model | R | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .314 | .099 | .089 | .003ª |

Table 3.4: Coefficients of the Beta Analysis

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | Standardized Coefficients | T | Sig. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| Narcissistic behavior | .183 | .062 | .302 | 2.959 | .004 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), weak leadership; b. Dependent Variable: employees' silence

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study reveal that most employees are reluctant to speak, or voice their concern and opinion in the work place. All type of silences, that is, Acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and pro-social silences are practiced by the study group.

At the same time, employees perceived the manifestation of weak leadership behavior in their organization. Even though there is a significant association between the weak leadership behavior and employees' silence, the extent of influence exert on employees' withholdings of information is minimum. The study indicates there may be other managerial problems that lead employees to withhold information. Consequently, it is the responsibility of the organizations to take necessary actions i.e. diagnostics procedures for the identification negative leadership behavior to mitigate problems. On the other side, the organizations should formulate policies and procedures preemptive to the exposure of employees to unwanted behaviors.

This research suggests the development of organizational interventions to increase levels of employee coping and well-being so that leaders and employees together work for organizational learning and success of the organizations.

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