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Proposal of a Method of Learning Strategic Silence to Improve the Effectiveness of Employee Voice

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly recognize the importance of utilizing employees' proactive suggestions to promote innovation. However, in practice, statements that challenge the status quo often carry the risk of negative evaluation from managers, discouraging employees from speaking up. This study focuses on the potential of "strategic silence"—a deliberate choice to withhold voice depending on contextual relevance—as a means of enhancing managerial evaluation. We developed a learning method based on an experiential learning model, incorporating two key functions: the ability to recognize appropriate timing and the ability to self-regulate to avoid excessive silence. A field intervention was conducted to evaluate its effectiveness. Results demonstrated that the method supported the execution of strategic silence and significantly improved employees' self-efficacy. Whereas the short-term effect on employee voice outcomes was not statistically significant, participants reported an increased belief that strategic silence could enhance the impact of their voice. Notably, those who perceived improvements in the effectiveness of their voice did not experience a reduction in voice behavior, suggesting that strategic silence can be a constructive and empowering strategy, rather than one that suppresses employees from speaking up.

Keywords: employee silence, experiential learning model, implicit cognition, issue selling

1 Introduction

To ensure that organizations function sustainably and effectively, it is essential for employees not only to perform their assigned tasks but also to act proactively and innovatively beyond the boundaries of their formal roles [1]. Especially under rapidly changing external environments, continuous value creation requires employees to re-examine the status quo and propose novel approaches unconstrained by existing frameworks [2].

However, in practice, such innovative behaviors are not sufficiently encouraged in Japanese workplaces. According to a 2023 PwC survey in 46 countries, 63% of global respondents reported managerial encouragement of dissent, whereas in Japan, the figure was only 23%. Similarly, whereas 52% of global respondents agreed that they frequently bring new and innovative ideas to their teams, only 16% of Japanese employees agreed [3]. These findings suggest that raising alternative or challenging ideas is less welcomed in Japan, leading to the suppression of employees' innovative behavior. Furthermore, in organizations with multilayered hierarchical structures, such as large corporations, bottom-up proposals often entail high coordination costs

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[4]. Consequently, employees may repeatedly find their ideas ignored or dismissed, resulting in a perception that speaking up is futile. Over time, such experiences may undermine employees' self-efficacy, making future proactive behaviors increasingly difficult to initiate [5].

Employee voice has been conceptualized in organizational behavior research as a form of innovative behavior, and prior studies have explored its underlying motivations as well as the psychological factors that lead employees to withhold voice [6]. However, relatively limited attention has been given to the quality and effectiveness of voice. One relevant concept is issue selling, which refers to middle managers' strategic efforts to communicate suggestions to top management. Dutton and Ashford [7] emphasized the importance of timing and effort to capture managerial attention. Building on this, Parke et al. [8] introduced the concept of strategic silence, which they define as the deliberate withholding of voice to evaluate contextual and managerial readiness. Their findings suggest that strategic silence increases the likelihood of managerial approval, indicating that voice suppression may not always be passive or defensive—it can instead function as a calculated and proactive strategy.

In contrast, traditional organizational behavior literature has largely portrayed silence as a defensive response to fear of rejection or punishment [9], associating it with negative outcomes such as diminished innovation, productivity, and psychological well-being [10]. Thus, strategic silence can be defined as the temporary and intentional withholding of voice with the future intention to speak up[8], potentially embodying characteristics of both silence and voice.

This study focuses on strategic silence as a means for employees to enhance the effectiveness of their constructive voice behavior and proposes a method for acquiring strategic silence as a skill. Furthermore, it empirically examines the psychological effects of strategic silence—an action embodying both silence and voice—and its impact on subsequent voice behavior.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Employee Voice and Silence

Employee voice refers to discretionary communication behavior directed toward superiors that challenges the status quo with the constructive intention of initiating change [11]. Morrison [6], building on prior research, defined voice as "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who can take action with the intent to bring about improvement or change." In contrast, employee silence refers to intentionally withholding such input, even when employees hold ideas or concerns, they could share [9].

Morrison [6][12] also organized the antecedents and consequences of employee voice and silence into a conceptual model. Figure 1 illustrates a simplified version of this model, highlighting the mechanisms by which employees decide whether to speak up or remain silent.

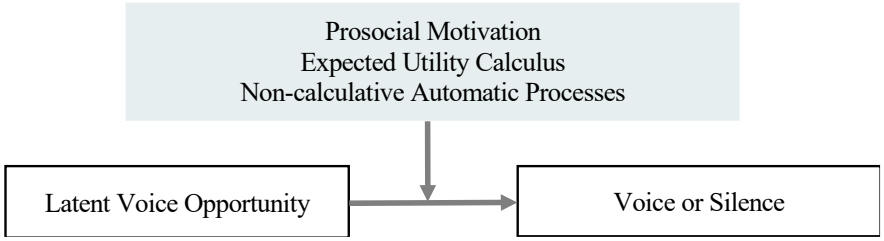

Figure 1: A Model for Assessing Employee Voice and Silence (modified based on [6])

In contrast, Guarin et al. [13] emphasized the temporal dimension that had been underexplored in earlier research and, through a comprehensive literature review, expanded upon existing models to develop the dynamic MOOVE framework. This study draws on these theoretical frameworks to inform the design and analysis of the proposed learning method.

2.2 Strategic Silence

In general, employee voice has been associated with positive outcomes for organizational effectiveness, whereas silence has been linked to negative effects [9]. However, research has also emphasized the importance of choosing the right timing for voice [7] and the risk that poorly timed voice can lead to conflict within the organization [14]. Parke et al. [8] revealed that some employees deliberately withhold ideas or concerns they deem premature, engaging in what they term "strategic silence." Their findings showed that such behavior leads managers to perceive those employees' voice as higher in quality, which in turn positively influences performance evaluations and rewards (Figure 2) [8]. Parke et al. [8] define strategic silence as an active behavior where voice is deliberately withheld to maximize how it will be valued by others, clearly distinguishing it from common forms of silence driven by fear or resignation.

Nonetheless, these findings are primarily based on field studies and vignette experiments, and practical validation in real organizational contexts remains limited [8]. Moreover, employees vary in their ability to regulate their impulse to speak up [15]. However, little attention has been given to how such abilities can be developed.

To enable strategic silence to function effectively in the workplace, it is essential to develop educational or training-based approaches that support employees in assessing situational relevance and making informed decisions about whether to speak or remain silent. This study develops a method for acquiring strategic silence as a skill and examines its effects through field application.

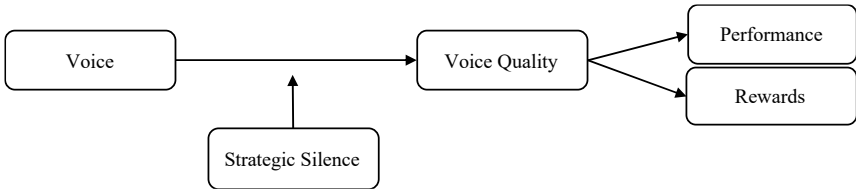

Figure 2: A theoretical model of the effects of strategic silence (modified based on [8])

2.3 The Effectiveness of Employee Voice

Employee voice is not always perceived positively. Liang et al. [16] classified voice into promotive and prohibitive types and showed that promotive voice is generally viewed more favorably by managers. Burris et al. [17] found that managers evaluate employee suggestions based on their feasibility, giving higher ratings to more actionable ideas. Furthermore, Whiting et al. [18] demonstrated that even identical voice content can be evaluated differently depending on timing and organizational context.

Thus, the content and timing of voice influence its effectiveness, but ultimately, these effects are subject to managerial perceptions. Accordingly, this study follows Parke et al. [8] in adopting the concept of voice quality—defined as the perceived value of employee voice by managers—as the primary indicator of voice effectiveness. Notably, in this study, voice quality is assessed based not on managers' direct evaluations, but rather on how employees perceive their voice to have been received and valued by their managers.

2.4 Psychological Impact of Strategic Silence

Strategic silence is not merely about withholding voice but about waiting for a more appropriate time to speak up, thereby enhancing the perceived quality of voice and increasing the chances of favorable manager evaluation. As a result, experiencing success in being heard may improve employees' self-efficacy. Bandura [19] defined self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to successfully execute tasks even under challenging conditions. Parker et al. [20] argued that employees with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors such as making innovative suggestions.

However, strategic silence also carries potential risks. According to Parke et al. [8], employees may unintentionally suppress important information or concerns that should have been communicated, which could lead to an overall decline in voice behavior. In this sense, it remains unclear whether strategic silence promotes or inhibits voice.

This study investigates how strategic silence affects employees' self-efficacy and how changes in self-efficacy influence actual voice behavior in practice.

3 Method of Learning Strategic Silence

This study proposes a learning method for employees to consciously and effectively practice strategic silence. According to Parke et al. [8], strategic silence skills are defined as the ability to assess whether to speak up or remain silent from the perspectives of topic relevance, preparedness, and audience receptiveness. The proposed method clarifies the voice–silence decision-making process and supports the application of strategic silence in practice.

3.1 Method Design

In designing the method, we adopted Martin's [21] PMTE paradigm to organize its core components into three categories: Process, Method, and Tool. As the foundational learning framework, we referred to the experiential learning model developed by Matsuo et al. [22], which explicitly incorporates a phase of critical reflection. This phase enables participants to conceptualize their silence strategies and formulate explicit decision-making criteria regarding silence.

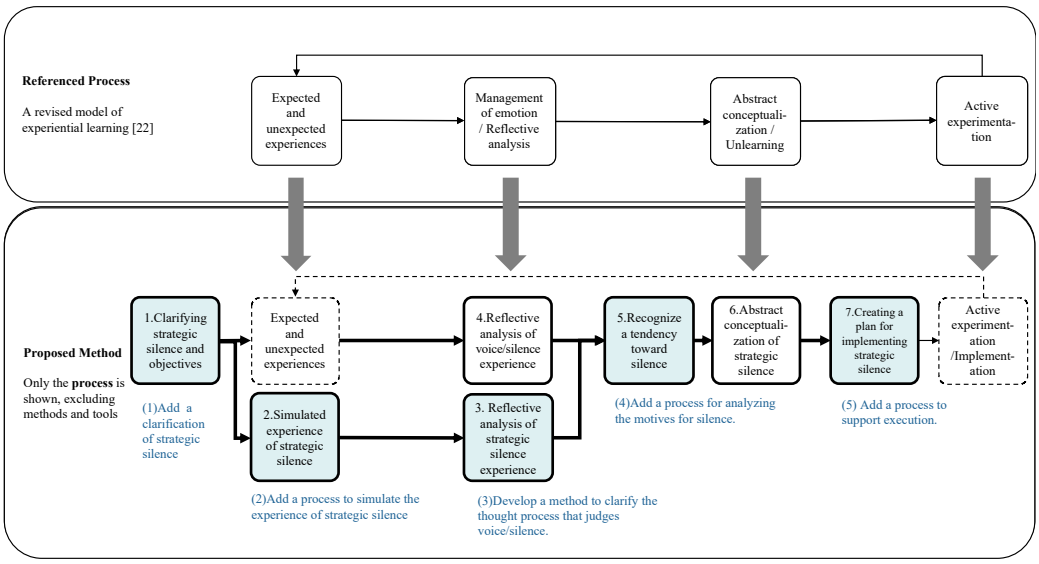

Figure 3: Process design of the Proposed Method

As shown in Figure 3, the design incorporated five functional requirements identified based on prior studies and preliminary investigations: (1) a function to communicate the value of strategic silence, (2) a function to simulate strategic silence behavior to provide an experience that is hard to gain through daily work, (3) a function to establish voice-silence judgment criteria based on the idea that making implicit cognitive processes explicit can transform behavior [23], (4) A function to differentiate strategic silence from excessive silence, (5) a function to lower the execution barrier.

These requirements were incorporated into the experiential learning model and served as the foundation for constructing the overall framework of the method.

3.2 Proposed Method

The proposed method, as shown in Figure 3, consists of seven processes, including reflection on actual experiences, reflection on simulated experiences, analysis of silence tendencies, and conceptualization that integrates these elements.

3.3 Procedure

This section outlines the implementation procedure based on the defined process with selected examples introduced as appropriate.

1. Read an explanatory text introducing strategic silence to understand its purpose.
2. Read a scripted scenario in which the absence of strategic silence skills leads to a failed voice attempt, providing a simulated experience of failure.
3. Analyze the simulated experience by documenting one's own cognitive processes using a tool based on a framework reconstructed from Morrison's voice–silence model [6] , interpreted through the lens of strategic silence, as shown in Figure 4.
4. Reflect on and analyze one's own past real-life experiences.
5. Complete a questionnaire on silence behavior. Silence tendencies are visualized as radar charts based on four silence typologies—acquiescent, quiescent, prosocial, and opportunistic [9]—along with the strategic silence scale [8], as shown in Figure 5.
6. Engage in a comprehensive reflection on one's silence tendencies and articulate, in one's own words, what should be learned and unlearned to conceptualize strategic silence as a skill.
7. Formulate a concrete action plan for applying strategic silence in practice.

Each of these steps is implemented individually by participants. Based on the final action plan, participants are encouraged to practice strategic silence in their actual work settings.

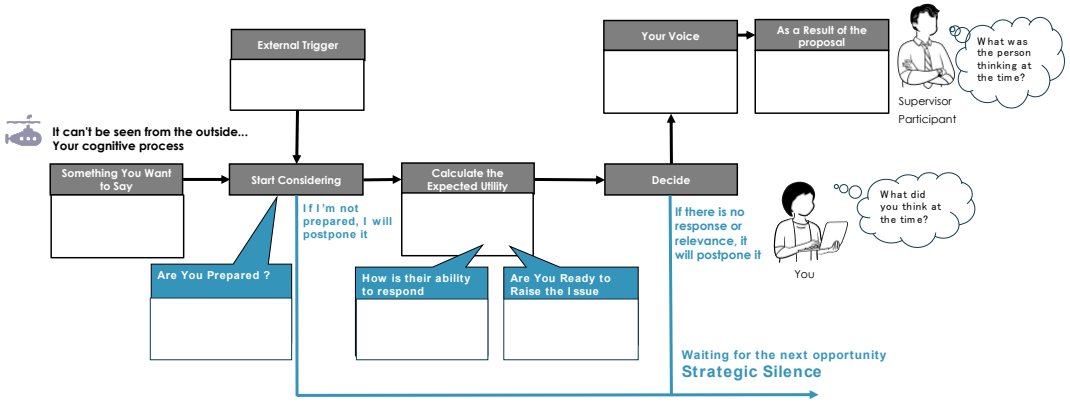

Figure 4: A Tool that clarifies the thought process

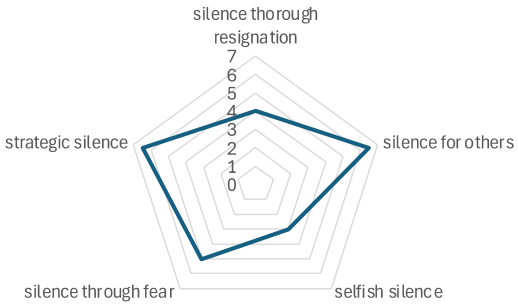

Figure 5: A tool for understanding why you are silent

4 Evaluation Method

To examine the effectiveness of the proposed method, we conducted an experimental evaluation consisting of two components: verification of strategic silence behavior and validation of its psychological and behavioral effects. To clarify the specific effects of the proposed method, we conducted a comparative evaluation against a control group that was only exposed to explanatory text describing strategic silence and the four types of employee silence.

4.1 Subjects

Participants were working adults in their 20s to 40s employed in private companies and government organizations. They were recruited via internal mailing lists and social networking services within companies and universities. Managers were excluded from participation. Individuals who did not complete the experimental procedure were also excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 29 participants in the experimental group and 10 in the control group.

4.2 Procedure

The experiment proceeded as follows. Participants first received an explanation of the study's purpose and procedures and provided informed consent. They then completed a pre-survey via Qualtrics to collect demographic and psychological baseline data. The experimental group received a full 60-minute method, while the control group received a simplified 10-minute version, both distributed as Excel files by email. Immediately after, participants completed post-survey 1 assessing understanding, usability, and perceived effectiveness. Over the following week, they recorded their voice behaviors to monitor the application of strategic silence. Finally, at least four business days later, they completed post-survey 2 to evaluate the method's sustained impact.

4.3 Evaluation Indicators

4.3.1 Strategic silence

Based on Parke et al. [8], we measured three dimensions—topic relevance, preparedness, and audience receptiveness—with six items (two per dimension) on a 6-point Likert scale. The mean score was used.

4.3.2 Effectiveness of employee voice

To evaluate perceived effectiveness of voice, we used a 3-item scale based on Parke et al. [8],

assessing whether the employee's voice was seen as valuable by their manager. Unlike the original study (which used manager ratings), participants self-rated these items. Additionally, one item asked participants after one week whether they felt strategic silence enhanced the effectiveness of their voice, rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

4.3.3 Impact of strategic silence on self-efficacy and voice

Using the 7-item version of the General Self-Efficacy Scale by Chen et al. [24], participants rated items such as "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough" on a 5-point Likert scale. One original item was excluded due to ambiguity in translation. The final scale showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83).

4.3.4 Voice Behavior

Changes in voice behavior were assessed using a 5-item scale from Maynes et al. [25], including items such as "I suggested new and more effective ways of doing things at work," rated on a 6-point Likert scale.

4.4 Analysis

Paired t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-intervention results within each group, and independent t-tests were used for between-group comparisons. To gain a more nuanced interpretation of the quantitative results, qualitative insights from self-observation logs and open-ended questions were incorporated.

5 Experimental Results

5.1 Verification- Strategic Silence Behavior

To assess the impact of the proposed method, paired t-tests were conducted on the strategic silence scale before and one week after the intervention. The experimental group showed a significant increase [Pre: M = 3.23, Post: M = 3.83, $t(28) = 3.85$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.91]], whereas the control group did not [Pre: M = 3.39, Post: M = 3.70, $t(9) = 1.15$, $p \geq 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.30, 0.92]], indicating that the strategic silence behavior significantly increased among those who received the proposed method (Figure 6).

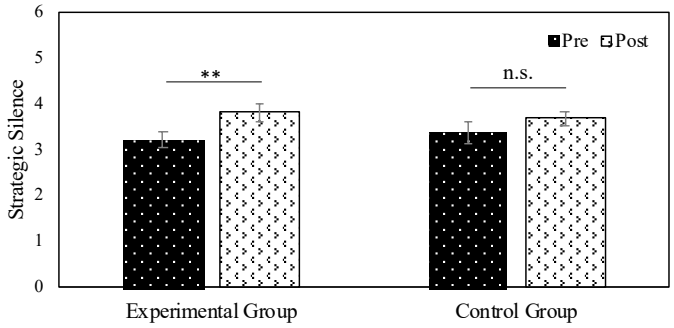

Figure 6: Comparison of pre-survey and post-survey mean scores on the Strategic Silence Scale (*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, n.s. = not significant)

The experimental group showed sufficient power (Cohen's d = 0.61, power = 0.89). In contrast,

the control group had low power (Cohen's d = 0.48, power = 0.27 with n = 10). To achieve adequate power (≥ 0.80), at least 37 participants are needed, indicating the necessity of a larger sample in future studies.

As shown in Table 1, further analysis on each dimension of strategic silence also showed significant improvements in the experimental group. Topic relevance [t(28) = 3.31, p < 0.01], preparedness [t(28) = 5.49, p < 0.001], and audience receptiveness [t(28) = 2.82, p < 0.01] all improved significantly. No significant changes were observed in the control group, suggesting that the method strengthened all three dimensions of strategic silence.

Table 1: Changes in the mean values of each item on the strategic silence scale before and after the experiment (experimental group)

	questionnaire item	mean		difference		paired t-test	df	two tailed p-value	Cohen's d
		Pre.	Post.	mean	SE				
Relevance	I intentionally kept quiet on issues because they were not relevant to the topics being discussed at that time.	3.28	4.07	-0.79	0.24	3.31	28	** p<0.01	0.64
	I deliberately remained silent on issues because they were not relevant to the goals or agenda at that time.	3.72	4.24	-0.52	0.28	1.85	28	n.s. 0.074	0.45
Readiness	I intentionally kept quiet on issues because I needed more time to develop them.	2.69	4.00	-1.31	0.24	5.49	28	*** p<0.001	1.22
	I withheld ideas or concerns because I needed more time to prepare them.	3.48	3.86	-0.38	0.26	1.49	28	n.s. 0.148	0.31
Responsiveness	I withheld ideas or concerns because I needed to wait until my boss or team would be in a better mood to hear them.	3.07	3.03	0.03	0.29	0.12	28	n.s. 0.907	0.02
	I intentionally kept quiet on issues until my boss or team would be in a better frame of mind to hear them.	3.21	3.76	-0.55	0.20	2.82	28	** p<0.01	0.41

5.2 Validation- Evaluation of Voice Effectiveness

Whereas no significant changes were observed in the pre-post scores of the voice effectiveness scale in either group, post-intervention survey responses indicated that participants in the experimental group were more likely to believe that strategic silence enhanced their voice effectiveness [experimental group: M = 4.0, control group: M = 3.2, t(37) = 2.73, p < 0.05, Cohen's d = 1.01].

5.3 Validation- Impact of Strategic Silence on Self-efficacy

The experimental group showed a significant increase in self-efficacy from pre-survey to post-survey test [Pre: M=3.22, Post: M=3.41, t(28) = 2.88, p < 0.01, Cohen's d = 0.34, 95% CI [0.06, 0.33]], whereas no significant change was observed in the control group [Pre: M=3.56, Post: M=3.34, t(9) = 0.59, p ≥ 0.05, Cohen's d = -0.29, 95% CI[-1.05,0.62]] (Figure 7).

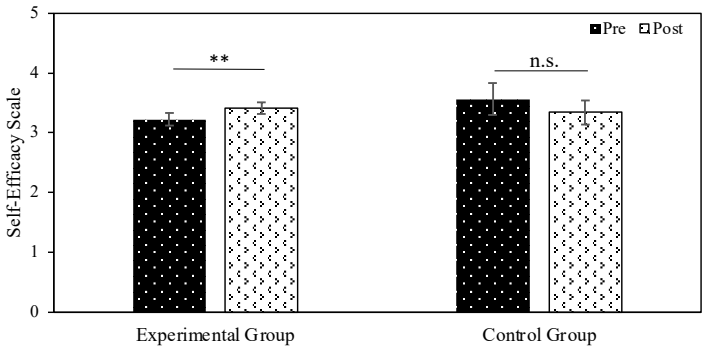

Figure 7: Comparison of pre-survey and post-survey mean scores on Self-efficacy Scale (* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, n.s. = not significant)

5.4 Validation- Voice Behavior

No significant differences were found in the voice behavior scale between pre- and post-test for either group. However, post-experiment interviews revealed that some participants felt more confident in expressing ideas they had previously hesitated to voice, suggesting a link between perceived voice quality and voice behavior.

To further explore this, the experimental group was divided into two subgroups: those who felt their voice quality had improved and those who did not. Among those reporting improved voice quality, there was no significant reduction in voice behavior [Pre: M = 3.72, Post: M = 3.95, $t(11) = 1.22$, $p \geq 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.27$], whereas those who did not perceive improvement showed a significant decline in voice behavior [Pre: M = 3.93, Post: M = 3.52, $t(16) = 3.43$, $p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = -0.63$] (Figure 8).

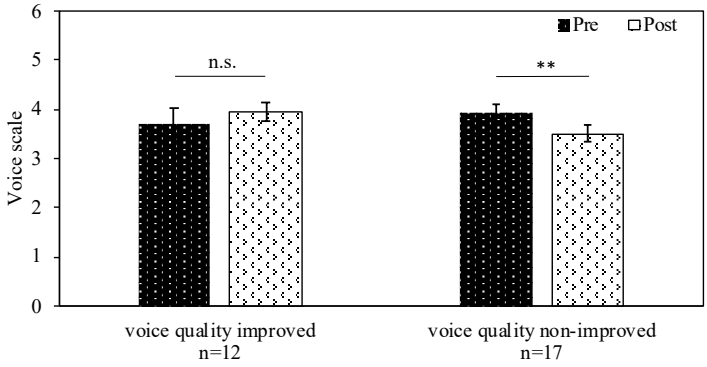

Figure 8: Comparison of pre-survey and post-survey mean scores on Voice Scale
Voice quality improved vs. non-improved group
(* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, n.s. = not significant)

6 Discussion

6.1 Verification of the Proposed Method

This study developed a method for acquiring strategic silence as a skill and verified its impact on employee behavior. The results demonstrated significant improvements across all three dimensions of strategic silence—topic relevance, preparedness, and audience receptiveness—among the experimental group, indicating that the proposed method effectively facilitated behavioral change.

The method's emphasis on reflective analysis and the conceptualization of decision-making criteria likely promoted the practical execution of behavior. Additionally, the use of tools to clarify the voice-silence decision process helped participants reframe silence as a strategic choice rather than a passive action.

On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was observed in the between-group comparison with the control group, which may be attributable to the small sample size of the control group. Nevertheless, survey responses indicated that participants who had spoken up frequently in the past but experienced failures were more likely to initiate strategic silence behavior simply through conceptual understanding. This suggests that for individuals who have not previously practiced strategic silence, awareness of the concept alone may have a certain positive

effect. Future studies should expand the sample and consider participant attributes in their experimental designs.

6.2 Validation of the Proposed Method

Although there was no immediate change in the effectiveness of the actual voice, the belief that strategic silence greatly increases the impact of the voice increased significantly within the experimental group. This suggests that there is a time lag before strategic silence is evaluated by superiors as a result and supports the need for long-term evaluation.

Self-efficacy also showed a significant increase among the experimental group, indicating psychological resource development toward voice opportunities. Notably, this improvement occurred despite the lack of direct success experiences, implying that the reflective components of the method may have contributed to a more confident self-assessment regarding voice. This finding aligns with Bandura's concept of vicarious experiences as a source of self-efficacy development [19].

Although there was no significant change in voice behavior, participants who, based on the survey, perceived an improvement in voice quality did not reduce their voice behavior. In contrast, those who did not perceive such an improvement showed a significant decline. These findings suggest that concerns about strategic silence leading to voice suppression can be mitigated when participants recognize improvements in the quality of their contributions.

Notably, qualitative data revealed that many participants who reported improvements in the quality of their voice had previously encountered unsuccessful attempts to express their opinions. This finding suggests that strategic silence may function as a supportive strategy for employees who face challenges in effectively articulating their voice. In other words, while Parke et al. [8] expressed concerns that strategic silence could lead to the concealment of important information, this concern may not be universally applicable. The present study suggests that such concerns may not hold in cases where employees exhibit a strong motivation to speak up.

7 Conclusion and Future Work

This study proposed and empirically tested a learning method to help employees acquire strategic silence as a skill to enhance the effectiveness of their voice. By clarifying the voice and silence decision-making process and promoting reflective analysis and the conceptualization of decision criteria, the proposed method facilitated an increase in strategic silence behavior across its three dimensions: relevance, preparedness, and responsiveness.

Although the proposed method did not produce short-term improvements in actual voice effectiveness, participants developed a stronger belief in the strategic value of silence to amplify voice effectiveness. Furthermore, the method significantly enhanced employees' self-efficacy—the confidence to speak up—without suppressing their intent to voice.

Importantly, participants who perceived improved voice quality did not reduce their voice behavior; rather, they maintained or increased their voice frequency. These participants often had prior difficulties with getting their suggestions accepted, suggesting that strategic silence is not merely a tactic to be accepted by managers but a capability that empowers employees who seek to bring about constructive change in their organizations.

This study demonstrated that the intentional implementation of strategic silence can facilitate bottom-up constructive communication within organizations and has the potential to serve as a

valuable resource for supporting innovation.

However, this study had limitations. The intervention was short-term, and it could not fully assess long-term changes in voice effectiveness, especially from the manager's perspective. In addition, this study did not determine which specific processes within the proposed method contributed most to the observed effects. Future research that isolates and evaluates the impact of each component may facilitate the refinement of the method or the amplification of targeted outcomes.

Future research should pursue (1) longitudinal studies to examine the sustainability of behavioral change, (2) assessments of how task characteristics and organizational culture affect the perception of voice, and (3) the development of methods tailored to specific employee attributes, such as those who have had negative experiences related to speaking up.

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