



Book Review: *Speaking Up in a Culture of Silence: Changing the Organization from Bullying and Incivility to One of Listening and Productivity*

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ABSTRACT

Do you know when to speak up and when to listen? A big challenge for many individuals is making the decision to speak up or deciding to sit silently as a bystander during meetings where tempers often run rampant. What is involved in your decision-making process when brainstorming sessions go awry and opinions differ in high-stress, decision-making moments? Did you miss the non-verbal clues that are significant in reducing conflict and stress? This book provides readers with a series of case studies that describe the processes employees used to navigate speaking up in a culture of silence during times when listening and productivity were low while bullying and incivility increased. Through changing how one responds, listens, and reacts employees and management can steer clear of the triggers that may enable conflict to thrive to create an environment where individuals feel heard and welcome to speak up.

KEYWORDS

Bullying, Listening, Incivility, Speaking Up, Organizational Change



Whether you are an internally or externally facing ombuds, ombuds are often challenged to identify the “what” and the “why” of an issue. What makes it hard for some individuals to speak up and why is it so difficult for others to listen? Ombuds are the neutral yet unsung heroes working independently and confidentially behind the informal scenes to assist others with conflict resolution. I remember being the silent person early on in my career and now, as an ombuds, I help others lift their voices to have their concerns heard and addressed.

The book’s title grabbed my attention, “*Speaking Up in a Culture of Silence: Changing the Organization Activity from Bullying and Incivility to One of Listening and Productivity.*” I just had to know how things worked out in organizations that had so many variables at play: speaking up, culture, silence, activity, bullying and incivility and how the dots finally connected to reach listening and productivity. I wondered as I glanced at the book’s cover, which character I could be while seated at the table? Was I the listener? Was I the silent partner holding in an uncomfortable truth? Was I productive or did one of my actions trigger someone else to act in a certain manner? A relatable and quick-read book that materialized from David Naylor’s failed attempt to help others. I liked the book from the first line, as Naylor (2023) mentions, “This book emerged out of failure.” A one liner reminding me that sometimes we fail forward. Naylor vividly describes people as expensive to employ and recruit—as thinking and know how is considered a precious commodity.

Naylor’s book helps the busy professional start where they are in their personal journey to speaking up: middle, beginning or end—speaking up is not a superpower, as we all have the power to change the culture of silence by *speaking up*. If you are an ombuds on your way to the next International Ombuds Association conference, you can compare some of your memorable cases against the options you would have presented to those involved in the matters presented in this book.

Through a series of scenario-based case studies, Naylor helps readers navigate through what he witnessed, had described to him, or experienced himself. He encourages readers to explore three overarching questions to unearth why it can be difficult to speak up within organizations and while participating in groups:

- 1) What is being asked of me in this situation?
- 2) What sort of team, department, division, or organization am I a part of?
- 3) What can I do to help others speak and resist being silenced?

Each scenario provides details of what happened and guides readers on a fact-finding process of why things went wrong through the lens of the people involved, describes the behaviors that fueled their perceived problems and ultimately provides insight of how slight changes in behaviors were big factors that worked toward a resolution. By maintaining control, listening to others, and identifying the individual trigger points that exacerbate conflict, the load and responsibility of dealing with what happened can be shared—to get people talking.

For the purposes of this review, I will share my take on one case example that resonated with me. The case highlights the aftermath of how one perceived comment made by Carole, a senior colleague, had a lingering impact on Jane, an experienced physician. For perspective, a surgical team worked to save the life of a patient who died from their injuries, despite the team’s best effort. By chance, the two caregivers spoke about what transpired with the patient and Carole’s response was, “*they would have died anyway.*” Naylor helps the reader unpack and explore this example of how coercive power creates harm (p.31). As an ombuds can you remember an instance facilitating a conversation only to hear a comment that silences the room? Or have you received a written message that subliminally says: I am done speaking about this matter.



While Carole may have felt she was being truthful, her response impacted Jane in ways that Carole did not see or acknowledge, resulting in Jane's inability to work so much so, Jane subsequently had trouble getting out of bed. Naylor challenges readers to acknowledge and manage the psychological consequences of our work—to be open to and supportive of a conversational culture which encourages questioning and argument, regardless of rank, in the pursuit of intelligent ideas about what is going on. Questioning on the surface may cause conflict, as managers often feel threatened when subordinates ask relevant questions and share ideas to work through problematic events.

Naylor (2023) suggests that readers focus on four dimensions of work when it comes to Facts and Gaps:

1. *Work as Done*—What we do, how we experience work. Here he notes there is always a gap between 'policy as written, and policy as performed.'
2. *Work as Disclosed*—What we say, when asked about our lived experiences at work.
3. *Work as Imagined*—When we know more than we disclose there is a gap in the data.
4. *Work as Prescribed*—What we understand to be going on, when in a leadership/management role (p.34)

Unfortunately, I was left not knowing if Jane and Carole worked through the patient's loss of life and the insensitive comment made afterwards. Naylor does present the perspectives of not knowing: if there were past triggers that made Jane shut down and some non-verbal cues that Carole missed to offer an invitation to talk. This scenario is realistic, and cues can be missed by making assumptions. According to Naylor (2023), the problem is if you are successful in waiting and listening, in creating psychological safety, you must be prepared for people to say stuff that evokes feelings in yourself that may be uncomfortable for you to hear (p. 41).

Naylor worked with senior managers to share his series of case studies and provide additional perspectives, regardless of the various hats one has worn throughout their careers: the Convener, the Bystander, the Silent Party, the Bully, the Imposter, the Authority Figure, the Facilitator, the Follower, the Ignored and more. Deciding when to speak up or not is always intrinsic to those involved. If you need a quick reality check to bring back real-life situational perspectives, each case example provides readers with an inside but clarifying glimpse into what happened, who the players were and what part and role they contributed to the conflict. Readers also get a chance to see each characters' thought process undertaken as they worked through their conflict; were they the bully, the silent partner or did they provide incivility toward others?

In conclusion, ombuds know the work of a manager can be challenging and the work of an ombuds is beneficial to resolving conflict by facilitating communication to help parties reach mutually satisfying solutions. Although there are no perfect interventions, Ombuds weave a delicate yet confidential tapestry to keep the organizational heartbeat coordinated, while also helping to cultivate an environment of civility with open minds and ears to allow others a chance to be heard. Naylor perpetuates, speaking up is about creating a pause, to think and review with others—a solitary activity expressed in social context. Everyone has a story. How would your story or case study read if one were to get a glimpse of your role within your organization? When connecting the dots to move from active listener to a productive team member or leader takes humility, introspection, communication, and action to move from failure to forgiveness. Silence does not always mean agreement but as Naylor simply states, "*Speaking Up is everything.*"



REFERENCES

Naylor, D. (2023). *Speaking Up in a Culture of Silence: Changing the Organization Activity from One of Bullying and Incivility to One of Listening and Productivity*. Routledge: New York.



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