

COMMENTARY

Civility and voice: From “civility wars” to constructive engagement

Ludmila N. Praslova*

Vanguard University of Southern California

*Corresponding author. Email: lpraslova@vanguard.edu, lioudmila.praslova@gmail.com

The challenge posed by Cortina, Cortina, and Cortina (2019) is balancing the need for civility with the benefits of candor and protecting the voice. I extend this work by outlining a four-quadrant model of organizational climate for civility and voice, and providing suggestions for facilitating the high voice, high civility climate for civil discourse, constructive engagement, and collaboration. This perspective is informed by the literature as well as by the extensive experience with multiple institutions of higher education in the context of regional accreditation and has been helpful in my organizational practice.

There are many recent examples of “civility wars” in academia, in which administrative push for civility resulted in resistance from faculty and students concerned with de-facto censorship in the name of civility and with the loss of voice (Cortina et al., 2019; Kleban, 2014; Schmidt, 2014). At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, demonstrators carried posters “Civility = Silence, Silence = Death” (Nelson, 2014). Slogans such as “Civility = Silence” suggest that tensions of “civility wars” might in part be fueled by the confusion of two separate dimensions of organizational climate: civility and voice. Thus, constructive work of ending “civility wars” and facilitating civil discourse in academia and other types of organizations might benefit from the following:

- Clarifying the roles of civility and voice as two separate dimensions of organizational climate
- Developing a model of organizational climate for both civility and voice
- Outlining strategies for facilitating the development of high civility, high voice climate

Both civility and voice have multiple definitions. In this commentary, civility is defined as the degree to which norms for respectful treatment exist and are upheld within the institution. This definition is based on Walsh et al.’s (2012) discussion of group norms for civility and is suitable for conceptualizing civility as a group-level rather than an individual-level phenomenon.

Although voice in organizations is often defined as discretionary, voluntary, individual communication of ideas for improvement (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), it also has a normative/contextual dimension. Organizational contexts may discourage and even punish voice behavior, and they may facilitate what Morrison and Milliken (2000) term a “climate of silence,” in which organizational members share a belief that speaking up about problems is “futile and dangerous.” Positive organizational voice climate, then, is one in which making suggestions for improving organizational functioning is safe, and well-substantiated input has a fair chance of effectively influencing organizational processes.

Civility and voice are equally important to organizations, and sacrificing one for another is counterproductive. Lack of civility is detrimental to organizational reputation and leads to increased negative behavior, emotional distress, poor health, and organizational costs associated

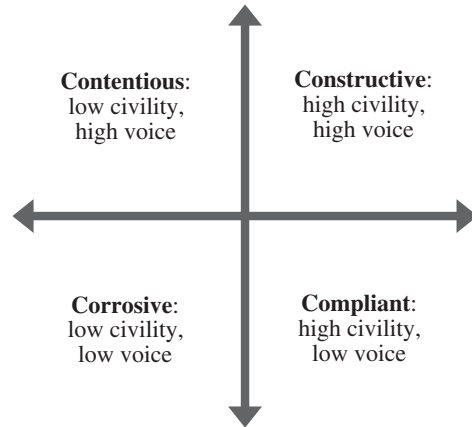


Figure 1. Organizational climate for civility and voice.

with cognitive distractions, project delays, and turnover (Adams & Webster, 2013; Cameron & Webster, 2011; Cortina et al., 2019; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Meier & Spector, 2013; Pearson & Porath, 2005, 2009). Positive outcomes of high voice include higher employee motivation, reduced turnover, improved safety, and creative problem solving and innovation, as well as improved managerial effectiveness (McClean, Burris, & Detert, 2013; Morrison, 2011; Tindel, 2014; Tucker & Turner, 2015; Zapata-Phelan, Colquitt, Scott, & Livingston, 2009). Overall, voice can be seen as an aspect of organizational engagement—a prized asset for competitive advantage. Civility can set a positive tone and amplify the benefits of this engagement. In higher education, modeling civility and voice to students is also an essential part of educating for effective organizational, local, and global citizenship.

Organizational climate for civility and voice

The proposed model of organizational climate for constructive engagement and civil discourse is based on civility and voice as its essential dimensions. Levels of development on these dimensions form four types of organizational voice climate (see Figure 1).

1. **Constructive:** High civility, high voice climate, characterized by civil discourse and collaboration. In constructive organizational climates, communication is likely to be open and transparent, with multiple mechanisms for the expression of voice across the institution. There is also a widely shared understanding of civility as an essential characteristic of discourse. High levels of motivation and engagement facilitate extra-role involvement and creativity, which benefit organizational mission, and the “shared governance” model is reflected in institutional decision making. Examples of constructive cultures can come from different industries. A commitment to open communication, engagement, and collaborative innovation is described by Tindel (2014) as one of the foundational characteristics that help the Container Store thrive.
2. **Contentious:** Low civility, high voice climate. Organizational members tend to speak up freely but might be less concerned with demonstrating respect or with understanding the effect of their tone on the other side. When there is contention, it is possible to develop civil discourse by modeling and encouraging civility. Unfortunately, in many cases, those who wish to “fix” contentious environments do so by attempting to take away the voice rather than by strengthening the civility dimension of organizational communication.
3. **Compliant:** High civility, low voice climate. Compliant organizations may appear peaceful and orderly. Due to low voice, however, engagement is likely to be at best surface level and might not facilitate the same advantages of creativity and innovative contribution as the

deeper engagement associated with climates of collaboration. In compliant climates, formal mechanisms of engagement (e.g., committees) often lack decision-making authority, and the only truly influential mechanisms are top down. Some individuals feel comfortable in this climate and are content with a lower voice, especially when the top-down influence is largely “benevolent.” However, in the absence of checks and balances, the benevolence is at best unreliable.

4. **Corrosive:** Low civility, low voice climate. This could be associated with the proverbial “snake pit” climate, in which powerless individuals turn against each other in frustration, unable to influence the organization for the better and for various of reasons unable or unwilling to leave. The institution may exist in a corrosive, self-destructive climate for a longer or shorter period of time, depending on availability of resources.

Facilitating the high civility, high voice climate

One lesson of “civility wars” in academia is that there is no shortcut to developing climates of high civility and voice. When civility is mandated or demanded by those with more power, the demand could, ironically, lead to decreased civility, as those with less power may attempt to make their message more dramatic. Moreover, attempts to remove voice to increase civility eliminate the possibility of civil discourse, because without voice there is no discourse. Thus, although mandating civility or removing the voice may appear to be quick—and therefore tempting—fixes to communication breakdowns or to contentious environments, these “shortcuts” at best do not work and, at worst, may backfire. The following points might inform facilitating climates of high civility and high voice:

1. Changing organizational climate will take time. For example, in studies of organizational safety climate, improvements in safety took up to 2 years to manifest (Neal & Griffin, 2006). Nevertheless, although changing the environment is difficult and time consuming, systemic change is likely to be most lasting and effective.
2. For a lasting and systemic change to occur, both top-down and bottom-up processes need to operate. Facilitating community-wide participation in sense making, planning, and decision making creates the type of engagement and ownership of the process that is most likely to result in lasting change.
3. Mandating civility does not work because it is often perceived as a threat and censorship. Yet, the same leadership behaviors that encourage voice (trust building, providing multiple mechanisms for communication, modeling respectful communication, facilitating shared decision making, and reducing power distance in an organization) also encourage civility.
4. Although the entire organizational system needs to be involved in creating and maintaining the climate of civil discourse, leaders are in key positions of influence for facilitating or halting voice (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014). Developing leadership competence and self-efficacy may help those in positions of power to be more open to voice, which, along with the willingness to “check your ego at the door” (Fast et al., 2014; Tindel, 2014), are essential to the ability of leaders to facilitate environments of high voice and civility.
5. Finally, it is important to work with organizational and occupational cultures rather than against these. Unpacking and understanding values underlying behaviors of organizational members, including the symbolic meaning of cultural elements, is a key to the productive process of collaborative engagement. Specifically, understanding that valuing of voice can manifest as opposition to imposed civility could help prevent or resolve some of the battles of civility versus voice. Another example of working with the cultural heritage of academia could be establishing the civility discussion within the framework of intellectual virtues, such as fair-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage. Such framing might both clarify the connection between civility and values traditionally espoused by academia and facilitate a productive dialogue.

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