

COMMENTARY

Realizing the benefits of quiet environments: Culture matters

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Asselineau et al. (2024) suggest that imposing silence through the introduction of quiet environments in organizations could offer benefits; however, they recognize that imposing silence is nuanced, stating that, “Benefiting from quiet environment requires a profound understanding of what silence can and cannot deliver and under which circumstances.” We agree that a deeper understanding of the setting in which a quiet environment is embedded is warranted and suggest that the consideration of cross-cultural theories with Asselineau et al.’s imposed silence via quiet environments will assist in identifying when silence may or may not be beneficial in the workplace.

Although Asselineau et al. cite Lao Tzu, much of their discussion derives from a Western cultural perspective (e.g., Blaise Pascal). Research in traditional Western settings may not generalize to other cultural milieus (Henrich, 2020). There is the potential for silence to be misinterpreted in cross-cultural interactions (e.g., Verouden et al., 2018); thus, paying particular attention to situational aspects of the workplace as it relates to cultural differences regarding silence will aid organizational research and managerial practice in regard to the benefits of quiet environments.

This point will be illustrated through two concepts germane to understanding cross-cultural workplaces, that is, cultural tightness–looseness and context/preferred communication style. Culture describes the different ways that groups make sense of their environment through the construction of shared meaning, interpretations, value hierarchies, and the enactment of norms of behavior (House et al., 2004). As with any aspect of human interaction, silence as a behavior is subject to the influence of cultural norms.

Our first consideration of culture is the concept of cultural tightness–looseness (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2006; Pelto, 1968) as it relates to a program of silence in a cross-cultural workplace. Asselineau et al. posit four types of silence, and in each case one can infer that sets of norms surrounding silence, either its imposition or volitional choice, would be created and maintained in the workplace. Given the importance of norms to group functioning, this concept is germane, and it applies to norms regarding silence. The research of Gelfand and colleagues (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011) examined cultural tightness or looseness in the sense of the strength of the norms (i.e., strong = tight, weak = loose) and the tolerance for deviation from social norms (e.g., low tolerance = tight, high tolerance = loose).

Workplaces and the individuals in them will differ along these dimensions, more so in cross-cultural workplaces which, by definition, exhibit greater cultural diversity. Whether silence is volitional or coercive (imposed), the tightness–looseness of social norms becomes an important consideration for the success of quiet work environments. People from a tight culture would be more likely to follow imposed silence in the workplace if it was seen as an ongoing situation and thus a strong norm.

Our second consideration is the cultural dimension of context/preferred communication style. Asselineau et al. explicitly note that their model is broader than simply silence “perform[ing] a

communication function” (p. 6). Communication encompasses a broader constellation of interpersonal interactions and preferences that have an impact on silence as a workplace intervention. Context is an aspect of culture pertaining to the information richness of communication channels where the meaning in an interaction is located (Hall, 1983; Munter, 1993). More than simply communication, context reflects an individual’s preferences for social interactions, which influences the organization and functioning of workplaces.

Low-context communication is direct, explicit, and precise with more of the meaning embedded in the actual words of the message as opposed to other situational aspects (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Hall, 1983; Munter, 1993). Low-context communicators may know little about the subject at hand and may lack extensive personal networks. They need additional information to be able to participate fully and meaningfully in an interaction (Hall & Hall, 1987). On the other hand, high-context communicators rely on interpreting messages from multiple sources that are often indirect and implicit, requiring interpersonal knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity. High-context people live in a “sea of shared information.” Channels of communication are rich and information dense. Meaning exists on multiple levels, not simply the literal, because it is embedded in ongoing social networks and relationships.

Low-context cultures consider interruptions as noise and a negative feature of a workplace (Hall, 1983; Perlow, 1997). “When interactions are scattered throughout the day they are perceived as interruptions” (Perlow, 1997, 116) and, thus, as disruptive and dysfunctional. In an intervention involving system engineers in a low-context culture, structured quiet times, a form of imposed silence, were created to reduce distractions and interruptions, contributing to a 65% increase in productivity (Perlow, 1997; Stillman, 2023). Silence (and “alone time”) is viewed as freedom from dysfunctional distractions.

Although research suggests that imposed silence through quiet environments can be functional in low-context cultures, it could be detrimental in high-context cultures. Because high-context communicators are comfortable being embedded in a sea of information (Hall, 1983; Munter, 1993), we suggest a restriction in the flow of information by imposing silence would make their job more difficult and result in lower productivity. High-context communicators would likely find the reduction of interruptions to be impediments to their preferred information gathering and communication styles. Thus, quiet environments could be viewed as a negative feature of a workplace in a high-context culture. In a cross-cultural work environment, there could be differing interpretations of a quiet environment policy with greater potential for stress, conflict, dissatisfaction, and lower productivity.

For practitioners and managers realizing the value of quiet environment interventions, framing becomes critically important. The interpretation of a social interaction as a distraction or an opportunity can be strongly influenced by culture (Verouden et al., 2018) and should not be overlooked in our attempts to improve the workplace. Interactions perceived as a distraction with deleterious results would be an interpretation consistent with a low-context style. Conversely, interruptions may be perceived as an opportunity consistent with a high-context culture, and such interactions should be encouraged and facilitated rather than impeded.

We agree with Asselineau et al. that noise reduction and quiet environments must be applied prudently to avoid harm. Caution is warranted in extending these ideas to cross-cultural workplaces until investigated further. Fully acknowledging the importance of cultural tightness-looseness and context suggests potential paths for a fuller understanding of silence as an organizational phenomenon and possible means of intervention to enhance organizational outcomes. An intervention meant to enhance or even impose silence may, in some workplaces, be detrimental and an impediment to knowledge creation, transmission, and acquisition as well as subsequent productivity and worker well-being. Asselineau et al. have brought to the fore a potentially important organizational resource (i.e., silence), but one that needs to be interpreted and applied through a sensitive cultural lens and with a deft hand, certainly in a multicultural, global workplace.

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