

8

Expressing Dissent

I never seemed to catch her [my boss] doing wrong things until my coworker started bringing it to my attention. I started to notice her not showing up on time, yet clocking herself in as if she had been there all day. She would go run some personal errands on company time all of the time. I let it go, assuming it was none of my business, until the day she had a huge team meeting on the staff needing to be on time and how she was going to start writing us up if we were late. I could not believe my supervisor, who should be a role model, could be such a hypocrite.

Gina, age 23

In the scenario above, Gina finds herself troubled by both the behavior of her boss and the double standard her boss has established. What should she do in this situation? Should she speak to her boss directly? A coworker? Her boss's boss? Or should she continue say nothing? In this case, Gina opted to circumvent her boss. As a result, according to Gina, her supervisor "lost some of her freedoms as a supervisor and could not be trusted like before."

Typically, we don't set out to undermine our supervisors, but at times, as this example illustrates, we find ourselves in situations that necessitate the expression of dissent. Kassing (1997) defines dissent as

the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about workplace policies and practices. In this instance, dissent occurred due to a workplace practice that involved some degree of organizational wrongdoing. In other cases, dissent may be expressed in response to organizational policies that employees find to be flawed. For example, consider the case of Aamir, a loan originator:

Without notice, the pay structure had been changed for all loan originators. Previously, originators were paid on how many loans they closed. But the new change would mean that originators would be paid on tiers. Tier 1 was 50%, tier 2 was 70%, and tier 3 was 90% commission. This was great for originators that originated high loan amounts, but I originated only CRA loans, which were low-income loans, which would mean that I would never exceed the 50% tier unless I tripled in new clients. I worked twice as hard and still the loan amounts would never exceed that 50%.

Aamir, age 28

Clearly, this policy puts Aamir at a disadvantage with regard to earning commission in his organization. It seems unfair that he should be penalized by a compensation system while others benefit. But what should he do about it? Aamir can express dissent to his supervisor about the policy, to his coworkers, or to friends and family outside of work. He chose to speak to someone in management about his concerns.

As we will see in this chapter, the expression of dissent within organizations creates several kinds of risk for employees. Will dissenting lead to retaliation or reward? Appreciation or disdain? Action or inaction on the part of management? Kassing's (2007) study suggests that dissenters sometimes experience retaliation. Unfortunately, Gina finds herself in the unenviable position of reporting on her boss. On the surface, this is an act of insubordination and disloyalty, yet the manager to whom she reported her concerns responded by monitoring Gina's boss more closely and by verifying the allegations. In the end, Gina's boss was "put on notice" and relieved of some of her duties. The work situation improved for employees. Gina experienced no retaliation. Taisha reported a less successful experience.

When I was working as a RA in the dorms, my boss began to show disrespect for our staff by making up or changing information she was supposed to relay to us. She would also show up late to my individual meetings. I wrote a letter to the top guy at Residential Life with certain concerns about the job (not just about her, but about many concerns) and suggestions. I sent her a copy of the letter. We had a staff meeting a couple days later, and my boss was up in arms about following the

chain of command. Actually, the only reason I didn't follow procedure was because my boss never followed through, and I had a personal invitation from the top guy to contact him personally with any concerns that I had. My boss was pissed, and she took it out on me the rest of the year and made my life and working experience a nightmare.

Taisha, age 21

Was Taisha right in going to the “top guy”? Should her boss have been “pissed”? What we do know is that Taisha's communicative choice to dissent resulted in retaliation. What could she have done differently, if anything, to change this outcome? To answer these questions, we need to look to the literature and some key studies.

❖ WHY IS EXPRESSING DISSENT IMPORTANT?

Dealing With Organizational Constraints

Upon joining an organization, we encounter a variety of constraints—when to arrive and to leave, how to dress, what tasks to perform, and so on. Some degree of constraint is necessary for organizations to operate optimally; otherwise, our work lives would be confusing and chaotic. However, sometimes organizational constraints prove burdensome. What if employees were required to wear black uniforms while working outdoors in the height of summer? This policy would create potential health risks associated with heatstroke and heat exhaustion. In this case, employee dissent might move management to rethink a harmful policy and create a dress code that would be more seasonally appropriate. Expressing dissent, then, is a kind of communication that questions and, when necessary, challenges organizational constraints.

Drawing Attention to Overlooked Issues

As it turns out, organizations often focus constraints on the communication of employees. Workers face restrictions when speaking about organizational matters. American citizens speak freely about politics, the economy, or the local sports team. You can share your opinions about presidential candidates, the economy, or the performance of the football coach. But at work, employees tend to censor themselves when it comes to critiquing their coworkers, managers, and companies. Failing to do so could put at risk your employment or standing among workplace peers. At times, though, dissent is essential as it brings attention to problems that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Lupé found that expressing dissent was necessary because working conditions were both unfair and unrealistic.

I work for a retail store that does at least \$200,000 a week. They expect us to greet and assist every guest that comes in the store even though we are always short staffed. We are also expected to do several jobs and get paid for one. My argument was that they should not implement a “greet-and-assist” plan if understaffed.

Lupé, age 42

Lupé deals daily with the challenge of being short staffed and the expectation to meet and assist every customer. Her dissent about this situation calls attention to the inherent difficulty she experiences in trying to follow the “greet-and-assist” plan. Management may not recognize the difficulty this situation presents, failing to see that an effective and courteous greet-and-assist plan will be difficult to execute without adequate staffing. Lupé’s decision to share her concerns brought the issue to management’s attention. Of course, the skill with which Lupé communicated her concerns will influence her manager’s response.

Exposing Unethical Behavior and Organizational Wrongdoing

Organizations and the people who manage them do not always operate ethically. Unethical behavior continues to occur in contemporary organizations, and oftentimes it is the expression of dissent from employees that exposes organizational wrongdoing. Textbox 8.1 reveals how dissent occurred in response to unethical practices in the subprime lending industry. In this instance, the organization asked employees to forge federally mandated lending documents to close high-interest loans. This unethical practice yielded profits for the company. However, behavior of this kind created a lending crisis that in turn contributed to a national and global economic recession. The case highlights the power and importance of dissent in contemporary organizations.

Textbox 8.1 Employee Dissent and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis

Founded in 1922, the Ethics Resource Center (ERC) is a nonprofit devoted to the advancement of organizational ethics. The ERC seeks to advance high ethical standards and practices in organizations and to serve as a resource for both public and private institutions. In October 2008, Jason Zuckerman, a principal at the Employment Law Group in Washington, D.C., detailed his experience with employee dissent and subprime lending in a guest column that appeared on the ERC’s Web site (www.ethics.org).

Zuckerman recounted the story of an employee from the mortgage industry who retained his firm for legal council. This particular employee felt he had experienced retaliation when he questioned his sales manager's directive to increase the company's subprime lending, which involved forging federally mandated disclosure forms. These were the very forms that let borrowers know about the disadvantages of subprime loans. Mortgage companies benefited from pushing such sales because these loan products came with much higher interest rates, which meant they were more lucrative for the lender. In response to employee dissent, the sales manager withheld sales leads—a clear act of retaliation for an employee whose compensation was largely based on commissions. The company, in turn, took the dissenting employee's retaliation case as an affront to its mission of making housing more affordable for the low-income borrowers.

Zuckerman reports that 3 short years later, the company had lost more than \$1 billion from subprime mortgages. Zuckerman concluded that much of the financial crisis triggered by the subprime mortgage industry could have been averted by attending more closely to those employees who expressed dissent about the questionable practices perpetuated in the industry.

Providing Corrective Feedback

The subprime lending example also highlights the capacity of dissent to serve as a form of *corrective feedback* (Hegstrom, 1995). By sharing dissent, employees draw attention to organizational trouble spots. In the subprime lending industry, these included fraudulent and unlawful practices; in other organizations, they may include health and safety practices, flawed sales and marketing strategies, or lack of clarity in job descriptions and role responsibilities. Such feedback provides management with the opportunity to correct problems. It also signals employees' concern about organizational well-being. When employees express dissent with the intention of providing corrective feedback, they display an investment in bettering their respective organizations. Ideally, management appreciates such feedback. In this way, employees, management, and the organization all benefit from the expression of dissent.

❖ KEY RESEARCH STUDIES

Employee Responses to Dissatisfaction

Dissent is a communicative response to workplace conditions, practices, and policies that we find dissatisfying. Hirschman (1970) posited that employees respond to dissatisfaction through voice, loyalty, or exit. He contended that when faced with dissatisfying conditions, employees

would choose to exit the organization or to stay and give voice to their concerns. Loyalty, in turn, is thought to influence employees' decisions to use exit or voice. Employees with higher degrees of loyalty are more likely to voice and those with lower levels to exit. Farrell (1983) expanded on the model, suggesting that employee responses to dissatisfaction should include neglect, which is characterized by lateness, absenteeism, and increased errors.

A Model of Employee Dissent

Kassing (1997, 1998) developed a model for understanding the factors that would affect how employees choose to express dissent. He argued that the expression of dissent begins when an employee experiences a *dissent-triggering event*. Subsequent research reveals a wide range of dissent-triggering events (Hegstrom, 1999; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Table 8.1 provides a typology of possible dissent-triggering events and examples of each drawn from actual employee accounts. As you can see, multiple and varied issues can trigger employee dissent, some concerning ethics and fairness, some dealing with decision making and organizational change, and others relating to inefficiency and resources.

Table 8.1 Dissent-Triggering Event Examples

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Employee treatment</i> (fairness and employee rights) | "I was not receiving my paycheck in a timely manner." |
| <i>Organizational change</i> (changes and implementation of changes) | "In July we transitioned into a new software system. This caused problems with client billing over several months." |
| <i>Decision making</i> (decisions, decision-making processes) | "Management made a unilateral decision to change a software program without conducting a needs assessment." |
| <i>Inefficiency</i> (inefficient work practices and ineffective processes) | "At an old catalog job I worked, near the end of my time there they hired an extra photographer to speed things up, yet they did not hire an extra copywriter. So, the work bottlenecked because I could not write fast enough to supply two photographers." |
| <i>Role/responsibility</i> (unclear, unrealistic, or unmet roles and responsibilities for self and others) | "There was disagreement regarding reassignment of work duties." |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Resources</i> (use and availability of organizational resources) | "Members of my department were in desperate need of latex gloves. . . . However, because our department answers to both a building-level supervisor and a district-level supervisor, both were at odds with whose budget the funds would come from." |
| <i>Ethics</i> (unethical practices or expectations of employees) | "I disagreed with some of the lack of clarity and honesty the company was allowing/encouraging employees to convey to customers." |
| <i>Performance evaluation</i> (employee evaluations or the evaluation process) | "A supervisor was unfairly writing up employees who she did not like." |
| <i>Preventing harm</i> (practices or policies that endanger self, coworkers, or customers) | "I addressed my safety and other members of staff's safety." |

Source: Adapted from Kassing and Armstrong (2002).

According to Kassing (1997), the employee then sorts through individual, relational, and organizational factors to answer two critical questions: (a) What is the probability of being perceived as constructive or adversarial, and (b) what is the likelihood of experiencing retaliation for expressing dissent? Individual factors include personality and communication traits such as being apprehensive or argumentative. Research findings indicate, for example, that employees who are more argumentative express more dissent to management (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999). Relational factors concern the types and quality of relationships employees have with their coworkers and supervisors. Not surprisingly, employees who have higher quality relationships with their supervisors express dissent more readily to them (Kassing, 2000b). Organizational factors include the climate and culture. Studies illustrate that employees are more likely to express dissent when they perceive that their opinions are valued (Kassing, 2000a, 2006).

Employees try to determine if their dissent will be perceived by bosses and peers as constructive or adversarial. They assess the likelihood of retaliation. On the basis of these considerations, workers choose the appropriate audience for dissent messages. When employees view dissent as risky at work, they direct messages to family members and nonwork friends because the risk of retaliation is low. This practice is known as *displaced dissent*. In contrast, employees who feel comfortable and secure in sharing their dissent are more likely to

engage in *upward dissent*, directing their concerns to management. At times, employees want others in the organization to hear their concerns but worry that management will be unreceptive. In these instances, dissent is sometimes shared only with coworkers, a practice known as *lateral dissent* (Kassing, 1997, 1998). Because expressing upward dissent to management and supervisors provokes the greatest degree of risk, it has received particular attention in subsequent studies.

Upward Dissent Expression

By asking employees to report about specific instances in which they dissented to management, Kassing (2002) determined that employees used five distinct strategies for expressing upward dissent. *Direct-factual appeal* involves supporting one's dissent claim with physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, or personal work experience. *Solution presentation* is the practice of suggesting a way to resolve a troubling issue. Repeated efforts to draw attention to the problem are referred to as *repetition*. "Going around the boss" to a higher authority is known as *circumvention*. The final strategy, *threatening resignation*, expresses the intention to exit the organization if management is unresponsive to the need for change. This same study revealed that employees used direct-factual appeal and solution presentation regularly and frequently. In contrast, circumvention and threatening resignation were used sparingly.

In a follow-up study, Kassing (2005) asked employees to rate the competence of each strategy. Solution presentation was perceived as most competent, followed by direct-factual appeal. These approaches appear to focus attention on problems and evidence rather than people and their relationships. They minimize the relational damage that sometimes accompanies dissent. In contrast, the strategies of repetition, circumvention, and threatening resignation were perceived to be less competent. Yet Kassing's (2002) study established that employees sometimes use these less competent strategies. Why would people choose less competent strategies given that there are clearly superior alternatives? Kassing (2007, 2009) explored this in subsequent studies.

Practicing Circumvention

Going around the boss can be risky. What are the possible effects on supervisory relationships? What will be the outcomes for an organization? Kassing (2007) addressed these questions by asking employees to describe a time when they felt it was necessary to go around their boss to someone higher in the organizational chain of command. Responses indicated a range of relational and organizational outcomes. Although

circumvention led to decline within the superior-subordinate relationship in about half of the cases, in the other cases, it produced neutral or positive relational effects, including improved understanding between the parties (see Table 8.2). With regard to organizational outcomes, the results were sometimes desirable (see Table 8.3). Kassing concluded that circumvention should be used judiciously: It can sometimes be effective in bringing about change, but it frequently undermines supervisory relationships.

Table 8.2 Typology of Relational Outcomes Resulting From Circumvention

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deterioration | Subordinates noted a decline in superior-subordinate relationship quality and/or work conditions. |
| Neutrality | Subordinates reported no notable change in the relationship because circumvention produced ineffectual outcomes or because circumvention exposed inadequacies regarding how supervisors initially handled issues. |
| Compromise | Supervisors and subordinates addressed the concern at issue, the circumvention, or both in a way that protected their status and their mutual identities. |
| Development | Subordinates reported being thanked and feeling appreciated when circumvention produced favorable outcomes for supervisors. |
| Understanding | Supervisors tacitly approved of and deemed legitimate the issues raised by employees that the supervisors did not or could not address effectively. |

Source: Kassing (2007). Used by permission.

Notice in Table 8.3 that circumvention sometimes resulted in an absence of corrective action. Some dissenters actually experienced retaliation, including the imposition of intolerable working conditions, reprimands, and, in some cases, termination. So what tips the scales in favor of the dissenter? What makes him or her more likely to be seen as constructive? Less likely to experience retaliation? The answer lies in whether dissent is motivated by principle or personal gain.

An Issue of Principle or a Matter of Personal Advantage

The contrast between matters of principle and personal gain was first introduced by Graham (1986) and explored further by other dissent scholars (Hegstrom, 1999; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). *Principled dissent* is

Table 8.3

Typology of Organizational Outcomes Resulting From Circumvention

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Favorable for the dissenter | Circumvention allowed employees to achieve goals and to compel supervisory action. |
| Triggering agent sanctions | Circumvention resulted in some form of reprimand or sanction for the dissent-triggering agent (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, customers). |
| Organizational improvement | Circumvention led to corrective action that addressed either workplace conditions or corporate policies and practices that were beneficial to other employees as well as or in addition to the dissenter. |
| Absence of corrective action | Circumvention failed to produce any or enough corrective action on the part of management. |
| Disadvantageous for dissenter | Circumvention created confrontational representations of dissenters and produced retaliation. |

Source: Kassing (2007). Used by permission.

expressed in response to actions that violate a standard of justice, honesty, or economy, whereas *personal advantage dissent* is expressed in response to personal motives (e.g., wanting time off, seeking a raise, etc.). Although the definitions of these types of dissent appear distinct, in practice they can blend together. At times, issues of principle affect people directly, leading them to be motivated to speak out not simply because an issue is unethical or morally wrong but also because it affects them individually.

When I chose to leave the Active Duty Army and join a National Guard Unit in an early release program, my immediate commander (company CO) signed my paperwork with an approval or positive endorsement. When his boss, the battalion commander, found out about it, he made my company commander change his endorsement to a "no." I felt that this was unjust or possibly even illegal influence on my commander's decision, and I brought it up.

Jared, age 31

In this example, Jared deals with a mixture of motives for dissenting. He is personally motivated to see that his endorsement is accurate and favorable, but he also is concerned about the ethics and legality of the behavior exhibited by the battalion commander who overrode the decision of a subordinate officer. This case illustrates how principled dissent

can be tinged by personal advantage motives. Sherron Watkins, an Enron employee who blew the whistle on the energy company's questionable accounting practices, found herself in a similar situation. She dissented not only because she believed the accounting practices were ethically questionable but also because she was concerned for her career and the possible professional damage she might suffer if Enron was exposed.

Textbox 8.2 Organizational Wrongdoing at Enron

Originally an energy company that owned power plants, water companies, and gas distributors, over time Enron evolved into a powerful energy trader. Before collapsing, Enron was America's seventh largest company, having been named "America's Most Innovative Company" by *Fortune* magazine 6 years in a row from 1996 to 2001.

To disguise corporate losses, a network of partnerships was established. These partnerships served to hide debts by buying up losing businesses from Enron. In turn, Enron appeared more profitable than it actually was, and stock prices remained high, being inflated and overvalued.

In 2001, Sherron Watkins, Enron's vice president for corporate development, wrote a seven-page letter to her boss, Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay, informing him of her concerns regarding the company's accounting practices. She wrote, "I am incredibly nervous that we will implode in a wave of accounting scandals," adding that "the business world will consider the past successes as nothing but an elaborate accounting hoax."

When the accounting scheme was exposed publicly and Enron buckled, the company left behind more than \$30 billion in debt, corporate shares that were worthless, and 21,000 unemployed workers around the world.

Kassing (2009) looked more carefully at employees' reasons for going around the boss. Not surprisingly, the primary motive was some perceived flaw in their supervisor's behavior. This included supervisors' failure to act on employee concerns, poor performance with regard to general management principles, unfair use of power, poor treatment of employees, and unethical behaviors such as stealing from the company, sexually harassing employees, and abusing company policies. To avoid being construed as adversarial, employees generally attempted to emphasize the principled nature of their dissent claim *along with* personal motives for expressing dissent. Kassing concluded that people see circumvention as constructive when the motives for dissent appear principled in nature and the issues are comparatively serious (see Table 8.4).

Earlier in the chapter, we discussed the case of Aamir, the loan originator. Aamir found the new compensation system to be unfair for

Table 8.4 Considerations Regarding the Perception of Circumvention

| Issue Severity | Nature of Dissent | Dissent Construal |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| High | Principled | Constructive |
| Low | Personal advantage | Destructive |

Source: Adapted from Kassing (2009).

officers who generated certain types of loans. By default, they could not qualify for the highest levels of compensation. In essence, Aamir's concern is one of personal advantage. His potential to earn income has been compromised by the new system. In response, Aamir expressed upward dissent by going to management. Let's assume that in doing so, he circumvented his immediate supervisor. How did he minimize the risk of going around his boss? Aamir frames his argument around fairness, a quality that most employees understand and value. In so doing, Aamir shifts the focus of his argument from purely personal gain to a matter of concern to all loan originators. For management, the issue is not simply "Aamir is upset that he won't make as much in commission," but rather "the new compensation scheme is flawed and inequitable." Viewed this way, the matter has broader and more severe implications. Aamir's dissent is more likely to be perceived as a legitimate and constructive criticism of organizational policy. For a summary of the communication options available to Aamir and other employees who choose to express dissent, see Textbox 8.3.

Textbox 8.3 Communication Options

Choice of Audience (Kassing, 1997, 1998)

- Upward dissent
- Lateral dissent
- Displaced dissent

Upward Dissent Strategies (Kassing, 2002)

- Direct-factual appeal
- Solution presentation
- Repetition
- Circumvention
- Threatening resignation

Nature of Dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1999)

Principled
Personal advantage

❖ EXPRESSING DISSENT AND THE RISK NEGOTIATION CYCLE

Expressing dissent is inherently a risky proposition because it involves threatening the organizational status quo and management. It is not a practice to engage in lightly, certainly not without some consideration of the factors that reduce or heighten risk to the dissenter. We use the risk negotiation cycle to better understand how organizational participants manage risk when expressing dissent (see Figure 8.1).

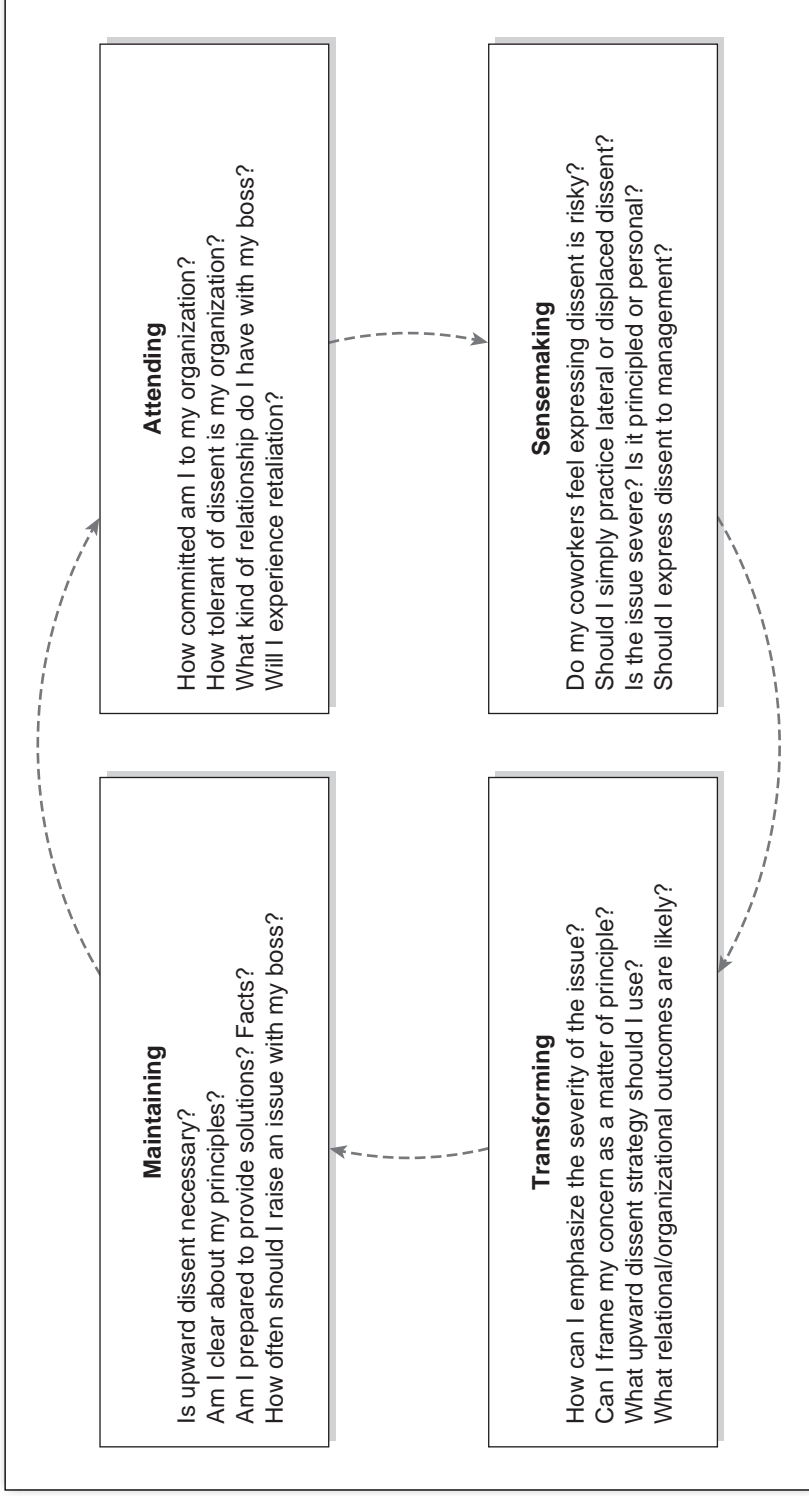
Attending

We have suggested a variety of factors that exacerbate or alleviate the risk faced by dissenters. Employees should attend to individual factors, including how satisfied, loyal, and committed they feel. Relational considerations include the quality of bonds with supervisors and coworkers. Will expressions of dissent put these relationships at risk? Organizational factors require attention. How tolerant is management of employee dissent? How has it responded to employee dissenters? Has the organization created mechanisms (e.g., suggestion systems) that facilitate the process? Attending to these matters helps employees form a risk assessment. If the organizational culture values voice and feedback and you are a satisfied employee with strong working relationships, you may judge risk to be low. In contrast, organizations that treat dissenters punitively signal less tolerance for employee dissent. Poor-quality supervisory relationships limit the communication options. In these cases, dissent is risky and more likely to lead to retaliation. By attending to these risk factors, employees decide on the audiences for dissent messages and the communication strategies they will use.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking emerges at different points in the dissent expression process. Dissenting to coworkers and nonwork friends and family provides an audience that confirms not only concerns but also your risk assessment. The coworker who responds to your dissent claim with, "I agree with you completely, but I'd never say that to management," signals that expressing dissent to management is a risky proposition.

Figure 8.1 Expressing Dissent and the Risk Negotiation Cycle



Thus, lateral and displaced dissent messages can be important elements of a risk management process.

Previewing your dissent strategy with coworkers or mentors is a valuable kind of sensemaking. It can help you determine if your message will be perceived as principled or personal. For example, one of the authors recently felt it was necessary to challenge an organizational decision to close the campus daycare center where his child was enrolled. He objected to the closure on personal grounds, but also for reasons of principle, as the closure would negatively affect students and other employees. After an unsuccessful attempt to express upward dissent to the vice president using a direct-factual appeal strategy, he considered circumvention—sending an e-mail to the president of the university. He sought the advice of two colleagues before doing so. Both cautioned him about the potential repercussions of circumventing a senior leader at the university. Their advice helped him choose a less risky approach.

Transforming

Lateral and displaced dissent are transforming in that they reduce the risk associated with expressing dissent directly to management. Expressing dissent to coworkers and to people outside of work provides relative safety. However, lateral and displaced dissent will not result in significant organizational change. Optimal outcomes can sometimes be achieved through the expression of upward dissent, but these gains come with a higher degree of risk. Dissent can lead to optimization when it involves corrective feedback, addressing some flawed organizational policy or practice that stands to be amended. What can be done to increase the effectiveness of dissent? First, emphasize the severity of the issue. Second, focus on principled rather than personal-advantage concerns, or at least use a combination of the two. And finally, choose the upward dissent strategies that have been identified as more competent and less relationship threatening (e.g., solution presentation). When the first two suggestions are implemented, it is certainly possible to obtain optimal outcomes, even when using less competent strategies, such as circumvention (Kassing, 2007). However, combining all three of these suggestions reduces risk and increases the likelihood of optimization.

Maintaining

Once we have attended to, made sense of, and transformed risk, we want to maintain it at acceptable and safe levels. This may involve appropriate use of displaced and lateral dissent. Dissent about less

serious issues is best directed to coworkers and others outside of work. It is wise to avoid overburdening supervisors with repeated expressions of personal-advantage messages. Also, reserve your dissent messages for relatively serious matters. The safety of dissent is maintained when employees use routinely those strategies that focus on facts and solutions and less on personal relationships. Have a solution in mind when expressing dissent to supervisors so that the interaction is constructive rather than destructive. It is less productive to repeatedly raise the same concerns (i.e., repetition) or raise them without factual support or solutions. Employees can honor the supervisor's role and status in the organization by sharing dissent with him or her first and avoiding circumvention. Going around the boss should be reserved for situations when the supervisor has failed to be responsive to serious and well-documented concerns. Employees manage risk when they document a trail of constructive actions taken to raise a supervisor's awareness of the issue.

❖ CONCLUSION

In closing, we provide two additional accounts that represent two very different outcomes. In the first, Derek expresses dissent about a safety issue in an attempt to prevent harm.

I was working for an airplane charter company. Fueling aircraft was one of our duties. Fuel spills weren't uncommon. One of the fuelers spilt what I thought to be approximately 25 gals of jet fuel. It's very hard to gauge exactly how much was spilled, but I thought it should be cleaned up no matter what. It was a very busy time for us. My supervisor didn't think it was important to clean up because of our busy schedule. I went to the director of operations because I had already confronted my supervisor. This type of behavior was common when we were busy (not cleaning up spills). The issue was partially resolved. We had a routine meeting where fuel spills and the importance of cleaning them was addressed.

Derek, age 26

Below, Marcus recounts the unfairness he perceived upon taking a new job as coworkers shifted their work to him. His experience is not unusual. Workgroups often test the newcomer. As we see, Marcus decided to speak with his supervisor rather than dissenting directly to his coworkers. We cannot determine from the account whether he also engaged in displaced dissent. Would he have taken a different approach if his concerns had been shared with a mentor? Would Marcus have placed himself at less risk?

I was a new hire and my coworkers were pushing large amounts of their duties onto me. I went to my supervisor and gave him specific instances as examples and he questioned the other workers. They denied it and he said there was nothing else he could do. I went to his supervisor and we were all called in and the issue discussed. My supervisor acted different toward me after and avoided talking to me. Although the issue was resolved I felt left out of the group dynamic thereafter.

Marcus, age 26

When attending to risk, employees like Derek and Marcus must consider an organization's tolerance for dissent. Do the organizations featured in these stories appear more or less tolerant of dissent? What about the employees' apparent relationship with their respective organizations? One is a newcomer, the other a seasoned enough veteran to know that fuel spills of a certain magnitude ought to be a concern. What is the quality of the relationships Derek and Marcus have with their supervisors? Are these problematic in any way? How do these relationship qualities affect the expression of dissent? Finally, what is the risk of retaliation for these two employees?

When it comes to sensemaking, consider the role of coworkers in these scenarios. What could Derek and Marcus learn by observing their coworkers? Derek and Marcus also must make sense of issue severity. How serious is a jet fuel spill? How serious is the problem Marcus faces with his new coworkers? Are these matters of principle or personal advantage? What could Marcus do to emphasize the seriousness and principled nature of his concern? Are the issues grave enough to warrant the attention of management? Or would it be better to practice lateral or displaced dissent?

To transform risk, our dissenters need to choose an appropriate communication strategy. How does Derek do this? Both of our dissenters resorted to circumvention. What strategies did they employ before moving to circumvention? Do these appear to have been the most competent choices? What other alternatives could have been used? What were the apparent relational and organizational outcomes of circumvention?

Finally, what should Derek and Marcus do in the future to maintain risk at acceptable levels? Should they express lateral and displaced dissent instead of or in combination with upward dissent? Do they have well-defined principles that will guide them in future interactions? Have they jeopardized relationships with coworkers? Supervisors? How will this affect their future decisions about expressing dissent? The problems experienced by these employees may continue into the future. Should they continue to raise their concerns with their supervisors? How often? Would it be risky to do so? What are the alternatives?

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