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Dissent in Organizations

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Employee dissent occurs when employees express their disagreement or contradictory opinions about workplace policies and practices to various audiences. The most notable and obvious cases of dissent occur when employees engage in whistleblowing by dissenting to industry regulatory bodies, the media, or both. However, not all employees feel the need to voice their concerns in this manner. Rather, employees often express their dissent within organizations either directly to their supervisors, often referred to as upward dissent, or to their co-workers, known as lateral dissent. Additionally, employees may choose to speak with family and nonwork friends about their concerns, by engaging in displaced dissent (Kassing 1997, 1998).

Initial conceptualizations differentiated *personal-advantage dissent* from *principled dissent*, with the former referring to dissent expressed as a means for some personal gain and the latter as dissenting in order to correct some matter of ethical or moral concern (Graham 1986). Further exploration into these distinctions revealed that the two were not as discrete as previously thought and in fact often overlapped or coexisted (Hegstrom 1999). Later models of dissent moved away from a content focus and toward an audience focus by recognizing that employees could dissent to various people besides managers (Kassing 1997). This body of work considers the factors that shape employees' choices about expressing dissent to different audiences by considering individual, relational, and organizational influences.

Individual influences include employees' predispositions and demographic characteristics, their attachment to or affinity for their respective organizations, and their organizational position. To date, a constellation of communication and personality traits that appears to influence the expression of dissent has been identified. These traits include argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and locus of control. Workplace attitudes – such as commitment, satisfaction, and organizational identification – also influence dissent, as do additional factors such as workplace experiences and organizational position. *Relational influences* concern the type and nature of relationships employees possess within organizations. When employees develop high-quality relationships with their supervisors they are more likely to express upward dissent. In contrast, employees in low-quality relationships choose to express more lateral dissent to their co-workers. Additionally, research indicates that employees regularly dissent to management in response to other-focused dissent that triggers events that concern the well-being of their co-workers.

Organizations vary tremendously in the extent to which they allow for and embrace employee dissent. Findings repeatedly demonstrate that → *organizational cultures* and climates foster or impede dissent. For example, employees report expressing more upward dissent and less lateral dissent when they perceive that comparatively more freedom of speech exists in their organizations. Organizational tolerance for dissent also has an impact on the topics about which employees choose to dissent. When organizational climates suppress dissent, employees tend to remain silent and choose to dissent almost exclusively about clearly unethical issues. However, when managers create opportunities for employees to share their dissent, dialogue between management and employees improves.

Research on organizational dissent has also considered the nature of messages used in the dissent process (Kassing 2002). *Direct-factual appeal* entails supporting one's dissent claim with information derived from some combination of physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, and personal work experience. Similarly, *solution presentation* calls for providing solutions to address the dissent-triggering issue. *Repetition* involves continued and repeated efforts to draw attention to one's dissent claim across time, whereas *circumvention* involves expressing one's dissent to someone higher in the chain of command than one's immediate supervisor. Finally, *threatening resignation* entails using the threat of resignation as a form of leverage for obtaining responsiveness and action from one's supervisor. Clearly, some of these strategies will be more effective and appropriate than others. Indeed, recent findings revealed that direct-factual appeal and solution presentation were deemed the most competent upward dissent strategies, whereas circumvention and threatening resignation were seen as the least competent.

Concepts that overlap with and inform our understanding of employee dissent include: employee resistance, upward influence, employee voice, boatrocking, and whistleblowing. Some of these concepts are much broader than dissent, others defined more narrowly. For example, employee resistance, which concerns the ways in which employees react to and defend themselves against systems and structures of domination (→ Control and Authority in Organizations; Organizational Communication: Critical Approaches), would encompass dissent. Similarly, upward influence would include dissent, but also other types of influence processes such as adhering closely to the contractual obligations of one's position or fostering personal discussions with one's supervisors (→ Supervisor–Subordinate Relationships). Likewise, employee voice involves all efforts employees make to have their concerns heard, not just their disagreement (→ Participative Processes in Organizations). Boatrocking aligns most closely with employee dissent in that it involves expressing dissent internally within an organization, whereas whistleblowing is a specific type of dissent, as noted above, that involves seeking the attention of regulatory bodies or the media. Conceptually, employee dissent should be thought of as a form of employee resistance, upward influence, and employee voice, which includes boatrocking and whistleblowing as specific means for expression.

SEE ALSO: ► Control and Authority in Organizations ► Feedback Processes in Organizations ► Organizational Communication: Critical Approaches ► Organizational Culture ► Participative Processes in Organizations ► Supervisor–Subordinate Relationships

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Distance Education

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Distance education refers to teaching and learning that occurs when students and teachers are in different physical and/or geographic locations. Although many people believe that distance education is a recent development made possible by the → Internet, it actually began in the late 1800s. Distance education has its roots in correspondence courses, which began around 1870. In fact, the first home study division of an American university was established in 1882 at the University of Chicago. Home study programs flourished in the early 1900s, and the National University Extension Association established a Correspondence Study Division in 1915. Correspondence programs provided written educational materials leading to the completion of programs, certification, and college degrees to students via mail services. Generally, early distance education programs were targeted toward adults living in rural areas who did not have access to education otherwise.

During the 1930s, → *radio broadcast* became a popular medium for providing distance education in the US, and by 1952, the → Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had established public broadcasting with the primary objective of providing instructional television (Portway 1992; → Educational Media; Instructional Television). Telecourses became a mainstay in distance education throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Some colleges provided entire programs of study via distance education telecourses. Video-tape technology expanded the opportunities for distance education, and telecourses had their most extensive use during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Internet and world wide web revolutionized distance education, once again, during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (see Portway [1992], for a complete review).

Today, distance education is *defined more broadly* as a formal learning activity that occurs when students and instructors are separated by geographic distance or by time, supported