ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT

Jeffrey W. Kassing, Arizona State University

At a fundamental level expressing disagreement is part and parcel of American culture. Our cultural values ensure this. Yet, there is one place, perhaps the place where we spend most of our adult lives, which restricts freedom of speech. That place is the workplace. It is here that we hold our tongues, carefully choose what we say, and temper our opinions. We do so because the risks of speaking out at work are considerable (Waldron & Kassing, 2011). We may put our jobs, careers, and livelihood on the line when we speak out. So we confront an unusual paradox when we go to work. We value and uphold the principles of free speech culturally, yet we check those very principles at the proverbial office door each morning. The prevalence and acceptance of this paradox raises interesting questions about how and why employees express dissent within organizations, and it frames organizational dissent as a pertinent line of communication inquiry. This chapter highlights that line of inquiry by considering the question: What issues cause employee dissent in the workplace and how do employees dissent?

Before discussing why and how employees dissent, some definitions should be put in place. Organizational dissent refers to the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about workplace policies and practices (Kassing, 1998). Expressing dissent, then, entails separating or distancing oneself from the majority and taking a stance that is in opposition to the prevailing position. Organizational dissent naturally requires contradiction and disagreement (Kassing, 1997, 2011a). This does not, however, mean that it will be destructive to the organization. Rather, this is one of several commonly held misconceptions about organizational dissent. To the contrary, organizational dissent can offer important corrective feedback that helps organizations identify problematic practices and policies that could prove damaging and debilitating if left unaddressed (Hegstrom, 1995; Kassing, 1997).

What other assumptions do we make about dissent that should be reconsidered? Well, people often associate dissent with conflict. Dissent can certainly bring about conflict, but it does not always do so (Kassing, 1997; Redding, 1985). Additionally, people tend to believe that dissent occurs clearly and often exclusively in response to unethical actions. While this is one

key reason why people express dissent, it is only one of many (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Another common misconception is the idea that dissent stems from dissatisfaction. This may be the case, but dissatisfied employees are not the only ones who express dissent. In fact, research suggests that employees dissent out of a desire to fix problems in the workplace and to protect their companies from risk (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Furthermore, we tend to liken dissent to open protest, something shared loudly and widely. But realistically it can be comparatively quiet, shared with colleagues around the office and with friends and family outside of work (Kassing, 1998). Similarly, we expect dissent to be adversarial. But it can be constructive in nature too as it may be delivered with suggestions for improving the situation (Kassing, 2002). Dissent therefore can be offered in the spirit of helpfulness (Redding, 1985). Thus, dissent expression is related to but independent from conflict, happens in response to all manner of events and issues, and is shared by both satisfied and dissatisfied employees. And it can be expressed openly or selectively as well as constructively or destructively (Kassing, 2007, 2011a).

With these conceptual parameters in mind, we can now consider what causes employees to express dissent in the first place. Kassing (1997) suggested that there are three crucial pieces to the dissent equation: the dissent triggering event, the spheres of influence that affect dissent expression, and the dissent audience. Accordingly, a dissent trigger starts the process in motion (Kassing, 1997; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). This is an event that is deemed serious enough to warrant attention—a situation that is grave enough to move an employee to express dissent despite the attendant risks. Many factors can serve as dissent triggers, including employee treatment, organizational change, decision making, inefficiency, roles and responsibilities, performance evaluation, ethics, and preventing harm to customers and coworkers (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). In addition, dissent routinely triggers as a result of some shortcoming in supervision (Kassing, 2007).

Once a dissent trigger escalates to the point where an employee feels strongly that it must be addressed, the employee considers individual, relational, and organizational spheres of influence, in conjunction with personal goals (Garner, 2009), before deciding with whom to share dissent. Sorting through these spheres of influence allows employees to address two basic questions. First, will I be perceived as adversarial or constructive? Second, what is the likelihood of experiencing some measure of retaliation for expressing dissent? While some modern organizations have made considerable strides in being more dissent tolerant, affording employees greater latitude in expressing and sharing their opinions (Cheney, 1995; Hegstrom, 1990), the majority of workplaces continue to restrict employee voice even as they intend to honor and promote it (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Thus, many employees operate under the assumption that they may experience retaliation for speaking out about issues. Accordingly, they rely upon individual, relational, and organizational influences to inform their decisions about how and with whom to express dissent (Kassing, 1997).

These spheres of influence help employees choose an audience for their dissent. Dissent audiences include: management, coworkers, and family and friends outside of work (Kassing, 1997, 1998; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Expressing dissent to management is known as articulated or upward dissent. This is dissent that is shared directly and openly with supervisors, management,

or others higher in the chain of command. It happens when employees determine that they will be viewed as constructive and are unlikely to experience retaliation. For example, managers tend to express more upward dissent than their non-management counterparts (Kassing & Armstrong, 2001; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999). So too do employees who feel comfortable and confident with their organizational standing (Kassing, 2000a; Payne, 2007).

Sharing dissent with coworkers of the same or a similar rank has been called latent or lateral dissent. The term latent refers to the fact that dissent readily exists in organizations but goes unheard by management. Lateral denotes that this form of dissent expression moves laterally within organizations—being shared vertically across levels of the organization rather than being directed upward to management. Latent/lateral dissent occurs when employees feel that it is too risky to express their disagreement with management directly, but still feel that dissent should be heard by others in the organization. In these instances they turn to coworkers as a sounding board. Latent/lateral dissent appears to be favored by non-management workers, by employees who are not as invested in their organizations, and by organizational members who exercise less influence in their workplaces (Kassing, 1998; Kassing & Armstrong, 2001; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999).

Displaced dissent gets directed to family members and non-work friends. It is a type of dissent expression that winds up being displaced outside organizations as employees intentionally seek out and express dissent to people who are not affiliated with their respective workplaces. This type of dissent occurs when people recognize that they most certainly will be perceived as adversarial and risk retaliation. Thus, they turn to the safer and insulated channels of expression that organizational outsiders provide. Outsiders offer counsel, advice, and support with little risk to the dissenter. So while displaced dissent fails to help the organization, it serves an important function for organizational members. Research findings indicate that people rely on displaced dissent when they are new and inexperienced and when they are considering terminating their employment (Kassing & Dicioccio, 2004; Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, in press). That is, at times when seeking the guidance of others can prove particularly pertinent.

While these types of dissent expression have traditionally been conceptualized as distinct from one another, the advent of social media has shown how they can in fact overlap (Gosset & Kilker, 2006). Researchers, for example, studied what are known as gripe sites or sucks sites. These are Web pages that current or former employees, as well as customers, use to vent their frustration and to express their disagreement with a given organization's practices. Such sites have proliferated in the past decade and many organizations have devoted considerable time and energy to shutting these sites down. Gosset and Kilker's (2006) work revealed that what by definition would be considered displaced dissent, as it was not shared within the traditional confines of the organization, wound up functioning more like upward dissent. Accordingly, former and current employees expressed dissent in their postings knowing full well that management would be reading their comments. Thus, displaced and upward dissent combined in a novel way as a result of social media's capability to provide anonymity while targeting a particular readership (i.e., management).

Employees come to share dissent with one of these audiences based on their assessment of how individual, relational, and organizational influences converge. Individual influences include the personality and communication traits that people bring into their respective organizations. For

example, people who like to argue seem to be more inclined to express dissent to management (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999). Similarly, those who are confident that they control what happens to them more so than external factors (i.e., possess an internal locus of control) favor expressing dissent to management (Kassing & Avtgis, 2001). In contrast, people who are more verbally aggressive by nature and those who believe that external factors exercise greater control in their lives appear to share dissent with their coworkers more readily (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999, 2001).

In addition, individual influences also take into account how people feel about their respective organizations. Are they more or less satisfied, committed, loyal, and engaged? Research illustrates that people who are more satisfied with work express upward dissent to management compared to those who are less satisfied (Kassing, 1998). Similarly, those who have a stronger connection with their workplace—those who identify more clearly and strongly with the organization as well as those who have higher levels of organization-based self esteem—favor upward dissent expression (Kassing, 2000a; Payne, 2007). Apparently work engagement associates strongly with upward dissent as well (Kassing et al., in press). And those who choose to express dissent to management also appear to avoid emotion based coping strategies for dealing with stress (Kassing, 2011b).

In contrast, employees who are less committed to their organizations express more lateral and displaced dissent, as do those employees who believe that they exercise little personal influence in their respective organizations (Kassing, 1998). Dissent expression also varies in response to employee burnout. Apparently employees suffering from burnout reduce their expression of lateral dissent to coworkers (Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, & Richardson, 2007). Moreover, employees who express lateral and displaced dissent reportedly rely on emotional venting when dealing with stress and give greater consideration to leaving their respective organizations (Kassing, 2011b; Kassing et al, in press).

Relational influences include the types of relationships we maintain with our supervisors, managers, coworkers, and colleagues (Kassing, 1997). In contrast to the aforementioned study on social media, early research showed that employees preferred to express dissent most readily in face-to-face interactions with their supervisors (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Not surprisingly, when employees believe that they have strong relationships with their superiors they express more upward dissent to management and direct less lateral dissent to coworkers (Kassing, 1998, 2000b). Coworker relationships also factor into dissent expression. In fact, concern for coworkers has surfaced as a consistent reason people report feeling the need to express dissent (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). In some cases, concern for coworkers is a stronger reason for expressing dissent than unethical issues (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002).

The final set of influences—organizational—considers the impact that organizational structure, culture, and climate have on dissent expression (Kassing, 1997, 2000a). Organizational structure concerns the systematic arrangements that dictate reporting, tasks, and relationships within organizations. These are the formal and tangible aspects of organizations that influence how work gets accomplished. Apparently, dissenters feel more confident and influential sharing their concerns in smaller versus larger organizations (Miceli & Near, 1992). Other organizational facets, like the degree to which an organization operates bureaucratically with centralized or decentralized reporting can affect dissent expression as well (King, 1999). Organizational climate

and culture are the facets of organizational life that take shape through the daily interactions of members sharing stories, recounting events, and enacting rituals. Organizational climate and culture inform employees about how tolerant their organizations will be with regard to hearing employee dissent. This often manifests in how organizations make decisions and the degree to which employees feel these decision making processes are fair. How fair employees perceive their organizations to be when it comes to making decisions has a clear impact on how they express dissent (Goodboy, Chory, & Dunleavy, 2009; Kassing & McDowell, 2008). Some organizations are clearly more tolerant of dissent than others and employees come to learn these tolerance levels as they develop an understanding of an organization's culture (Hegstrom, 1990; Pacanowsky, 1988). Not surprisingly, when employees recognize that their organizations are more tolerant of dissent they share more upward dissent with management (Kassing, 1998, 2000a).

Although dissenters can share their concerns with various audiences, upward dissent presents the greatest challenge to employees (Kassing, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a). As a result, employees express upward dissent strategically, choosing from a variety of different approaches (Kassing, 2002). These range from providing solutions and evidence to going around your boss and threatening to quit and vary with regard to perceived effectiveness and utility (Kassing, 2005).

Direct-factual appeal is a proactive and competent strategy (Kassing, 2005), which involves "supporting one's dissent claim with factual information derived from some combination of physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, and personal work experience" (Kassing, 2002, p. 195). When using this strategy, employees actively collect evidence and summon their experience. In doing so, they buoy their concerns with facts, evidence, and workplace experience. As a result, they avoid unfounded opinions, unnecessarily aggressive attacks, and misdirected complaints. Furthermore, accompanying one's dissent claim with evidence shifts attention away from the individual dissenter and toward the issue at hand.

Solution presentation involves presenting a solution to the perceived problem that has triggered dissent. This strategy demonstrates a willingness to be proactive in addressing the concern on behalf of the dissenter and therefore is seen as widely effective and appropriate (Kassing, 2002, 2005). Employees have offered solutions that address a range of issues and vary in their viability. This highlights the fact that the feasibility of a solution is less pertinent than the act of offering one in the first place (Kassing, 2011a). Solutions presentation can be used in conjunction with direct factual appeals so that solutions accompany the direct evidence generated for a given issue (Kassing, 2002).

Circumvention is the act of going around one's immediate boss or supervisor in order to air a concern with someone higher in the chain of command (Kassing, 2002, 2007, 2009a). It is not used as frequently as direct-factual appeal and solution presentation strategies, but it is used somewhat routinely. People justified circumventing their bosses for three predominant reasons: supervisor inaction, supervisor poor performance, and supervisor indiscretion (Kassing, 2009a). Supervisor inaction led to circumvention when employees felt that their supervisors' continual dismissal of or disregard for their concerns warranted the attention of other audiences. In these instances, employees attempted multiple times to share their concerns with an inattentive or dismissive supervisor or they assumed that the supervisor would be inattentive and dismissive.

Inaction or suspected inaction resulted in circumvention in both cases. Circumvention also occurred when employees believed that their bosses were failing to perform their respective duties well or when they were taking advantage of their supervisory status, using it as the basis for capricious and unjustifiable decisions. Finally, employees circumvented supervisors when there were clear breeches of company policy. These instances included cases of deceit, theft, poor judgment, and harassment (Kassing, 2009a). Circumventing one's supervisor is no small undertaking as it resulted in superior-subordinate relational decline the majority of the time (Kassing, 2007). However, there were many cases in which it produced some form of relational stability or even improvement. This happened, for example, when supervisors recognized that circumvention was necessary to get movement from upper management on issues they were unable to address at their supervisory level.

Threatening resignation, as the name suggests, involves using the threat of quitting one's job as a means to draw attention to the severity of the situation. This strategy confronts the organization and supervisor with an ultimatum, fix the situation or lose the employee. For this reason it is not a strategy to be used regularly and in fact serves as an option of last resort in many instances (Kassing, 2009a). Although it does not occur too often, it does surface in particular types of situations (Kassing, 2002, 2011a). Employees have threatened resignation when their safety has been put in jeopardy by a job requirement or an organizational failure to address a dangerous circumstance. Threatening resignation also surfaces when employees confront a direct and serious affront to their integrity and image and when they reach an impasse with their supervisors (Kassing, 2011a). In the former case, employees respond to a direct attack on their work, personality, or standing in the company with the threat of resignation, whereas in the latter case they do so because they finally come to the point where they recognize that an intolerable and untenable situation with their direct supervisor will not change without the threat of resignation. When threatening resignation, employees reveal how far they are willing to be pushed before they decide to push back. This can occur instantaneously as in cases of safety, harm, and personal affronts, or it can be reached over time when employees finally determine that a longstanding and ongoing situation will not change unless they take dramatic action. Employees do not threaten such dramatic action though without recognizing that it could mean they would in fact have to quit their jobs (Kassing, 2002, 2011a).

The final upward dissent strategy is repetition. This strategy involves revisiting an issue on several occasions across a given period of time with the intention of drawing some resolution from management (Kassing, 2002, 2009b). When enacting repetition, employees rely upon and use the other upward dissent strategies discussed here, with the intention of keeping a topic alive without overstating it. This can be challenging as supervisors can grow weary of hearing the same concerns repeatedly, but also effective as it demonstrates employees' undeterred desire to see the issue addressed satisfactorily. Employees, then, must be cautious about the impressions they create when practicing repetition. Thus, they tend to use proactive and competent strategies initially and more often (e.g., solution presentation, direct factual appeal) and only move to less competent ones later (i.e., circumvention and threatening resignation). Employees also must give consideration to how often and how frequently they should raise the same concern (Kassing, 2009b). Should it be brought up weekly or monthly, every other day, or once every few weeks? Additionally, repetition seems to be affected by supervisors' responses. When supervisors delay

addressing dissent claims, employees stretch repetition out and let it transpire for longer. In contrast, when supervisors became irritated and annoyed with hearing dissent about the same issue repeatedly, employees shortened the length of time they were willing to practice repetition.

In conclusion, employees face any number of triggering events at work that will lead them to feel they need to express dissent. They must then work through a host of influences that will help them determine with whom they should share their dissent. They can share it with management, with coworkers, or with family members and friends outside of work. If they choose to share dissent with management, employees can enact several different strategies for expressing upward dissent. Doing so will require consideration of which tactics to use, how often to use them, and how supervisors react to those tactics.

Dissent expression in organizations is an interesting line of inquiry, one that has garnered considerable attention (Kassing, 2011a). It is relevant to anyone who confronts the need to share disagreement and contradictory opinions at work. Understanding what causes dissent and how people go about expressing it is an important communication skill that will serve employees well. Once familiar with the possibilities, dissenters can know and understand why they feel the need to speak out, can determine who to talk to about their concerns, and can decide how best to express those concerns. When this happens both individuals and organizations stand to benefit.

REFERENCES

Avtgis, T. A., Thomas-Maddox, C., Taylor, E., & Richardson, B. R. (2007). The influence of employee burnout syndrome on the expression of organizational dissent. *Communication Research Reports, 24,* 97–102.

Cheney, G. (1995). Democracy in the workplace: Theory and practice from the perspective of communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 23,* 167–200.

Garner, J. T. (2009). Strategic dissent: Expressions of organizational dissent motivated by influence goals. *International Journal of Strategic Management, 3,* 34–51.

Goodboy, A. K., Chory, R. M., & Dunleavy, K. N. (2009). Organizational dissent as a function of organizational justice. *Communication Research Reports, 25,* 255–265.

Gossett, L. M., & Kilker, J. (2006). My job sucks: Examining counterinstitutional web sites as locations for organizational member voice, dissent, and resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly, 20,* 63–90.

Hegstrom, T. G. (1990). Mimetic and dissent conditions in organizational rhetoric. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 18,* 141–152.

Hegstrom, T. G. (1995). Focus on organizational dissent: A functionalist response to criticism. In J. Lehtonen (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on communication research and pedagogy* (pp. 83–94). St. Ingbert, Germany: Rohrig University Press.

Kassing, J. W. (1997). Articulating, antagonizing, and displacing: A model of employee dissent. *Communication Studies, 48,* 311–332.

Kassing, J. W. (1998). Development and validation of the Organizational Dissent Scale. *Management Communication Quarterly, 12,* 183–229.

Kassing, J. W. (2000a). Exploring the relationship between workplace freedom of speech, organizational identification, and employee dissent. *Communication Research Reports, 17,* 387–396.

Kassing, J. W. (2000b). Investigating the relationship between superior-subordinate relationship quality and employee dissent. *Communication Research Reports, 17,* 58–70.

Kassing, J. W. (2002). Speaking up: Identifying employees' upward dissent strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16,* 187–209.

Kassing, J. W. (2005). Speaking up competently: A comparison of perceived competence in upward dissent strategies. *Communication Research Reports, 22,* 227–234.

Kassing, J. W. (2007). Going around the boss: Exploring the consequences of circumvention. *Management Communication Quarterly, 21,* 55–74.

Kassing, J. W. (2009a). Breaking the chain of command: Making sense of employee circumvention. *Journal of Business Communication, 46,* 311–334.

Kassing, J. W. (2009b). In case you didn't hear me the first time: An examination of repetitious upward dissent. *Management Communication Quarterly, 22,* 416–436.

Kassing, J. W. (2011a). Dissent in organizations. Cambridge: Polity.

Kassing, J. W. (2011b). Stressing out about dissent: Examining the relationship between coping strategies and dissent expression. *Communication Research Reports, 28,* 225–234.

Kassing, J. W., & Armstrong, T. A. (2001). Examining the association of job tenure, employment history, and organizational status with employee dissent. *Communication Research Reports, 18,* 264–273.

Kassing, J. W., & Armstrong, T. A. (2002). Someone's going to hear about this: Examining the association between dissent-triggering events and employees' dissent expression. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16,* 39–65.

Kassing, J. W., & Avtgis, T. A., (1999). Examining the relationship between organizational dissent and aggressive communication. *Management Communication Quarterly, 13*(1), 76–91.

Kassing, J. W., & Avtgis, T. A. (2001). Dissension in the organization as a function of control expectancies. *Communication Research Reports, 18,* 118–127.

Kassing, J. W., & DiCioccio, R. L. (2004). Testing a workplace experience explanation of displaced dissent. *Communication Reports, 17,* 111–120.

Kassing, J. W., & McDowell, Z. (2008). Talk about fairness: Exploring the relationship between procedural justice and employee dissent. *Communication Research Reports, 25,* 1–10.

Kassing, J. W., Piemonte, N. M., Goman, C. C., & Mitchell, C. A. (in press). Dissent expression as an indicator of work engagement and intention to leave. *Journal of Business Communication.*

King, G. (1999). The implications of an organization's structure on whistleblowing. *Journal of Business Ethics, 20,* 315–326.

Miceli, M. P., & Near, J. P. (1992). *Blowing the whistle: The organizational and legal implications for companies and employees.* New York: Lexington Books.

Pacanowsky, M. E. (1988). Communication in the empowering organization. In J. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook, 11* (pp. 356–379). Beverley Hills: Sage.

Payne, H. J. (2007). The role of organization-based self-esteem in employee dissent expression. *Communication Research Reports, 24,* 235–240.

Redding, W. C. (1985). Rocking boats, blowing whistles, and teaching speech communication. *Communication Education, 34,* 245–258.

Sprague, J. A., & Ruud, G. L. (1988). Boat-rocking in the high technology culture. *American Behavioral Scientist, 32*, 169–193.

Stohl, C., & Cheney, G. (2001). Participatory processes/paradoxical practices: Communication and the dilemmas of organizational democracy. *Management Communication Quarterly, 14,* 349–407.

Van Dyne, L., Ang, S., & Botero, I. C. (2003). Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs. *Journal of Management Studies, 40,* 1359–1392.

Waldron, V. R., & Kassing. J. W. (2011). *Managing risk in communication encounters: Strategies for the workplace.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.