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Designing a Contingency Model for Breaking Organizational Silence in Iranian Public Organizations

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: The present study aimed to design a contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations.

Methods and Materials: This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the philosophical foundations of pragmatism. Initially, the researcher participated in various seminars and workshops held in public organizations and made observations that facilitated familiarity with the phenomenon of organizational silence in these organizations and with manifestations of unethical behavior. Subsequently, the interview questions were developed based on the research literature and the researcher's observations. Thereafter, the study model was developed using grounded theory, specifically Glaser's classical approach.

Findings: The findings yielded eight main categories for the model. The first category, "Human Resource Training and Development," comprised three subcategories: "Employee Participation Training," "Improvement of Professional Ethical Conduct," and "Improvement of Individual Skill Levels." The second category, "Improvement of Organizational Interactions," included two subcategories: "Improvement of the Quality of Organizational Interactions" and "Healthiness of Organizational Interactions." The third category, "Organizational Strategic Decisions," consisted of two subcategories: "Improvement of Strategic Thinking in the Organization" and "Strategic Changes toward Breaking Organizational Silence." The fourth category, "Organizational Support and Backing," included four subcategories: "Ensuring Job Security," "An Organizational Climate Conducive to Breaking Organizational Silence," "Organizational Support Policies," and "Job Motivational Factors." The fifth category, "Leadership and Managerial Factors," consisted of three subcategories: "Leadership Style," "Attitudes of Managers and Supervisors," and "Participative Orientation among Managers." The sixth category, "Psychological and Mental Factors," included two subcategories: "Psychological Well-Being Improvement Programs" and "Changes in Employee Attitudes." The seventh category, "Individual Factors," consisted of three subcategories: "Observance of

Professional Ethics," "Coping with Fears," and "Personality Characteristics." Finally, the eighth category, "Organizational Culture," included four subcategories: "Increasing Spirituality at Work," "Creating a Collaborative Culture," "An Ethical and Criticism-Receptive Climate," and "Level of Organizational Culture."

Conclusion: The findings of the present study can assist managers and researchers in designing a contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations and provide practical guidelines for overcoming organizational silence.

Keywords: *contingency model design, breaking organizational silence, grounded theory, Iranian public organizations.*

1 Introduction

Organizational silence has emerged as a significant concern in contemporary management because the effectiveness of organizations increasingly depends on employees' willingness to communicate knowledge, concerns, suggestions, errors, and dissenting views to those who possess the authority to act on them. In many workplaces, employees possess information that may be valuable for improving processes, preventing failures, correcting unethical conduct, and strengthening organizational learning, yet they may deliberately withhold such information. Organizational silence therefore extends beyond the simple absence of speech; it represents a complex behavioral and organizational phenomenon in which employees refrain from expressing ideas, concerns, or work-related information that could potentially contribute to organizational improvement. Recent scholarship has further emphasized that silence should not be interpreted uniformly, because it may emerge from fear, resignation, strategic calculation, concern for others, organizational norms, or even the deliberate pursuit of quietness and reflection. Accordingly, the managerial challenge is not merely to maximize employee speaking, but to distinguish harmful forms of silence from contextually constructive forms and to create conditions under which employees can communicate when voice is necessary and remain silent when silence genuinely serves organizational or collective interests (Asselineau et al., 2024; Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024).

The phenomenon becomes particularly important when silence is transformed from an individual response into a collective organizational pattern. When employees repeatedly conclude that expressing concerns is ineffective, risky, or professionally costly, silence may become institutionalized through shared beliefs about what can safely be discussed and which issues should remain unspoken. Such conditions may gradually weaken communication flows between hierarchical levels, reduce managers' access to operational information, and constrain organizational learning and adaptation. Evidence from public-sector settings suggests that organizational silence is closely associated with employees' relationships with their organizations and may affect organizational commitment, particularly where employees perceive insufficient opportunities to express themselves or limited responsiveness from organizational authorities (Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024). Research in Iranian public-sector environments has likewise identified organizational silence as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by managerial, structural, cultural, interpersonal, and individual conditions, demonstrating that silence in public organizations cannot be understood solely as an employee-level behavioral problem (Gelevardi et al., 2024; Mehter Gharadaghi et al., 2024).

The consequences of organizational silence can extend well beyond restricted communication. Persistent withholding of opinions may contribute to frustration, psychological withdrawal, work alienation, procrastination, burnout, cynicism, knowledge hiding, and intentions to leave the organization. Recent findings concerning teachers indicate that organizational silence can contribute to turnover intention through increased work alienation, suggesting that remaining silent may progressively weaken employees' psychological connection with their occupation and organization (Katıtaş, 2026). Similar concerns arise in educational workplaces where organizational silence has been positioned as a mechanism connecting organizational bullying with teacher burnout, indicating that employees who experience hostile or intimidating conditions may cope by withholding their views, while this silence itself may reinforce emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Shirin & Nazarzadeh, 2024). In another organizational context, silence has also been associated with procrastination, particularly when organizational conflict creates conditions in which employees prefer avoidance to open confrontation or constructive discussion (Dehghani Far & Seydi, 2024). These findings illustrate that silence is not a passive or inconsequential phenomenon; rather, it may represent an

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intermediate mechanism through which adverse organizational conditions are translated into dysfunctional employee attitudes and behaviors.

The relationship between silence and employee well-being has consequently received increasing attention. Organizational climate can shape whether employees experience their workplace as psychologically safe, supportive, respectful, and receptive to participation. When the climate discourages openness or signals that speaking may result in negative consequences, employees may suppress concerns despite recognizing their importance. Research on organizational climate and employee silence has highlighted the relationship between silence and burnout, reinforcing the view that prolonged suppression of concerns may generate psychological costs for employees while simultaneously depriving organizations of potentially valuable information (Duarte et al., 2024). Similarly, studies of workplace ostracism demonstrate that organizational silence may operate as an important mechanism through which exclusionary experiences influence undesirable work behaviors such as procrastination (El-Sayed et al., 2024). The organizational environment therefore determines not only whether employees speak but also whether they believe that expressing concerns will be acknowledged, treated fairly, and protected from interpersonal or managerial retaliation.

Among the most consistently identified contextual factors is organizational climate. A supportive climate can reduce employees' perceived risks of communication, whereas climates characterized by excessive hierarchy, distrust, favoritism, punitive reactions, or limited participation can reinforce silence. Studies in higher education institutions have demonstrated that organizational climate significantly influences organizational silence, emphasizing the importance of managerial practices and institutional conditions in determining employees' willingness to express work-related concerns (Kettaf, 2024). Organizational trust and resilience are similarly relevant. When employees believe that organizational actors are reliable, decisions are relatively fair, and the organization has sufficient adaptive capacity to respond to difficulties, they may be more willing to communicate openly. Conversely, low trust can increase perceptions of organizational silence and encourage withholding behavior even where formal communication channels are technically available (Yazdani et al., 2024). Thus, the existence of suggestion systems, meetings, or grievance procedures does not itself guarantee employee voice; employees must also believe that these mechanisms are credible, safe, and consequential.

Management support and interpersonal trust are particularly central to this process because employees frequently assess the interpersonal consequences of speaking before deciding whether to express concerns. In hierarchical organizations, employees may remain silent when they expect managers to react defensively, disregard suggestions, question their loyalty, or retaliate against criticism. By contrast, managerial support can signal that employee contributions are valued and that disagreement is not automatically interpreted as disobedience. Recent evidence from higher education has emphasized the mediating roles of management support and interpersonal trust in the relationship between organizational silence and organizational commitment, indicating that silence cannot be adequately explained without considering the quality of relationships between employees and organizational authorities (Panagiotounis & Saiti, 2026). These relational mechanisms are highly relevant to public organizations, where formal authority, administrative procedures, and hierarchical distance may amplify employees' sensitivity to managerial reactions.

Leadership therefore occupies a pivotal position in efforts to break organizational silence. Leadership style influences whether employees interpret organizational communication as genuinely participative or merely symbolic. Ethical, transformational, servant, and supportive leadership approaches can potentially reduce silence by emphasizing fairness, respect, development, participation, and responsible treatment of employees. Managers also shape silence through everyday micro-behaviors, including their responses to criticism, willingness to listen, degree of openness to alternative perspectives, and treatment of employees who identify organizational weaknesses. When managers demonstrate calmness, receptiveness, and commitment to employee suggestions, they can reduce the interpersonal cost of voice. Conversely, dismissive or humiliating managerial behavior can rapidly establish informal norms of self-censorship. The importance of leadership and supervisory relations is also supported by research on defensive silence, which has highlighted the need for organizational mechanisms specifically designed to enable creative employees to overcome fear-based withholding of ideas and concerns (Khosravi et al., 2024).

Breaking silence is particularly important for creative, knowledgeable, and professionally experienced employees because these employees often possess information that is

difficult for formal systems to capture. Defensive silence among creative employees can prevent organizations from benefiting from innovation, problem identification, and alternative solutions. Developing a model for breaking defensive silence therefore requires interventions extending beyond motivational appeals. Employees must experience job security, organizational support, fair treatment, appropriate rewards, and credible protection when they express ideas that challenge existing routines (Khosravi et al., 2024). At the same time, employee voice should be embedded within broader human resource development practices, including participation training, communication skills, professional ethics, self-confidence, teamwork, and knowledge development. Such competencies can increase employees' ability not merely to speak, but to communicate concerns constructively and responsibly.

The knowledge-management consequences of silence further increase its strategic significance. Organizations depend on the circulation of tacit and explicit knowledge across individuals and units, yet silence can obstruct both knowledge donating and knowledge collecting. When employees withhold experience, lessons learned, concerns, or specialized expertise, knowledge becomes fragmented and organizational learning becomes more difficult. Recent research has shown that knowledge donating and collecting can mediate the relationship between organizational silence and organizational cynicism, suggesting that silence can damage employee attitudes partly because it disrupts meaningful knowledge exchange (Panagiotounis, 2026). Related evidence has linked perceived anomie, organizational silence, compulsory organizational citizenship behavior, and workplace alienation to knowledge hiding, demonstrating that the informational consequences of silence may become embedded within broader patterns of distrust and dysfunctional workplace behavior (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). From this perspective, breaking organizational silence is not only an employee-relations issue but also a prerequisite for organizational learning and knowledge governance.

Career-related experiences also influence employees' decisions to remain silent. Employees who perceive limited advancement opportunities or career stagnation may conclude that voice is unlikely to improve their situation and may instead protect themselves through withdrawal. Research on career plateau has shown that such perceptions can lead to employee silence through complex mediating and moderating processes, indicating that silence may emerge when employees believe that their future within the organization is constrained (Jing et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of integrating career development, meritocracy, recognition, and fair advancement systems into strategies for overcoming organizational silence. Employees are more likely to invest effort in constructive communication when they perceive a meaningful relationship between competence, contribution, recognition, and career outcomes.

At the same time, silence must be conceptually differentiated according to its underlying motives. Not all silence is necessarily detrimental. Prosocial silence, for example, may involve withholding information to protect colleagues, preserve legitimate confidentiality, or serve organizational interests. Under conditions of organizational support and commitment to learning, certain forms of prosocial silence may have constructive functions (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024). Similarly, emerging scholarship has drawn attention to intentionally quiet environments and deliberate practices of silence, suggesting that periods of silence can support reflection, concentration, and thoughtful action when they are voluntary rather than imposed by fear or resignation (Asselineau et al., 2024). The managerial objective should therefore not be indiscriminate elimination of all silence. Instead, organizations need to break dysfunctional silence—particularly acquiescent and defensive silence—while preserving legitimate confidentiality, reflective quietness, and ethically motivated discretion.

Research in professional and healthcare settings further demonstrates that organizational silence is often experienced as a multidimensional process rather than a single behavior. A qualitative meta-synthesis of nurses' experiences of organizational silence has illustrated that silence can emerge from interacting personal, interpersonal, managerial, and organizational influences (Jian et al., 2025). Such evidence is important because professional employees may recognize risks, service-quality problems, procedural failures, or ethical concerns that are not immediately visible to senior management. If they perceive communication as unsafe or ineffective, the organization may lose access to critical frontline knowledge. This issue is particularly consequential in public and service organizations, where the outcomes of silence may affect not only employees and managers but also citizens, clients, and the quality of public services.

Public organizations constitute a particularly important context for studying organizational silence because they typically combine formalized procedures, hierarchical authority, legal accountability, political and administrative

pressures, and comparatively complex stakeholder environments. These characteristics may produce contradictory expectations: employees are expected to demonstrate accountability, professional responsibility, and commitment to public interests while simultaneously operating within structures that may discourage criticism of established procedures or senior decisions. Studies conducted among public-sector managers and employees have shown that silence is associated with a diverse range of antecedents and consequences and that understanding the lived experiences of managers is important for identifying the structural and behavioral mechanisms through which silence is reproduced (Gelevardi et al., 2024). Evidence from the Greek public sector similarly confirms that organizational silence is meaningfully connected with organizational commitment, suggesting that the issue transcends national settings and represents a broader challenge for public administration (Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024).

In the Iranian context, this problem is especially important because public organizations must simultaneously pursue administrative efficiency, accountability, ethical conduct, responsiveness to citizens, and adaptation to environmental change. A systematic review and meta-synthesis focused on organizational silence among public-sector employees has emphasized the multiplicity of factors involved, supporting the need for integrative models rather than isolated explanations centered on a single variable (Mehter Gharadaghi et al., 2024). Likewise, Iranian research on breaking defensive silence among creative employees indicates that active intervention is required to transform silence into constructive expression (Khosravi et al., 2024). These studies provide an important foundation, yet the complexity of public organizations means that no single leadership practice, human resource policy, cultural intervention, or psychological mechanism can be expected to break silence under all conditions.

This complexity points to the value of a contingency perspective. A contingency model assumes that effective organizational responses depend on the alignment among individual, relational, managerial, cultural, and structural conditions rather than on universally applicable prescriptions. For example, participation training may have limited effectiveness where employees lack job security; supportive leadership may be insufficient when organizational reward systems punish dissent; formal voice channels may remain unused where interpersonal trust is weak; and cultural initiatives may fail where favoritism or organizational politics undermine perceptions of fairness. Accordingly, breaking organizational silence requires a configuration of mutually reinforcing conditions encompassing human resource development, healthy organizational interactions, strategic decision-making, organizational support, leadership and managerial practices, psychological well-being, individual competencies, and organizational culture.

The need for such an integrated perspective is also reinforced by the variety of outcomes associated with organizational silence across recent research. Silence has been connected with burnout and organizational climate (Duarte et al., 2024), procrastination and organizational conflict (Dehghani Far & Seydi, 2024), workplace ostracism and procrastination (El-Sayed et al., 2024), turnover intention and work alienation (Katıtaş, 2026), bullying and burnout (Shirin & Nazarzadeh, 2024), knowledge hiding (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025), career plateau (Jing et al., 2024), organizational commitment (Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024), and cynicism through disrupted knowledge exchange (Panagiotounis, 2026). At the same time, organizational support, learning orientation, managerial support, trust, and appropriate forms of prosocial silence may moderate or transform these relationships (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024; Panagiotounis & Saiti, 2026). Taken together, these findings suggest that organizational silence is embedded in a network of mutually dependent conditions and cannot be effectively addressed through a fragmented managerial approach.

A further gap concerns the distinction between explaining organizational silence and explaining how it can actually be broken. Much of the available literature has concentrated on antecedents, consequences, correlates, and mediating mechanisms. Although these contributions are essential for understanding why silence occurs, managers also require actionable frameworks specifying the organizational conditions that can facilitate movement from silence toward constructive expression. A model of breaking organizational silence should therefore identify not only risk factors but also enabling mechanisms, such as employee participation training, ethical development, communication quality, strategic alignment, job security, supportive policies, appropriate motivational systems, participative leadership, psychological support, self-confidence, professional ethics, collaborative culture, respect for human dignity, constructive criticism, and organizational learning. The interaction among these components is particularly relevant in public organizations, where changes in one dimension

may remain ineffective unless supported by complementary changes elsewhere.

Consequently, a grounded, context-sensitive investigation is required to uncover how managers and experts in Iranian public organizations understand the conditions necessary for breaking organizational silence. A qualitative approach is especially appropriate because employees' and managers' interpretations of silence involve implicit assumptions about fear, trust, fairness, authority, professional ethics, interpersonal relationships, and organizational culture that may not be adequately captured through predetermined quantitative measures. Existing qualitative evidence in public-sector and professional environments confirms the value of examining lived experience and context in order to reveal the mechanisms through which silence is formed and sustained (Gelevardi et al., 2024; Jian et al., 2025). Developing a contingency model from such evidence can therefore provide both theoretical integration and practical guidance for managers seeking to create environments in which employees can responsibly express concerns, suggestions, criticism, and innovative ideas.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to design a contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations.

2 Methods and Materials

This study employed grounded theory. Accordingly, the research was qualitative and fundamental in terms of its purpose (Zagzebski, 1996). This stage helped the researcher develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of organizational silence, explain relationships among relevant phenomena, and contribute to the existing body of knowledge concerning the creation of mechanisms for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations. In this study, grounded theory was used to formulate and explain a contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations.

Three approaches to grounded theory have been identified: the systematic approach, the emergent approach, and the constructivist approach (Sarmad et al., 2012). In the present study, the emergent, or Glaserian, approach was employed.

After designing the interview protocol and examining its validity, the research data were collected through interviews with 11 senior managers of the Iranian National Tax Administration. The experts selected for the semi-structured interviews held doctoral degrees or were doctoral students, had at least 15 years of professional experience in the Tax Administration, and had educational backgrounds in public administration or entrepreneurship. Purposive sampling with a judgmental selection strategy was used. Interviewees were identified from two groups with academic and practical expertise and were questioned regarding the qualitative data relevant to the research topic.

All stages of open coding, selective or focused coding, theoretical coding, and ultimately the development of the theoretical model were derived from the interview transcripts and the theoretical literature.

Based on the data obtained from the interviews and the researcher's observations, the first stage of grounded theory analysis, namely open coding, was conducted.

In this process, the researcher first examined the written interview transcripts while considering the research objectives and questions. In grounded theory, coding can be conducted in various ways, including sentence-by-sentence, word-by-word, or incident-by-incident analysis. Because the researcher had already developed preliminary mental representations of certain codes during the interviews, incident-by-incident coding was employed during the coding process. These codes represented the characteristics of concepts as perceived by the researcher and generally referred to a common theme. When coding the interview transcripts, the researcher used in vivo codes, which consisted of the interviewees' exact expressions, and, in some cases, codes based on the researcher's interpretation of the statements, referred to here as confirmatory codes. Subsequently, appropriate codes were assigned on the basis of concepts developed from previous studies.

The present study adopted the emergent (Glaserian) approach in pursuing its objectives because, although this approach is challenging, the resulting models are developed within a broad analytical space, thereby expanding the researcher's perspective for data analysis. This approach to grounded theory does not rely on predefined assumptions; rather, it seeks to discover the participants' main concern and the manner in which this concern is resolved within the field of study. In this regard, Glaser repeatedly refers in his writings to the concept of the participants' "main concern." Grounded theory explains how participants resolve their primary concern, even though they may not be conceptually aware of the underlying process. Classical grounded theory is implemented through three fundamental steps. Through the fragmentation of data, coding moves the researcher beyond the empirical level by grouping data into codes that

will ultimately contribute to theory development. Under this approach, coding is implemented through three steps within two sequential stages: substantive coding, consisting of open coding and selective coding, followed by theoretical coding. These procedures were applied to identify the structure of the dimensions constituting the model for breaking organizational silence.

In this study, a combination of the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was used to assess the validity of the data and the interpretations derived from them.

Table 1

Criteria for Evaluating Interview Validity

Criterion	Definition	Description and Conclusion
Credibility	The extent to which the research findings accurately represent the data.	The interviews were conducted over several weeks, and continuous reports were provided to the research supervisors and advisors.
Transferability	The extent to which the research findings may be applicable to other similar contexts.	Purposive sampling was employed, the collected information was considered sufficient, and reviewers' assessments indicated that readers could evaluate the transferability of the findings to comparable contexts. Accordingly, the relevant concepts were ultimately extracted.
Dependability	The extent to which the findings are not exclusively dependent on a particular time and place and demonstrate stability in the explanations developed.	The interviewees expressed their opinions and perspectives in detail, enabling the researcher to acquire the required experience and understanding.
Confirmability	The extent to which the interpretations were not influenced by inaccurate information, concealment, or evasiveness on the part of interviewees.	The interviews were conducted in a professional yet friendly organizational environment, and the participants willingly provided the relevant information.

To measure test–retest reliability, two coded interview transcripts were selected completely at random and without prior cognitive bias from among the coded interviews. They were recoded by the researcher after an interval of 10 days, and the resulting codes were then compared. For each interview, codes that were similar across the two coding occasions were classified as agreements, whereas dissimilar codes were classified as disagreements. It should be noted that the number of agreements was calculated in terms of paired codes.

For example, as shown in the coding results for Interviews 3 and 12, the total number of codes generated at the two coding occasions separated by a 10-day interval was 25. The total number of agreements between the codes generated on the two occasions was 9, whereas the total number of disagreements was 7. Based on the formula presented above, the test–retest reliability of the interviews conducted in this study was 72%.

Table 2

Calculation of Test–Retest Reliability

Interview Code	Total Number of Codes	Number of Agreements	Number of Disagreements	Test–Retest Reliability (%)
3T	11	4	3	73
12T	14	5	4	71
Total	25	9	7	72

Given that the obtained reliability coefficient of 0.72 was greater than 0.60, the reliability of the coding process was considered acceptable.

3 Findings and Results

Initially, the researcher participated in various seminars and workshops held in public organizations and made observations that provided familiarity with the phenomenon of organizational silence in these organizations as well as manifestations of unethical behavior. Subsequently, the interview questions were developed on the basis of the research literature and these observations. Theoretical saturation was achieved after conducting eight interviews with the experts included in the study. Nevertheless, three additional interviews were conducted to enhance the robustness of the model, resulting in a total of 11 interviews with participants from the Tax Administration. Thereafter,

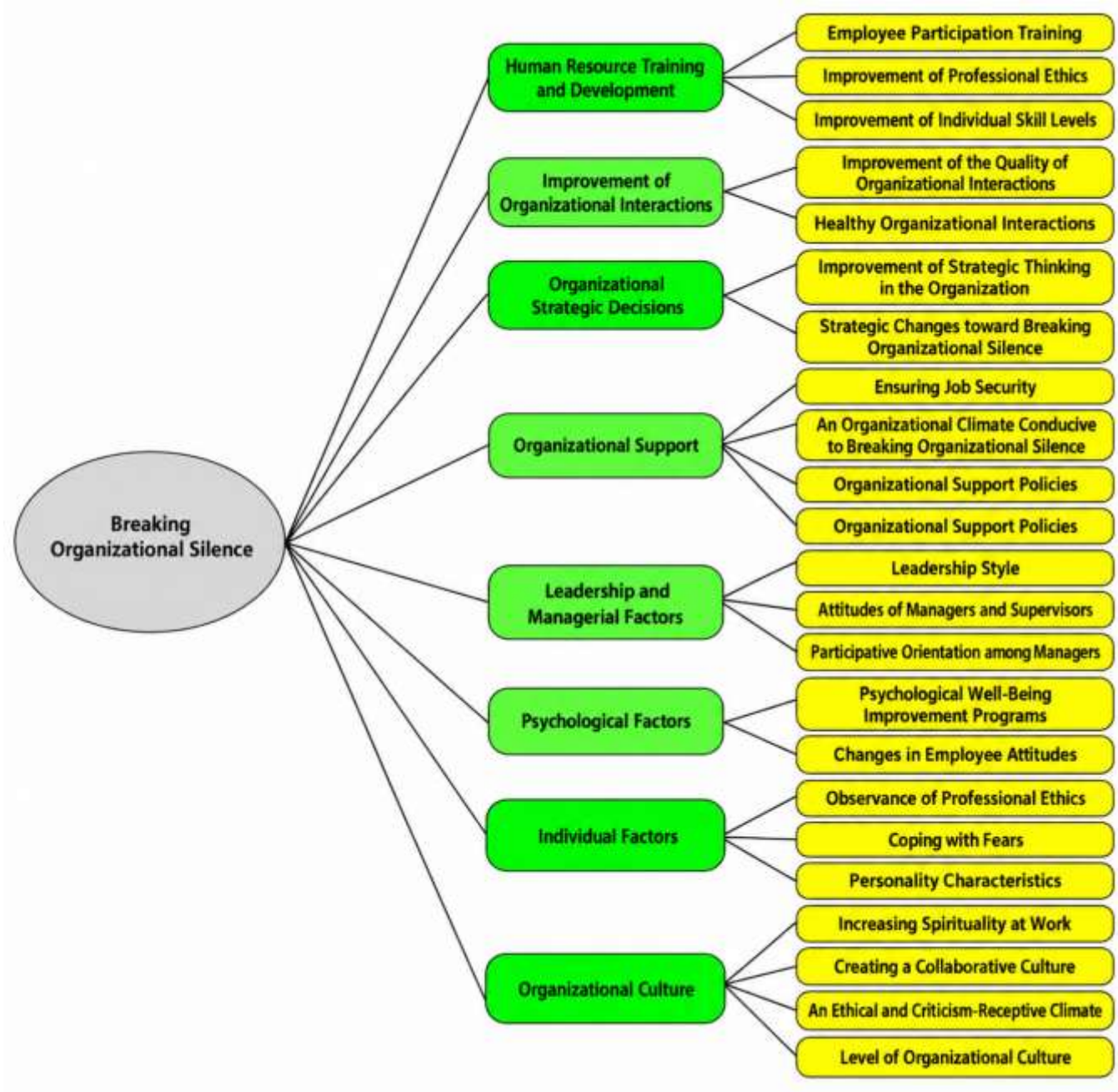
the study model was developed using grounded theory, specifically the classical Glaserian approach.

The data used in the present study were obtained from both documentary and field sources. The study collected the perspectives of academic experts and experts from the Tax Administration through multiple interviews. Accordingly, the method used to collect primary information was also field-based because the researcher entered the research setting directly and gathered primary data through interviews. Therefore, the present study employed a combination of documentary and field methods to collect the required information. The sampling method was purposive.

Based on the research findings, eight dimensions, or main categories, of the contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations were identified as follows:

Figure 1

Contingency Model for Breaking Organizational Silence in Iranian Public Organizations



Based on the model presented in Figure 1, the analysis of Iranian public organizations produced 12 open codes related to Human Resource Training and Development, 10 codes related to Improvement of Organizational Interactions, 8 codes related to Organizational Strategic Decisions, 14 codes related to Organizational Support and Backing, 13 codes related to Leadership and Managerial Factors, 8 codes related to Psychological and Mental Factors, 11 codes related to Individual Factors, and 16 codes related to Organizational Culture. Each of these dimensions is discussed below.

The category "Human Resource Training and Development" consists of three subcategories: "Employee Participation Training," "Improvement of Professional Ethical Conduct," and "Improvement of Individual Skill Levels." The indicators of this category include: individual knowledge management; promotion of a teamwork orientation; enhancement of organizational knowledge; creation of trust and empathy; protection of personal and organizational privacy and information; attention to ethical values; sense of responsibility; work conscience; enhancement of creativity and innovation; reinforcement of extra-role behaviors; promotion of innovative thinking; and enhancement of self-confidence.

The category "Improvement of Organizational Interactions" consists of two subcategories: "Improvement of the Quality of Organizational Interactions" and "Healthiness of Organizational Interactions." The indicators of this category include: friendly relationships within the organization; stability, continuity, and flexibility in work relationships; experience of collaboration and mutual satisfaction; provision of reciprocal feedback; workforce stability; combating favoritism; combating organizational corruption; preventing organizational backstabbing; constructive and cordial relationships with colleagues; and accountability.

The category "Organizational Strategic Decisions" consists of two subcategories: "Improvement of Strategic Thinking in the Organization" and "Strategic Changes toward Breaking Organizational Silence." The indicators of this category include: strengthening a realistic perspective; alignment with organizational objectives; strategic intelligence; strategic intent; designing strategies supportive of change; designing strategies supportive of talented and high-performing employees; reducing rules and regulations that reinforce organizational silence; and transformation and improvement of short-term objectives.

The category "Organizational Support and Backing" consists of four subcategories: "Ensuring Job Security," "An Organizational Climate Conducive to Breaking Organizational Silence," "Organizational Support Policies," and "Job Motivational Factors." The indicators of this category include: assigning appropriate positions to talented employees; job autonomy for creative employees; an emotionally supportive work environment; establishing reliability and trustworthiness; social learning; employee attention to organizational issues and problems; a forgiving work environment; meritocracy; regulations supportive of talented employees; a flexible organizational structure; standardization of activity implementation; strengthening motivational aspects of work; establishment of an appropriate reward system for creative suggestions; and increasing the weight assigned to competence and capability criteria within the compensation system.

The category "Leadership and Managerial Factors" consists of three subcategories: "Leadership Style," "Attitudes of Managers and Supervisors," and "Participative Orientation among Managers." The indicators of this category include: leadership supportive of talented employees; ethical leadership; transformational leadership; servant leadership; managers' receptiveness and commitment to employee suggestions; managers' calm and respectful treatment of employees; avoidance of insulting or humiliating managerial behaviors; managers' attention to employee problems; participation in organizational events, meetings, decision-making processes, and consultation activities; establishment of an open-forum system; strengthening managers' listening skills; adoption of group decision-making; and reduction of organizational centralization through delegation of authority.

The category "Psychological and Mental Factors" consists of two subcategories: "Psychological Well-Being Improvement Programs" and "Changes in Employee Attitudes." The indicators of this category include: establishing emotional connections with creative employees; providing career counseling to reduce occupational stress and increase psychological well-being; reducing political behaviors in the workplace; creating a culture of positive negotiation and dialogue; positive thinking; developing awareness and insight; creating a culture of appreciation; and fostering an orientation toward change.

The category "Individual Factors" consists of three subcategories: "Observance of Professional Ethics," "Coping with Fears," and "Personality Characteristics." The indicators of this category include: resisting pressure from

colleagues to disclose information; safeguarding confidential organizational and employee information; maintaining the confidentiality of customer information; absence of fear regarding interpersonal difficulties and social isolation; absence of fear of being labeled as a negative person; absence of fear regarding changes in organizational position or job status and loss of organizational benefits; absence of fear of adverse reactions, injustice, disregard, or distrust from managers and colleagues; comfort in expressing dissatisfaction; high self-confidence in expressing opinions and suggestions; lack of shyness in expressing opinions and suggestions; and political and communication skills.

The category "Organizational Culture" consists of four subcategories: "Increasing Spirituality at Work," "Creating a Collaborative Culture," "An Ethical and Criticism-Receptive Climate," and "Level of Organizational Culture." The indicators of this category include: justice orientation at work; attention to citizenship rights; respect for human dignity; development of a spirit of cooperation; coordination, integration, and synergy in work activities; utilization of employee experience; expressing criticism in an appropriate manner; providing support to individuals receiving criticism; creating an innovative climate; enhancing a climate of respect and empathy; supporting and encouraging constructive criticism within the organization; giving importance to the opinions of less-experienced employees; employee concern regarding organizational problems; organizational members' satisfaction with decisions made; strong communication; and a high level of centralization.

4 Discussion

The present study was conducted to design a contingency model for breaking organizational silence in Iranian public organizations using a qualitative grounded theory approach. The findings identified eight major dimensions: human resource training and development, improvement of organizational interactions, organizational strategic decisions, organizational support, leadership and managerial factors, psychological factors, individual factors, and organizational culture. Taken together, these dimensions suggest that breaking organizational silence is not the result of a single managerial intervention; rather, it is a multilevel organizational process that emerges through the interaction of individual capabilities, interpersonal relations, leadership behaviors, structural arrangements, supportive policies, psychological conditions, and cultural norms. This finding is consistent with recent research emphasizing that organizational silence is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to employee reluctance to speak. Studies in public organizations and professional settings have similarly shown that silence is shaped by interdependent individual, managerial, relational, and organizational antecedents (Gelevardi et al., 2024; Jian et al., 2025; Mehter Gharadaghi et al., 2024). Therefore, the model developed in this study extends previous research by shifting attention from the causes and consequences of silence toward an integrated configuration of conditions through which harmful silence can be disrupted.

The first major dimension identified was human resource training and development, which included employee participation training, improvement of professional ethics, and development of individual skills. This finding indicates that employees may be more capable of overcoming silence when they possess the knowledge, communication competencies, ethical awareness, self-confidence, creativity, and collaborative skills necessary to participate effectively in organizational dialogue. Breaking silence therefore requires more than encouraging employees to "speak up"; organizations must equip employees with the competencies required to articulate concerns constructively, provide feedback, participate in decision-making, and communicate dissent without escalating interpersonal conflict. This result is compatible with research linking organizational silence to knowledge-related behavior. When employees lack confidence in knowledge exchange or perceive that knowledge sharing is unsafe or ineffective, silence may facilitate knowledge hiding and weaken organizational learning (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). Similarly, knowledge donating and knowledge collecting have been shown to play important roles in the relationship between organizational silence and cynicism, indicating that the ability and willingness to exchange knowledge are central to the consequences of silence (Panagiotounis, 2026). Thus, training employees in participation, communication, teamwork, ethical conduct, and knowledge sharing may reduce silence by improving both their capacity and their perceived legitimacy to contribute.

The emphasis on professional ethics within the human resource development dimension also deserves attention. Employees who understand professional responsibilities and organizational values may be better able to distinguish between constructive voice, inappropriate disclosure, and legitimate confidentiality. This distinction is especially

important because silence is not uniformly harmful. Some forms of silence may serve prosocial or ethical purposes when employees withhold sensitive information in order to protect colleagues, clients, or legitimate organizational interests (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024). Asselineau et al. similarly argue that silence may sometimes be intentional and productive rather than merely dysfunctional, particularly when it supports reflection, concentration, or deliberate restraint (Asselineau et al., 2024). The current findings therefore suggest that professional ethics should be incorporated into efforts to break organizational silence so that employees are encouraged not toward indiscriminate disclosure but toward responsible, constructive, and contextually appropriate expression.

The second dimension was improvement of organizational interactions, including both the quality and healthiness of organizational relationships. The extracted indicators emphasized friendly relationships, mutual feedback, workforce stability, constructive relations with colleagues, accountability, and the reduction of favoritism, corruption, and organizational backstabbing. These findings demonstrate that interpersonal context strongly affects whether employees perceive voice as safe and worthwhile. In environments characterized by conflict, distrust, political behavior, or interpersonal hostility, silence can become a self-protective strategy. This interpretation is supported by findings showing that organizational conflict is associated with organizational silence and procrastination (Dehghani Far & Seydi, 2024). It is also consistent with research on workplace ostracism, where silence has been shown to mediate adverse behavioral outcomes such as procrastination (El-Sayed et al., 2024). In such contexts, employees may avoid expressing concerns because they anticipate social exclusion, retaliation, damaged relationships, or reputational costs.

The role of healthy interaction is also closely related to organizational trust. The present study's emphasis on cordial relations, reciprocal feedback, accountability, and reduction of favoritism suggests that breaking silence requires an interpersonal climate in which employees expect fair and respectful responses. Previous research has demonstrated that organizational trust is negatively associated with perceptions of organizational silence, indicating that trust can reduce employees' reluctance to communicate concerns or dissenting views (Yazdani et al., 2024). Likewise, managerial support and interpersonal trust have been identified as important mechanisms connecting organizational silence with organizational commitment (Panagiotounis & Saiti, 2026). Accordingly, the present findings support the argument that employee voice is fundamentally relational: employees are more willing to speak when they trust the people who receive their message and when past interactions have demonstrated that speaking will not produce disproportionate interpersonal costs.

The third dimension was organizational strategic decisions, including improvement of strategic thinking and strategic changes directed toward breaking organizational silence. This result indicates that silence should not be treated only as a human resource or communication problem but also as a strategic issue. Strategic intelligence, strategic intent, alignment with organizational objectives, support for change, support for talented employees, and reduction of silence-reinforcing rules all emerged as relevant components. This is important because organizational silence may become institutionalized through structures and routines that implicitly reward conformity and discourage challenge. The current findings therefore suggest that breaking silence requires senior management to embed openness and voice into organizational strategy rather than relying solely on localized interventions. The need for such an integrated approach is consistent with research showing that organizational silence in public-sector environments emerges from multiple interacting conditions, including structural, cultural, managerial, and behavioral factors (Gelevardi et al., 2024; Mehter Gharadaghi et al., 2024). A strategic approach can help ensure that changes in leadership behavior, human resource policies, communication practices, and organizational structures reinforce rather than contradict one another.

The fourth major dimension, organizational support, included job security, an organizational climate conducive to breaking silence, supportive policies, and motivational factors. This was one of the most comprehensive dimensions in the model and included indicators such as autonomy for creative employees, meritocracy, flexible structures, rewards for creative suggestions, supportive regulations, and compensation systems that place greater weight on competence. These findings strongly support the view that employees are more likely to express concerns when they perceive that the organization values and protects them. Organizational climate has repeatedly been identified as a major determinant of silence. Research in higher education has shown that organizational climate significantly influences silence, indicating that perceptions of the work environment affect employees' willingness to voice concerns (Kettaf, 2024). Duarte et al. likewise linked silence

with organizational climate and burnout, showing that silence can have both environmental and psychological dimensions (Duarte et al., 2024).

The importance of organizational support is further reinforced by evidence on creative employees and prosocial silence. Khosravi et al. identified organizational mechanisms for breaking defensive silence among creative employees, emphasizing the importance of supportive structures, managerial responsiveness, and conditions that reduce fear associated with expression (Khosravi et al., 2024). Kızrak and Yeloğlu also showed that organizational support plays an important role in shaping the consequences of prosocial silence (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024). The present study extends these findings by suggesting that organizational support must be operationalized through concrete policies such as job security, autonomy, reward systems, flexible structures, and merit-based practices. In other words, employees may interpret organizational support not primarily through official statements but through the actual consequences of speaking, contributing, and challenging existing arrangements.

The fifth dimension involved leadership and managerial factors, including leadership style, managerial attitudes, and participative orientation. Indicators such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, managers' receptiveness to suggestions, respectful treatment, active listening, group decision-making, delegation, and reduced centralization were all identified as important. This finding is strongly aligned with the literature because managers are often the immediate recipients of employee voice and therefore function as gatekeepers between silence and expression. If managers respond defensively or disrespectfully, employees may rapidly conclude that speaking is unsafe or pointless. By contrast, supportive and participative leadership can signal that disagreement is legitimate and valued. Previous research on management support and interpersonal trust indicates that employees' relationships with managers play a central role in the association between silence and organizational commitment (Panagiotounis & Saiti, 2026). Research in public-sector contexts similarly confirms that organizational silence is closely connected with employees' attachment to the organization (Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024).

The current results also suggest that reducing organizational centralization and increasing delegation may help break silence. This is theoretically plausible because highly centralized systems concentrate decision-making authority and can strengthen power distance, making lower-level employees less willing to challenge superiors. Participative management, by contrast, can normalize upward communication and reduce the perception that criticism threatens hierarchical order. The importance of managerial receptiveness is especially relevant for employees who already experience career stagnation or uncertainty. Jing et al. found that career plateau can contribute to employee silence through mediating and moderating mechanisms (Jing et al., 2024). In such situations, participative leadership and credible opportunities for involvement may counteract withdrawal by restoring employees' sense that their input can still influence organizational outcomes.

The sixth dimension concerned psychological factors, particularly programs for psychological well-being and changes in employee attitudes. The identified indicators included emotional communication with creative employees, career counseling, reduction of occupational stress, reduction of political behavior, positive dialogue, appreciation, positive thinking, and readiness for change. These findings show that organizational silence has an important psychological component. Employees may remain silent not only because of formal constraints but also because of anxiety, stress, pessimism, learned helplessness, or fear of negative evaluation. Previous research supports this interpretation. Organizational silence has been associated with burnout (Duarte et al., 2024; Shirin & Nazarzadeh, 2024), work alienation (Katıtaş, 2026), cynicism (Panagiotounis, 2026), and workplace alienation and knowledge hiding (Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). These relationships suggest that silence can become embedded in a negative psychological cycle in which adverse work experiences increase withdrawal, and withdrawal in turn weakens employees' sense of efficacy and belonging.

The seventh dimension was individual factors, including professional ethics, coping with fears, and personality characteristics. The findings specifically emphasized overcoming fears of isolation, negative labeling, loss of organizational position or benefits, managerial injustice, and distrust, together with greater confidence in expressing dissatisfaction, opinions, and suggestions. These findings directly reflect the defensive nature of many silence behaviors. Employees may withhold information because they believe speaking could threaten social relationships, career prospects, or organizational standing. Khosravi et al.'s work on defensive silence among creative employees similarly highlights fear-related mechanisms as central barriers to expression (Khosravi et al., 2024). The qualitative

meta-synthesis conducted by Jian et al. also demonstrates that organizational silence is experienced through interacting personal and contextual mechanisms, supporting the importance of individual perceptions and coping processes (Jian et al., 2025). Thus, although organizations must modify structures and leadership practices, employees may also benefit from interventions that strengthen communication self-efficacy, resilience, political skill, and confidence in constructive dissent.

The final dimension was organizational culture, encompassing spirituality at work, collaborative culture, ethical and criticism-receptive climate, and the overall level of organizational culture. Indicators included justice, citizenship rights, human dignity, cooperation, synergy, respect, constructive criticism, innovation, empathy, consideration of less-experienced employees' views, and strong communication. This dimension arguably integrates many of the preceding findings because culture establishes the broader normative context within which employee silence or voice becomes socially acceptable. A culture that values dignity, fairness, cooperation, and criticism can transform voice from a risky individual act into a normal organizational practice. This interpretation aligns with studies emphasizing the role of organizational climate, trust, commitment, and social relationships in shaping silence (Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024; Kettaf, 2024; Yazdani et al., 2024). It also corresponds with evidence that negative cultural experiences such as bullying and ostracism can strengthen silence and its adverse consequences (El-Sayed et al., 2024; Shirin & Nazarzadeh, 2024).

5 Conclusion

Overall, the contingency model developed in this study suggests that breaking organizational silence requires alignment across multiple organizational levels. Human resource development can improve employees' competence to speak; healthy interactions can reduce interpersonal risk; strategic decisions can institutionalize openness; organizational support can reduce perceived costs; leadership can legitimize voice; psychological programs can address fear and withdrawal; individual development can enhance confidence; and organizational culture can normalize constructive criticism. This integrated interpretation is consistent with the growing body of evidence that organizational silence is associated with diverse organizational outcomes, including commitment, burnout, procrastination, alienation, cynicism, knowledge hiding, and turnover intention (Dehghani Far & Seydi, 2024; Duarte et al., 2024; Efthymiopoulos et al., 2024; Katıtaş, 2026; Panagiotounis, 2026; Sulphey & Jasim, 2025). The findings therefore reinforce the need to move beyond single-factor explanations and toward context-sensitive configurations of mutually reinforcing practices.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the qualitative data were obtained from 11 senior managers within the Tax Administration, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other public organizations with different structures, missions, professional compositions, or administrative cultures. Second, the reliance on managers and experts means that the model primarily reflects managerial and expert interpretations of organizational silence and may not fully capture the lived experiences of frontline employees, temporary staff, or individuals who have personally experienced negative consequences after speaking up. Third, although theoretical saturation was reached and additional interviews were conducted to strengthen the model, the relatively small and purposively selected sample is inherent to the qualitative design and does not permit statistical generalization. Fourth, the findings are based on interview data, researcher observations, and theoretical interpretation, which may be influenced by participants' self-presentation and the researcher's interpretive role. Finally, the study developed a conceptual contingency model but did not quantitatively test the relative strength, causal direction, or interaction effects among its eight dimensions.

Future studies should quantitatively validate the proposed model using larger samples drawn from diverse Iranian public organizations and should test its measurement and structural properties through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Comparative studies across governmental agencies, municipalities, universities, hospitals, and state-owned enterprises could determine whether the importance of the eight dimensions varies according to organizational mission, hierarchical intensity, professionalization, or administrative context. Researchers should also examine the perspectives of frontline employees and middle managers separately to identify possible differences between managerial assumptions and employee experiences of silence. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable for determining whether interventions in leadership, organizational support, culture, or human resource development actually produce sustained reductions in dysfunctional silence over time. Future research could

also distinguish among acquiescent, defensive, prosocial, and opportunistic forms of silence and test whether the present model affects each form differently. Finally, multilevel studies could examine cross-level interactions among individual personality characteristics, team climate, leadership behavior, and organization-wide cultural and structural factors.

Public-sector managers should treat breaking organizational silence as an integrated organizational development priority rather than as a narrow communication initiative. Human resource units should provide systematic training in participation, constructive feedback, communication, teamwork, professional ethics, creativity, and self-confidence. Senior managers should create credible protections for employees who raise concerns, strengthen job security, reduce punitive responses to criticism, and ensure that rewards and promotions are visibly based on competence rather than favoritism. Organizations should establish accessible and trusted mechanisms for upward communication, including structured feedback sessions, open forums, anonymous reporting channels, and participative decision-making processes. Managers and supervisors should be trained in active listening, respectful responses to dissent, ethical leadership, delegation, and non-defensive handling of criticism. Psychological support, career counseling, stress-reduction initiatives, and recognition programs should be used to reduce fear and withdrawal. Finally, organizational culture should explicitly support justice, human dignity, collaboration, constructive criticism, innovation, and the inclusion of less-experienced employees' perspectives so that speaking up becomes a normal and valued element of public-sector work rather than a personally risky exception.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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