

# The silencing effect of uncertainty: Communication apprehension and organizational change



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## Rationale:



A study by Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) demonstrates that change is associated with high levels of uncertainty and stress, which may affect employee willingness to communicate and lead to communication apprehension (CA). Therefore, this study analyzes individuals' perceptions of change in relation to communication apprehension.

## Hypotheses and Research Questions:

**H<sub>1</sub>** : There is a relationship between the level of uncertainty and the level of communication apprehension.

**H<sub>2</sub>** : The perceived valence of individual-level change is related to

- a) level of uncertainty; and
- b) level of communication apprehension.

**H<sub>3</sub>** : The perceived valence of organizational-level change is related to

- a) level of uncertainty; and
- b) level of communication apprehension.

**RQ<sub>1</sub>**: Is management portrayal of change related to

- a) uncertainty; and
- b) communication apprehension?

Level of  
uncertainty



Valence  
(+ or - change)



Level of CA

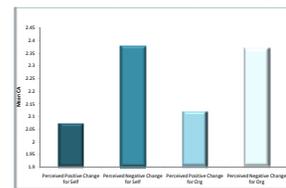
## Method:

- Nonrandom snowball and convenience sampling, N=146
- Subjects: Members of organizations who work at least ten hours per week and have been a member for at least one year
- Electronic survey using the following:
  - Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982) with  $\alpha = .96$ ,  $M=53.51$ ,  $SD=15.12$
  - Workplace Uncertainty Scale (Howard, Northey, Riedel, Rohe & Smith, 2010) with  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M=33.10$ ,  $SD=7.63$

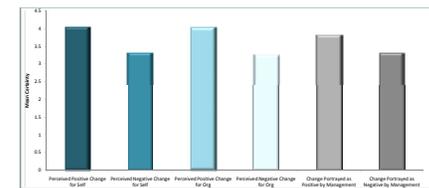
## Results:

- **H<sub>1</sub>**: As predicted, there was a significant association between the level of uncertainty and the level of CA,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = -.38$ .
- **H<sub>2a</sub>**: As predicted, there was a significant association between the perceived valence of individual-level change and uncertainty,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = -.44$ .
  - Independent samples t-tests revealed that there was a significant difference between those who perceived individual-level change as positive ( $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=.76$ ) and those who perceived the change as negative ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=.76$ ) and their reported uncertainty,  $t(144) = 5.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $F = .24$ .

Graph 1:  
Mean CA and Participants' Perceptions of Org. Change



Graph 2:  
Mean Certainty and Participants' Perceptions of Org. Change



- **H<sub>2b</sub>**: Also, as predicted, there was a significant association between the perceived valence of individual-level change and CA,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .24$ .
- **RQ<sub>1a</sub>**: Independent samples t-tests revealed that there was a significant relationship between management portrayal of valence of change and individuals' uncertainty,  $t(144) = 3.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $F = .25$ .
- **RQ<sub>1b</sub>**: However, management portrayal of valence of change was not significantly related to individuals' CA.

## Implications:

- Management should be conscious of how they portray organizational change because that portrayal is associated with both organizational- and individual-level uncertainty.
- CA is associated with individuals' perception of personal change and organizational change; however, CA is not associated with management portrayal of valence of change. Individual perception of change does not always align with management portrayal of change. If managers want to be perceived as credible in times of change, they should consider the employees' perception of the change as positive or negative.
- Results will be used to help organizations assist their employees in navigating change through more involved communication.