Identity-based issue selling

Susan J. Ashford
Michael and Susan Jandernoa Professor
of Management and Organization
University of Michigan Business School
701 Tappan Street
Ann Arbor Michigan, 48109-1234
734 763-1091
sja@umich.edu

Michelle A. Barton
Doctoral student, Management and Organization Department
University of Michigan Business School
mibarton@umich.edu


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Modern organizations exist in turbulent, fast changing environments (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). Organizational scholars have argued that there is an advantage in such environments to maximizing information flow within organizations and particularly to the top of organizations from below (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Better information flow allows greater responsiveness to the environment, greater adaptability, and higher-quality decisions that mirror the environmental complexity faced by the organization (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Recognition of the changing reality of the modern organization has prompted a growing interest in the factors affecting employees’ willingness to exercise voice within organizations. Dutton and Ashford (1993) discuss voice as employees’ willingness to speak up about, or sell, issues to those above them in the organization in hopes of affecting the organization’s strategic agenda. Issues are any event, development or trends with strategic relevance. Morrison and Milliken (2000), in contrast focus on the typical barriers organizations intentionally and unintentionally erect to inhibit voice and, in their words, create silence. All agree that under conditions of turbulence and change inside and outside of organizations, having employees who feel able to speak up about issues and problems is an adaptive advantage for an organization (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

A key question, then, becomes, “what motivates a lower-level employee to speak up and raise issues?” The motivational model implicit in the growing literature on voice and issue selling is a decidedly instrumental one. Employees are depicted as fairly calculative in their decisions about whether and when to speak up. They are portrayed as
making these decisions based on their assessments of the probability of successful selling (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton & Ashford, 1993), and the rewards and possible punishments (either tangible or reputational) that such selling might bring them, (Ashford et al., 1998; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). We certainly have no argument with these factors as motivators of issue selling -- they unquestionably play a role. However, we propose that another set of motives may also underlie this behavior; motives that have been largely overlooked to date in this literature. These motives, based on identity and identification, suggest a somewhat different calculus for issue selling. Instead of asking, "what will selling this issue bring me?" A seller operating based on the identity motive asks, "Is raising this issue consistent with who I am?" A seller operating on the identification motive asks, "Is raising this issue a manifestation of my degree of caring about and identifying with this organization or group?" The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the implications of considering identity and identification as motivators of issue selling.

We first briefly review the literature on voice, issue selling, and silence in organizations and then derive identity- and identification-based hypotheses for when and how individuals will raise issues; and implications for those managing organizations in which they hope to achieve a level of openness and issue sharing.

Before we turn to these tasks, a note on language and labels: Research on employees’ willingness to speak up has developed out of several separate streams with labels such as issue selling, voice, dissent, whistle blowing, speaking up, breaking silence, and so forth (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While other researchers have considered and attempted to articulate some of the differences between these types of
voice (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), for the purposes of this chapter, we regard them as forming a general class of behaviors involving speaking up in an organization about issues and concerns. Thus, we use “issue selling/raising issues,” “voice” and “speaking up” interchangeably. While we believe that the identity dynamics we will reference below are most clearly related to issue selling (as opposed to, say, raising a complaint about interpersonal treatment in the workgroup), many aspects are generalizable to all forms of voice.

**Literature Review**

The literatures concerned with employee voice, issue selling, and organizational silence have been preoccupied with the question of what motivates the initiation of these activities. Dutton and Ashford's (1993) theoretical treatise of issue selling raised a variety of factors that prompt this activity. These factors include the seller's expectation of success, the match between the issue and the seller's functional position, the seller's perceived credibility, the centrality of the seller in a communication network, the seller’s perception of impression management risk, and the perceived payoff of the issue for the firm. In their framework, issue selling is also considered more likely if top management (the targets of the selling attempt) is seen as more open and if the seller can identify a solution for the issue. Ashford, Dutton, and their colleagues empirically examined the factors affecting the initiation of issue selling in three studies. They found that the context is seen as favorable for speaking up when top management seems willing to listen, the culture is supportive, and the organization is facing competitive and economic pressures (Dutton *et al.*, 1997). In two studies focusing more directly on a controversial or "hot" issue (the treatment of women in organizations or gender equity), they found that
the number of women in top management, the supportiveness of the culture, norms favoring issue selling, and the quality of the seller's relationship with top management all affected willingness to raise issues about gender equity (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 2002). These variables affected willingness to sell this issue through their influence on the perceived probability of selling success and on the perceived image risk of raising this issue.

In Morrison and Milliken's (2000) theoretical treatment of organizational silence, employees are thought to avoid speaking up due to a climate of silence or the belief that speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort or is dangerous. This climate is created through managerial behavior in response to employee voice and is accelerated in systems where employees are very similar and workflow is interdependent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Pinder and Harlos (2001) noted that this silence is based on personal fear of the consequences of speaking up. Milliken, et al., (2003) isolate the primary fear as that of being viewed or labeled negatively. This finding is consistent with Edmonson’s (1999) emphasis on psychological safety as a precursor to speaking up and empirical evidence in the issue-selling literature on the deterring effects of image concerns on a person’s willingness to speak up about important issues (Ashford, 1998; Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 1997). Another motive highlighted by several researchers is a fear of being separated from the group (Ashford et al., 1998; Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003). Bowen and Blackmon (2003), in fact, note a spiral of silence that increases as one becomes increasingly aware that the view one holds in at odds with the majority view.
Motives are such an emphasis in this literature that one set of authors developed a typology of silence types based on the motive for each (Van Dyne et al., 2003). In this framework “defensive silence” is based on the fear of consequences stemming from speaking up while “prosocial silence” is based on the motive to cooperate with an organization (e.g., by staying silent about proprietary firm information) (Van Dyne et al., 2003). The preponderance of the literature has focused on the perceived costs and benefits of speaking up as a motive for doing so. The personal identity of the individual and his or her identification with larger groups has been far less emphasized. It does show up in discussions of people’s willingness to disclose aspects of their personal identity (e.g., their sexual orientation)(Bowen & Blackmon, 2003); but not on how personal identity in general affects a person’s willingness to speak up.

Identity, Identification and Issue Selling

A person’s identity is what makes "them them " (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). It is who they are, and what they believe in. People's identities are thought to drive their behaviors (Steele, 1988). Thus if my identity is as a loyal friend, I will behave in ways to reinforce and manifest this identity. According to social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), a person's identity relies heavily on their interaction with others and affiliation with groups. In this theory, identity is a framework for understanding oneself that is formed and sustained by a social interaction with others (Gioia, 1998). Thus, identity allows a sense of distinctiveness but is also a way to see oneself as part of a group or class (Erickson, 1964). People both have identities and they identify. They identify with groups that are socio-culturally and/or personally important to their self-definition (Kawakami & Dion, 1995) and with whom they share common attributes (Tajfel &
Turner, 1985). For example, sociologists have examined identification with groups based on race or gender and organizational scholars have examined people's propensity to identify with departmental groups in organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gregory, 1983; Sethi, 2000). Individuals are thought to use their own identities to determine if there is a kinship or unity of self and group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998). Further, when group affiliations and categories are emphasized in an organization the tendency to identify with a group (or social entitativity) is enhanced.

Recent literature suggests that individuals don't identify just with groups, but they come to identify with organizations as well (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 1998). When organizational identification occurs, an individual’s beliefs about his or her organization become self referential or self defining (Pratt, 1998). That is, individuals come to see associations with the organization and its core values as integral to who they are and how they define themselves. Organizational identification is more likely to occur in distinctive organizations that are attractive and have high prestige (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Conversely, when possible, individuals will try to distance themselves from organizations perceived to possess negative characteristics and this reduces their identification (Pratt, 1994). (Although, there are instances in which individuals will embrace negatively-perceived organizations as well (Turner et al., 1984)). In any case, as they do with groups, individuals who see themselves as similar to the organization are more likely to identify with the organization (Pratt, 1998). Individuals are also thought to achieve identification by taking steps to make themselves the same as (i.e. identical with) the organization through emulation
(Aronson, 1992). Organizations also can try to foster identification by attempting to show that they share the same values as their members (Cheney, 1983b).

While the literature on identification explores its effect on motivation, job satisfaction and job performance (Cheney, 1983a) and on behaviors such as organizational compliance and group conflict (Aronson, 1992; Dutton et al., 1994; Tajfel, 1982), the impact of identification on willingness to speak up or sell issues has not been addressed. There are three overlapping but distinctive ways in which identity and identification may be important to issue selling. First, the content of certain individual identities may make issue selling a natural manifestation of that identity. Thus for example, for a person who carries a strong identity as a helpful person, or as an active community member, raising issues that he or she sees as of general concern to those in the organization, and particularly to those higher up in the organization, may be a natural consequence of that identity. Helpful people help and active community members are active in supporting the community. If a person holding such an identity were to see a new trend in the marketplace or an emerging technology relevant to the firm, it would be very consistent with his or her identity to bring those issues to people in the organization who could act on them for the benefit of all. This is consistent with Bansal’s (2003) study of environmental issue-raising which found that successfully raised environmental issues were motivated by an individual concern about these issues.

Second, organizations are composed of numerous overlapping subgroups, such as functional areas, project teams, task force, gender groups, racial groups, and groups with a particular sexual orientation or stance on an issue. Individuals may identify with the needs, concerns, and desires of those subgroups to a greater or lesser degree. To the
extent that this identification is strong, it may serve as a motive to raise issues in the larger organization on behalf of this personally-relevant group. Thus, if a person identifies strongly with the marketing department, he or she may be especially motivated to raise issues in the larger organization regarding marketing concerns. Social identity theory suggests that identity-relevant issues will be particularly salient to individuals and will seem particularly important (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Steele, 1988).

Finally, identification with the organization itself may influence patterns of issue selling. An individual's belief that an issue is important to the organization along with their identification with that organization motivates them to raise the issue on behalf of the organization.

In these ways we believe that identity and identification play an important role in motivating issue selling. Bringing focus to this source of motivation for issue selling is important because identity-based issue selling may follow a different dynamic and be subject to different influences than instrumentally motivated issue selling. This next section articulates the role of identity and identification in issue selling and highlights some of those differences.

**Issue Selling Based on Personal Identity.** People come to organizations with personal identities. They may see themselves as loyal, as helpful, as rebels, as peacemakers, or 100 other different things. A person’s values and tendencies make up their identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Some identities may cause people to see raising issues as an important *activity* (such as when one has a strong personal identity as "helpful" as mentioned earlier or as a change agent). Alternatively, a personal identity
can lead people to see certain issues as important (for example, the issue of recycling, if "environmentalism" is a strong identity or the issue of conflict resolution training if one strongly identifies as a peacemaker). Here the identity relates to the content of the issue being raised (rather than the value of the activity itself). If individuals hold identities such as these, they may choose to raise issues in organizations as a way of expressing and manifesting those identities. They raise them not because they think they will personally benefit; and they are not deterred from raising them because they may pay some personal costs. Rather, they raise these issues because raising them is a manifestation of who they are and what they care about. Acting consistently with one’s identity (e.g., by raising issues that are manifestations of the personal identity in this case), is thought to reinforce and instantiate that identity over time (Erez & Earley, 1993; Markus, 1977; Pratt, 1998; Weick, 1995). Such self-consistency is a key tenet of self-verification theory (Swann, 1983; Swann et al., 2004). According to this theory, individuals’ actions tell them who they are and reinforce what they value (Penner et al., 1997) and they seek to verify this in the world. They will then strive to find ways to maintain that identity over time, leading to more issue selling among other activities (Penner et al., 1997). A person without an identity as a helpful, community-minded employee, for example, might not think to raise an issue regarding an emerging trend or development that will likely affect the organization. They might see the same trend observed by the first issue seller, but would only raise it if there was some additional motivation. Their identity alone wouldn’t create a motive to do so. These arguments suggest the following simple proposition:
P1: The more an individual’s personal identity includes attributes which make issue selling a logical expression of that identity, the greater the willingness to sell identity-relevant issues in organizations.

**Issue Selling Based on Subgroup Identification.** When people identify with a group, they define themselves in terms of the group rather than as individuals (Brewer, 1979). People come to identify with groups for many reasons. Predominate among these reasons is the perceived similarity between the individual and group (Hogg *et al.*, 1995; Turner, 1987; Turner *et al.*, 1994). Group identification influences the meaning given to events and the set of actions considered possible and desirable in response to those events (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Identification affects what people notice and how they interpret it (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). If individuals are highly identified with a group, they are likely to notice issues that impact that group. Based on this logic, we propose that highly identified group members will both notice, and evaluate as important, group-related issues.

Group identification also helps individuals fulfill the need to be safe (Erez & Earley, 1993), and to feel belonging (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983b; Kelman, 1961). People are thought to derive their sense of self in part from knowing that a group they value regards them as a respected member (Smith, *et al.*, 1998). Thus, a second motivation to sell group-related issues is to bolster their feelings of oneness with the group and/or to display their identity to the group in order to maximize affirmation from the group. To the degree that individuals receive support and a sense of belonging from identification with a group, they are likely to protect that source by raising issues that benefit the group. Indeed, identity-congruent behavior may be necessary to maintain
feelings of identity and group bonds. Thus, those highly identified with a group will see benefits for themselves in selling group-related issues and will be more willing to raise them. Finally, strong group identification leads people to see issues related to their group as generally important. Through a process of egocentric generalization, individuals who identify strongly with their group see their group’s issues as important to larger entities such as society or the organizations in which they work. This perception of the larger importance of their issues provides a further motivation for raising them. Specifically, the more individuals identify with their subgroup in an organization, the more likely it is they will see a gain to the organization resulting from their issue selling and will thus be willing to engage in it. These arguments suggest the following propositions:

P2a: The greater an individual’s identification with a group, the greater the likelihood of noticing group-related issues and viewing them as important.

P2b: The greater an individual’s identification with a group, the greater the perceived self gain from raising group-related issues within the organization.

P2c: The greater an individual’s identification with a group, the greater the perceived organizational gain from raising group-related issues within the organization.

P2d: The greater an individual’s identification with a group, the greater the likelihood of selling group-related issues in the organization.

Social identity theory suggests, however, that these processes may be affected by conditions of group threat. Because individuals who strongly identify with their group derive self-esteem from the group (Hogg & Turner, 1985), they may feel badly if the status of the group is threatened in some way. Threats in the form of negative
information about the group are thought to create a disruption to the social identity process (Pratt, 1994; Pratt & Barnett, 1997). Given that individuals are motivated to protect, enhance, and preserve social identity for members of the group (Tajfel, 1982), threats prompt increased identification with the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals whose social identity is disrupted or threatened will attempt to restore balance (Burke, 1991). We propose that balance restoration attempts will involve selling issues on behalf of the group. Group threats thus create a heightened motive to act on behalf of the group (say by issue selling).

In addition to threat, contextual changes that increase the salience of a particular identity can also lead to an increase in group identification (Emler & Hopkins, 1990; Oakes, 1987; Waddell & Cairns, 1986). Ely’s (1994) finding that when women are demographically represented at the top of an organization, the salience of women as a group increases provides empirical support for this theoretical statement. In addition, contexts that make boundaries between groups more visible, such as intergroup conflict, increase the probability of individuals identifying with one group or another (Pratt, 1998; Turner et al., 1994). Thus, both threats to a group and characteristics of the organization can increase a felt sense of "groupness" and therefore group-related processing of information about issues.

P2e: Highly group-identified individuals will be more likely to sell group-related issues in the organization when the group is threatened in some way.

P2f: Highly group-identified individuals will be more likely to sell group-related issues in the organization when the context enhances perceptions of group boundaries.
**Issue Selling Based on Organizational Identification.** Organizational identification fulfills similar self-enhancement needs as does group identification (Pratt, 1998). As noted earlier organizational identification occurs in organizations with high prestige, and with attractive images (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In this way, corporate identities enhance self-esteem by providing status and prestige (Cheney, 1983b). Identification with an organization may also fulfill holistic needs such as finding meaning or a sense of purpose. Thus, organizations that are associated with a vision or a social cause may have more strongly identified members within them (Collins & Porras, 1991; Greil & Rudy, 1984; Lofland & Stark, 1965). Indeed, Burke (1937) argues that a fundamental task of organizations is to engender identification to facilitate their functioning (Cheney, 1983b).

There are two rationales for why organizational identification might foster issue selling. First, when individuals identify with organizations, like identifying with the groups discussed above, it creates a motive to try to help and improve those organizations. Because issue selling is based in part on a desire to help and improve (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), it is straightforward to suggest that the greater the identification with the organization, the greater the desire to raise issues within that organization to help it.

Second, individuals may also see issue selling as a way to build a desirable level of organizational identification. If identification is more likely when individuals see themselves as more similar to (or aligned with) the organization (Pratt, 1998), issue selling is one possible way of creating that alignment. Indeed, issue selling is a logical addition to two strategies for creating alignment that have been suggested by the
literature. Individuals are thought to create alignment by finding organizations that are already similar to them (“affinity”) or by changing themselves to become more similar to an organization (by “emulation”) (Pratt, 1998). The overlooked additional strategy is that an individual can also try to change the organization so that it better fits the individual (a strategy we might call “influence”). A prominent way of doing so is by selling issues within the organization in the hopes of changing the strategic agenda of the organization. Thus, for example, an individual who cares about environmental issues and who identifies with an organization may strengthen that identification by selling the need to be responsive on environmental issues within that organization. This action, if successful, can create even greater affinity between this individual and the organization. Recognition of this possibility strengthens the individuals’ desire to sell issues of personal importance. Stated formally, this link between personal or subgroup identification and a desire for organizational identification suggests the following proposition:

P3a: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the greater the willingness to sell identity-relevant issues in organizations.

P3b: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the greater the willingness to sell issues that are important to personal or group identities to influential organizational members (to create more alignment).

Individuals’ tendencies to act on this desire, however, are more complicated in the case of organizational than subgroup identification. With organizational identification, the group to whom the individual is identified with is also the group to whom he or she sells the issue. In contrast, with subgroup identification, the seller attempts to influence a different group (the organization) based on a motivation stemming from subgroup
identification. This difference sets up contrasting patterns of motivation. Specifically, while strong organizational identification causes employees to think and act in ways that are congruent with the organization’s values and to make decisions that are consistent with these values (Cheney, 1983a; Pratt, 1998), it also can lead to overconformity to managerial dictates, decreased creativity and even unethical behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). These possibilities echo Schneider, Goldstein and Smith’s (1995) claim that organizations that foster high degrees of identification may not be as adaptive to changing market demands. Their reduced adaptability occurs as a result of the reduction of critical information flows. Indeed, when organizational identification is high, individuals may be less likely to bring up the very issues that are most critical to an organization at that point in time. This can happen for at least three reasons. Individuals may not perceive the issue, they may not consider the issue to be relevant, and/or they may be threatened by the issue. The more organizations try to foster identification, as is recommended in the literature (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b), the more heightened these tensions become.

Before an issue can be sold, it must first be perceived. When an individual highly identifies with an organization he or she may not see issues that are outside the paradigm of the current organization. For example, if the organization has a strong identity of being a “high quality technology provider,” employees who identify strongly with that organization may be less likely to consider or compare their firm to competitors who focus on different strategies for success such as "providers of high levels of service." If service quality becomes a differentiator in the marketplace, members of the "technology provider" organization may not recognize it in time. An individual whose identity has
become “a high quality technology provider” through organizational identification, is not as likely to sell issues of service quality to upper management, in part because he or she may not perceive such issues as issues. These employees might also miss the entrance of a competitor from outside of the current industry boundaries because of their frame of reference. Individuals who identify as part of a high-quality book publishing company, for example, may not recognize the encroachment of competitors from the software industry producing e-books simply because they never compare themselves to software providers.

Even when employees perceive an issue, they may not necessarily sell it. A perceived issue may not be classified as relevant or important as it may seem incongruent with the organization-based identity of the perceiver. Organizational members are thought to see some issues as threats to the organization that must be addressed while others are opportunities to be maximized (Jackson & Dutton, 1988). Highly identified individuals may see more issues as threats than opportunities and may keep silent if they think that raising an issue will threaten an aspect of the organization's identity. Note that we’re not concerned here with whether something is a threat to the organization per se, but rather a threat to the organization’s identity. Thus, in our “high quality technology provider” example above, the entrant of another technology provider would threaten the organization, but not its identity as a technology provider. However, should they face new competition outside the norms inherent in the identity (“we compete with other technology providers,”) such as was the case with our service oriented industry entrant, the issue of this new competitor’s existence may be perceived as a threat to the organizational identity (“does this mean we now have to define ourselves in terms of our
service not our technology?”). To the degree that an individual is highly identified with the organization, his or her own identity will also be threatened in such a scenario.

Similarly, opportunities to the organization may be threats to its identity and thus to those who identify with it. For example, individuals in an organization known for its high quality and customized solutions may be loathe to hear that low-cost, templated design is the wave of the future. Issues seen as threats to the organization’s identity are less likely to be raised and sold upwards in the organization. In an organization strongly centered on being a technology provider, who wants to be the first to tell management that the accepted basis for identity may be wrong for this market? Bringing such a message takes a willingness to push out from under oneself and one’s organization, the very identity supports that prop up feelings of security, prestige and esteem. To do so is to risk feeling or seeming disloyal, unsupportive or even destructive.

In addition to not noticing identity-inconsistent issues or deeming them of insufficient importance to raise, highly organizationally-identified individuals also may be especially sensitive to prevailing norms regarding the desirability of behavior. If norms suggest that people don't raise issues in this organization, such individuals may be especially unlikely to do so. These arguments suggest:

P4a: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the lower the likelihood of noticing or classifying as important issues that are incongruent with the organization’s identity.

P4b: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the lower the perceived self-gain from raising issues that are incongruent with the organization’s identity.
P4c: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the lower the perceived organizational-gain from raising issues that are incongruent with the organization’s identity.

P4d: The greater an individual’s identification with the organization, the lower the likelihood of selling issues that are incongruent with the organization’s identity.

These propositions suggest, ironically, that the issues most critical to organizations in times of flux and change, those that challenge the status quo, become the very issues most likely to be missed, ignored or denied by members in a highly identified organization. If they are sold, they may be so highly “cloaked” in the selling effort to avoid image costs that they are not noticed or appreciated appropriately (Sonenshein, 2006). While there may be good strategic reasons for maintaining an approach congruent with an organization’s current identity, if the issue is never raised or is raised in such a way that it is not appreciated, management will not have the opportunity to evaluate it and make a decision based on the realities of the market rather than on the preconceived notions inherent in their current identity.

This argument suggests that identity is something of a dilemma for many organizations. How does management encourage and foster a consistency of values and beliefs (thus allowing for increased decision-making at the lower levels), promote well-being and esteem, and encourage feelings of belonging and cohesion, without also reducing creative search and dissenting voice? Is it possible to have the benefits of a highly identified workforce without also incurring its costs?
The Nature of Identity-Based Issue Selling. We proposed earlier that motives matter. While all action is motivated by a complex array of forces, certain motivations can predominate with certain individuals and in certain situations. Indeed, identification-based motives need not be present in order to find issue selling in organizations. We believe that when identification-based motives are present, issue selling will differ in several important ways. Highlighting identity motives also yields a more complicated, nuanced picture of issue selling and voice from below than that which has guided our thinking in the past.

One difference, based on the arguments above, is that issue selling motivated by personal identity or identification with a group should be less responsive to perceived costs and rewards than is currently portrayed in the issue selling and voice literature. People selling issues based on who they are as people are not selling to obtain a reward or to avoid a punishment. Indeed, these individuals may not even see the punishments in terms of cost to their image that are apparent to others. That is, because they believe so strongly in either the issue they are selling or in the act of selling (e.g. as a manifestation of some aspect of their image such as their helpfulness) they may literally not view it as a cost when others identify them with the issue or comment on their selling it. Or, they may perceive the cost, but feel it is worth the gain in terms of reinforcement to their personal identity. When selling based on identification with a group, they may be less responsive to rewards and punishments offered by the larger context. In some cases it may even be that punishments from the larger context build stronger bonds within the particular subgroup with which they identify. For example, someone willing to "take it
on the chin" for the good of the group by raising issues relevant to the group may be held up as a hero within the group.

A corollary of this argument is that a person selling an issue based on personal identity or identification may persist longer than someone selling based on the rewards and punishments discussed in the literature. They may persist longer because they see less discouragement from others (e.g. they see less of the image risk that Ashford, et al. (1998) discuss). They may also be more resilient in response to setbacks. The fact that selling an issue is difficult to do may be less discouraging to these people than it is to classically motivated issue sellers. They are driven to sell an issue based on expressing who they are or based on identity rewards mediated by the group, not the organization and thus they persist even when the going gets tough. Finally, to the degree that identity boosts or contributes to self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), identity-based issue selling may benefit from the increased persistence usually associated with higher self-esteem (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977). These arguments suggest that:

P5a. The more issue selling is driven by identification motives, the less influenced individuals will be by the extrinsic costs or rewards associated with the selling effort.

P5b. The more issue selling is driven by identification motives, the greater the persistence in the selling effort.

The nature of identification with groups within organizations suggests that individuals don't simply sell an issue for the issue alone, but may also sell in order to be seen promoting this issue by the group with which they identify and/or by others in the organization. In this way issue selling can serve an impression-management function as
well as a substantive purpose. By taking up and advocating an issue proactively, an employee sends a message about who they are and what they value. As mentioned above, it may be important to be seen selling an issue by the group with whom they identify; important because it solidifies their bond with the group and increases their acceptance by the group.

Issue selling can also be a way of communicating symbolically with groups to which individuals would like to become a member. In this scenario, an individual hoping to become identified as aligned with, or similar to, a particular group might sell an issue known to be of interest to that group. Over time, various people in the organization and perhaps members of the group themselves, come to see the seller as similar to them and may categorize the seller as part of their group. In this scenario, identification is the hoped-for outcome of selling an issue known to be important to particular group. In this way issue selling may be a mechanism of social mobility within organizations. Note that this argument suggests that identity-based issue selling is not without its benefits, but in this case the benefits are identity-related. Thus, individuals are not looking for whether issue selling will bring them acclaim from top management or a promotion, but rather a heightened identification with the group that has come to mean so much to them. This impression-management logic suggests that:

P6: Individuals with strong group identification will be especially motivated to sell group-related issues when such actions are visible to group members.

**Initial Empirical Evidence for Identification Based Issue Selling.**

In the mid 1990s, faculty members at the University of Michigan collected data on issue selling that allows us to examine some initial empirical evidence relevant to some
of the propositions presented above. These researchers were interested in when people would be willing to raise “hot” or controversial issues. They examined this question by assessing when women might be willing to raise issues about the treatment of women in organizations. They collected data from a sample of 1,019 female alumnae of a Midwest business school who were all employed full-time. These women were asked about their identification with women as a group, their identification with the organizations in which they were employed, and about their willingness to raise issues concerning the treatment of women within their companies. They were also asked about the perceived importance of this issue, and the perceived gain to them and to their organizations from their raising this issue.

The findings from this research support several of the notions presented above. For example, respondents who identified with women as a group were more likely to perceive more extensive issues of maltreatment of women in their organization ($r = .18^{***}$). This finding supports the logic underlying P2a that identity-related issues are more salient for those who identify with a group. Identification with women as a group was also positively correlated with perceived willingness to raise this issue within the organization ($r = .35^{***}$), in support of P1. Identification with the organization was not significantly correlated (positively or negatively) with the willingness to raise this issue. Figure 1 presents findings relating identification with women and with the organization to various issue perceptions and to the perceived willingness to raise issues about the treatment of women. In this figure, consistent with Proposition 2a, we see that women who identified with women as a group rated this issue as more important ($\beta = .50^{***}$). These women also perceived more gains to themselves from raising this issue ($\beta = .16^{***}$),
supporting Proposition 2b. This result is consistent with the argument supporting P2b that raising identity-related issues yields benefits to the seller (such as, perhaps, solidifying and instantiating their identity and their image with the group). We also suggested that people who identify with the subgroup will think that raising their issue will benefit the overall organization (Proposition 2c). In support, we found that identification with women was significantly correlated with the perception that raising issues about the treatment of women would benefit the organization (beta = .31***). While implicit in our propositions, each of the three mediators depicted in Figure 1 was strongly related to perceived willingness to raise gender equity issues (r = .44***, .43**, and .44*** for issue importance, gain for self, and gain for organization, respectively).

We found a different pattern of results for identification with the organization. We suggest above that those who identify with the organization may attempt to protect the organization from issues that might be troubling to its identity. There is some evidence that concerns about the treatment of women may have been seen as one such issue for individuals more identified with the organization. For example, the higher the organizational identification, the less important this issue was judged to be (beta = -.16*** and the less gain there was seen for the organization in raising it (beta = -.11***). In contrast to Proposition 3b, however, identification with the organization was positively related to the perception of gains for the seller if the issue were raised (beta = .21***). It's important to note that the reduced tendency of organizationally identified individuals to
sell this issue was not because they didn’t believe they could raise the issue successfully (indeed, the correlation between organizational identification and the perceived probability of successful selling was .40***). Nor was it because they didn’t see personal gains from raising it - organizational identification was positively related to perceived gains to self (beta = .21***), in contrast to Proposition 3 b. Rather, being highly organizationally identified led to seeing fewer gains for the organization from raising this issue and to rating the issue as less important. Thus, women who identified highly with the organization felt able to raise the issue, but they saw no gain for the organization from doing so, and therefore were less willing to raise it. In this way, consistent with our propositions above, women who identify highly with the organization protect the organization from hearing about this troubling issue.

Conclusion

If it matters to the modern organization to have free-flowing information within its bounds so that it can adapt to a complex and changing environment, then understanding what motivates people to speak up or to stay silent is critical. Individuals today also hope to work within organizations that they can be proud of. They often hope to find meaning in their lives by living out core values and identifying strongly with groups with a company. Past motivational models focusing on voice and silence, with their focus on the costs and benefits involved in selling issues have ignored some of the implications of these trends. While costs and benefits associated with raising issues clearly play a significant role in the decision to sell, people also speak up and sell issues based on what they believe in and on their desire to affiliate with a group or an organization. Therefore,
understanding the nature of identity-based issue selling is necessary to create a more complete picture of voice in organizations.

Empirical work testing the propositions articulated above can add to our understanding of the initiation of voice activity. The initial data presented in this chapter suggests that identification with a subgroup within an organization affects individuals’ willingness to raise issues relevant to that group. These data also suggest that identification with the organization has different effects. If these two motives are left out of empirical investigations of the willingness to sell issues or raise concerns, then we have under portrayed the motivational dynamics at play. Including identity and identification in our models of voice in organizations can help explain why people raise issues when it's not totally in their personal interest to do so (except as it reinforces values that are often hidden to the casual observer). It can also help explain why certain individuals persist in their issue selling and voice efforts despite encountering setbacks whereas others curtail their selling at the first sign of trouble. Identification variables likely interact with the presence of costs or benefits such that those high in identification are willing to bear more costs and persist longer when compared to their lesser identified colleagues. These ideas require further testing and refinement.

Future research might also examine the effect of identity on how an issue is sold. Recent theorizing suggests that sellers often "cloak" their issues in language that makes it more palatable to targets of their selling efforts (Crane, 2000; Sonenshein, 2006). Highly identified individuals may feel less of the need to do such cloaking or may creatively use their perceptions of the organization's identity as a basis to sell their issues. These processes may be enhanced with "hot" issues such as the treatment of one group or
another. Issue sellers also appear to have more success in the selling process when they build coalitional support prior to selling (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Dutton et al., 2001). Leveraging group identification may be one mechanism for building and strengthening such coalitions.

Beyond the need for empirical testing of the theoretical propositions presented above, this chapter evokes some additional research questions. First, given that identification with different groups seems to provide an alternative motivation for issue selling, how might this motivation be affected when more than one identity is salient in a given situation? As Ashforth and Johnson (2001) note, multiple identities are available to everyone in organizational contexts. How do these identities interact to affect subsequent motivation and behavior? More specifically, how might the conflicting identities found in our sample of women employees play out over time? What happens when an identification with the organization leads one to feel one way about an issue whereas an identification with a subgroup within the organization leads one to feel another way? Women who identified with the organization in the data presented here were deterred from raising issues about the treatment of women and yet many of those same women also likely identified with women as a group. How do they resolve this conflict? Might issue selling be one mechanism for resolving conflicting motivations? For example, if an individual identifies him or herself as an environmentalist as well as a member of a corporation whose environmental record is discovered to be poor, might issue selling be one way in which he or she can bring these identities into balance by encouraging the organization to “clean up” its act?
Second, given that identification with the organization appears to create an impetus for identity-congruent and against identity-incongruent issue selling, how can organizations balance the apparently conflicting goals of promoting a company-wide and cohesive identification with the organization’s values and beliefs without at the same time reducing voice and creative dissent?

This question is quite timely, as there is a growing trend in organizations to articulate strong vision and compelling identities (Collins & Porras, 1991). Recent literature advises organizations to become more aware of the potential benefits to providing employees with a values-based organizational identity (Cheney, 1983a). It is not surprising; therefore, that many organizations attempt to appeal to employees’ desires for meaningful work. For example, organizational mission statements are often defined in terms of making a difference (Collins & Porras, 1996; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). However, by appealing to employees on this level, organizations may also, intentionally or not, be selecting employees whose identities are strongly tied up in the values espoused by the vision of the organization. Whether or not the organization actually integrates these values into its daily workings and decisions, it is likely that the employees who joined precisely because of those values, will attempt to do so. They will be motivated to maintain a congruency between their personal identity and that of the organization. Thus, as modern organizations increasingly attract employees on the basis of a strong organizational identity, they are likely to experience a rise in identity-based issue selling and a probable decrease in their accurate understanding of the complex environment the organization faces. That is, employees may work harder to maintain and reinforce the identity that they have come to care about than to be accurate
observers of trends in the marketplace and accurate communicators of the realities that the organization faces. If this is true, then researchers need to better understand the drivers, limiters and impacts of identity-based issue selling. Organizations need people who will speak "truth to power." They need this whether or not they recognize it in the immediate situation. In fact, organizations need people who are not reactive to the immediate rewards and punishments offered in the situation and are willing to speak up. It is only then that the organization itself can be rewarded (and not punished) over the long-term by its complex and changing environment. There are many examples of organizations that didn't listen and therefore didn't adapt much to their detriment. Thus in addition to simply understanding better why people raise issues by focusing light on the identification and identity-based motives for this activity, enlightened organizations should have particular interest also in cultivating such sellers.

Figure 1.
Predictors of Willingness to Sell Women’s Issues*

*entries are standardized beta coefficients; all coefficients significant at p< .001

References


