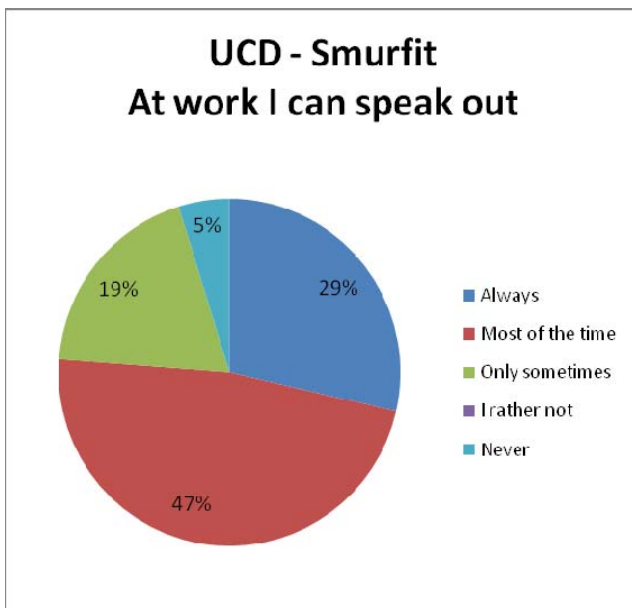
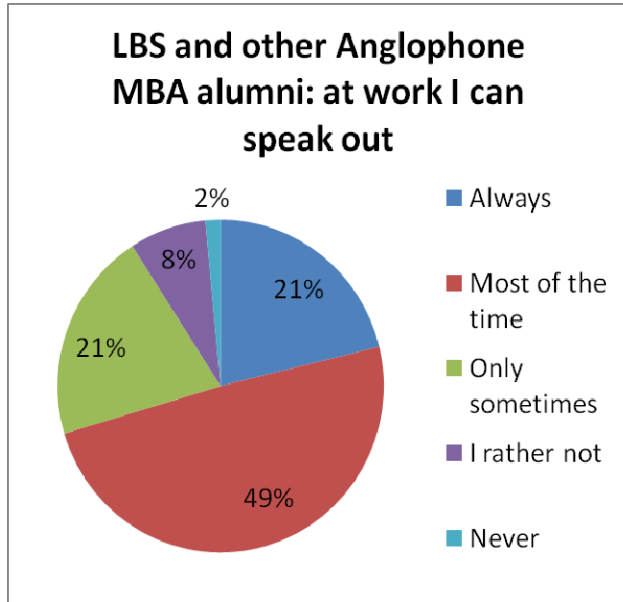


# When in doubt, keep your mouth shut.

Alfredo Behrens<sup>1</sup>

An organizational culture with an innovation mindset should not muffle its collaborators. Yet too many employees are afraid to speak out.

In fact, in a global survey with over 500 replies, only about one in five dares to “always speak out.” That is about the same share of employees that feels “only sometimes” it is safe speak out. Nearly half of the employees speak out “only most of the time;” but then, large majorities are not known to say anything controversial.



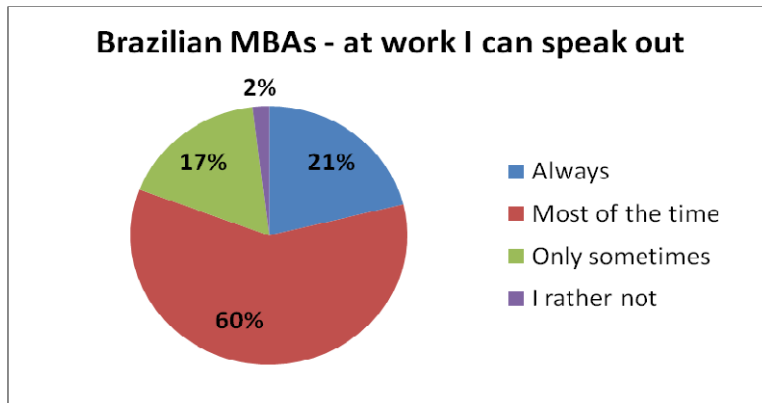
Except for a slight suggestion that University College Dublin MBA respondents at Smurfit may be more afraid that others to speak out – or face greater sanctions (5% say “Never”) these shares are remarkably stable. Both pie charts reflect the responses of MBA students at Anglophone programs. The first pie chart reflects the opinion in 2007 of mostly London Business School MBA alumni, where close to one third were American; while the second pie chart reflects

opinions culled recently (2010) among 25 MBA students from Dublin, about two thirds of which were Irish, the rest were mostly other Europeans. Dublin EMBA students showed the most polarized workplace. While Dubliners show the highest freedom to

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always speak out they also show the highest restriction to speaking out. Among Dubliners the share which stated would never speak out was more than double the share across the world.

Brazilian MBAs, on the other hand, appear to fare among the most open at work. Not one of 114 respondents chose to say they would never speak out, and a high 60% feel



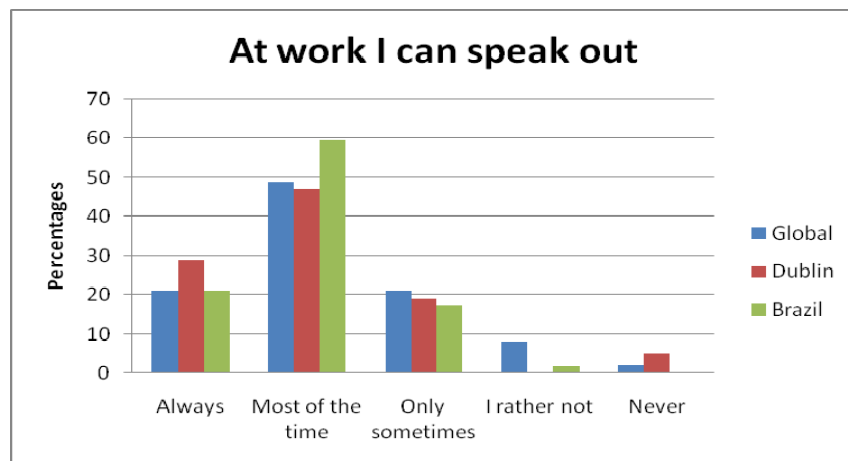
that they can speak out most of the time. Still among Brazilians, almost 20% feel uncomfortable when speaking out, and this reticence may be higher among the higher executives: six out of ten of them feel uncomfortable to provide

feedback to their bosses.

### Why would so many be afraid to speak out?

Self preservation may have a lot to do with it. An in-depth study, also with close to 200 employees, (Detert and Edmondson, 2007) suggest that it is not speaking about problems that employees are most afraid of; problems are too objective to dismiss.

What employees withhold the most are suggestions for innovation. These carry a greater deal of uncertainty regarding the benefits to be accrued from speaking out; while they are certain to



expose the employee who makes the suggestion. When in doubt, shutting up seems the safest route.

Yet, even shutting up about problems may prove a safe route only temporarily. Think, for example, of the current travails of Jeff Immelt, head of GE, after having lost \$200 in market capitalization and asking himself: "Was there one of my top 150 people who was thinking, 'You know, Jeff, commercial real estate shouldn't be so goddamn big,'

but didn't have a way to say [it]?"<sup>2</sup> The question that Jeff Immelt asks himself is a beacon to top managers whose closest aides feel muffled by fear, even if they do not recognize it themselves.

### Can GE Still Manage?

CEO Jeff Immelt says his company trains the best business leaders in the world. Yet they haven't saved him from a hellish decade that cut GE's value in half



Wondering why nobody spoke out haunts not only GE but also the relatively more open Brazilian work environment at some of the largest Brazilian corporations.

The aftermath of the crack of the Lehman Brothers bank led to revaluation of the dollar which, in Brazil,

caught some of the largest local conglomerates with their pants down. It turned out that they had made wrong currency bets which generated compound losses perhaps in excess of \$3 billion. One large protein producer went under, two large paper and pulp producers may take a decade to recoup their losses. Should some of the top Brazilian executives have spoken out louder before the Lehman Brother's crack? With hindsight, they should have cried that, under changing global conditions, there was a problem building-up in the "business as usual" approach which continued to bet on the steady decade-long strengthening of the local currency against the US dollar.

It is not only innovation that loses to fear, it is just any problem that is not too obvious that gets shoved under the carpet when people fear to speak out.

Detert and Edmonson suggest that the employees' fears may be based only on no more than perceptions, or company myths, like stories of people disappearing sometime after making a suggestion.



Whether the myths are not more than myths, or not; a culture of fear helps only the surfacing of the bravest, not the brightest.

CEOs, when not bullies themselves, should do better by establishing a culture of glasnost rather than the gulag.

**Reference:** James R. Detert, Amy C. Edmondson. **Why Employees Are Afraid to Speak.**

**Harvard Business Review.** May 01, 2007. Prod. #: F0705B-PDF-ENG , pages 23-25.

<sup>2</sup> Business Week, cover story, April 15, 2010.