Organizational Silence and Risk Reporting in Founder-Led Philippine Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are exposed to multiple risks, including regulatory, financial, technological, and stakeholder risks. Formal controls and risk management systems are insufficient to guarantee a risk-aware culture if employees do not feel they can report risks up the hierarchy. This study examined how organizational silence affects risk reporting and the development of a risk-aware culture in founder-led Philippine private higher education institutions (PHEIs). A secondary qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews was conducted with 15 key informants from six PHEIs in Region I. A deductive-inductive thematic analysis was applied, drawing on organizational silence theory, psychological safety, and founder imprinting as its theoretical foundation. Findings revealed four related themes: the founder's shadow as a silent mode of governance; the paradox of compliance in which silence is generated by regulation; the mid-manager's dilemma in the context of organizational hierarchy; and a typology of silence that was contextual in terms of fear-based, loyal, fatalistic, and defensive silence. The findings show that risk awareness and organizational silence can exist at the same time, and that compliance alone is not enough to build a risk-aware culture. The findings in this study imply that there is a need for participative decision-making, effective risk reporting systems to upper management, increased support for middle management, and more focus on culture improvement than compliance.

Keywords: organizational silence, risk culture, psychological safety, founder imprinting, private higher education, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions operate in a dynamic environment shaped by changes brought about by advances in technology, changes in the rules governing these organizations, pressures related to finances, public health emergencies, and the evolving needs of stakeholders. These circumstances have made it harder to manage Higher education institutions (HEIs). This is the reason why HEIs have become more adaptive and proactive in handling change management. Private higher education institutions in the Philippines are also susceptible to these changes because they have high dependence on tuition fees, competition, and the need to adapt to changing requirements set by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2022). Furthermore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on private higher education institutions have shown how poorly these organizations are prepared for such circumstances, which further proves the necessity of managing change in private higher education institutions. Thus, all experiences that we gained from private higher education institutions operating under the influence of changes indicate that risk management should be seen not only from a reactive perspective but also should become an essential part of strategic planning and decision-making within the institution.

A risk-aware culture is described as the combination of the values, norms, and behaviors through which the organization's members perceive, communicate, and react to the risks (Institute of Risk Management, 2012). In order to develop such a culture, it is crucial to develop an environment where workers can safely point out any threats, problems, or issues. However, the existence of risk management systems does not always guarantee risk communication transparency. Although the organization has an efficient system for risk management, the phenomenon of organizational silence may still occur. Such behavior may be characterized by acquiescent silence, a response to powerlessness and low expectations of efficacy, or quiescent silence, a response rooted in fear and a sense of personal risk (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison, 2023; Knoll et al., 2021). As a result, employees' failure to speak up about issues that may pose risks to their organization can prevent the organization from obtaining critical information needed for proactive intervention, risk reduction, or crisis prevention.

The literature on risk management in PHEIs indicates that employees are well aware of risks within their institutions. However, the barriers that prevent employees from communicating risks are largely unexplored. This problem becomes salient for PHEIs, which are often regarded as family-owned businesses in which hierarchy and obedience to the top level prevail as part of organizational culture (Gatdula, 2023). Furthermore, the power distance orientation within Philippine companies may inhibit subordinates from raising issues and conveying potential risks to superiors (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2022; Hofstede et al., 2020). These challenges may be further intensified by regulatory pressures that promote a checklist-oriented approach to risk management, emphasizing procedural compliance rather than meaningful dialogue and substantive engagement with risk-related issues (Gu et al., 2022; Alsharari, 2022). Taken together, these factors point to an important deficiency in understanding how organizational hierarchy, culture, and compliance maintain silence about risks, even when employees are aware of them.

Most of the literature on risk management in higher education institutions has mainly concentrated on structural and formal aspects, such as risk management frameworks, governance, and regulatory compliance. In contrast, the literature paid little attention to examining the dynamics of risk information exchange within the organization from social and cultural perspectives. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining organizational silence as an influence on the risk information exchange process and on shaping risk-sensitive organizational culture within PHEIs managed by founders. More precisely, this study investigated organizational silence in its various forms, reasons for its occurrence, and consequences.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a secondary analysis of semi-structured interview data in the context of a larger mixed-methods study investigating the risk-aware culture and performance of Philippine private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The rationale for using secondary analysis was that it would enable a detailed exploration of an understudied phenomenon using an existing, information-rich dataset, thus obviating the need for further data collection (Heaton, 2008; Irwin, 2023). The original qualitative study involved 15 key informants from 6 PHEIs in Region 1, including 3 at the institutional level, 6 at the managerial level, and 6 at the individual level. They were purposively sampled because they played a role in institutional governance, risk management, regulation, or administration.

The secondary data set was analyzed using a deductive-inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The first stage of coding involved the use of theoretical codes that were derived from organizational silence theory, psychological safety, and founder imprinting. Using deductive codes enabled the identification of statements related to acquiescent and quiescent silence, employees' comfort or discomfort with airing their concerns, and founder authority. Inductive analysis was then conducted to identify how organizational silence manifested and how it was produced within the organizational setting.

The validity and credibility of the analysis were enhanced through reflexive journaling, an audit trail, and thick description. The original study also utilized member checking, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing to increase the rigor of the methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2021). Ethical clearance for the original study was obtained from the University of the Cordilleras Research Ethics Committee. All the participants provided consent for participating in the study. Member check, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing have been used to add methodological rigour to the study, using anonymous interviews for further studies. To ensure confidentiality, all identifiers have been stripped, and interview citation has been provided in form of role descriptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis, four inter-related themes that can help to understand how organizational silence influences risk communication in founder-led PHEIs were identified. These themes include founder's shadow, the paradox of compliance, the middle manager's dilemma, and a typology of silence. From the identified themes, it becomes clear that silence is not just the individual inability to communicate. It is a result of several factors.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of organizational silence in founder-led PHEIs

Major Theme	Sub-Themes	Levels Affected	Analytic Role
1. Founder's shadow	1.1 Unquestionable founder 1.2 Hierarchical decision-making 1.3 Espoused-values gap	Institutional, Managerial, Individual	Explains how founder authority becomes a silence mechanism
2. Compliance paradox	2.1 Compliance as risk management 2.2 Regulatory overload 2.3 Checklist mentality	Institutional, Managerial	Explains how regulation can displace substantive risk discussion
3. Middle manager's dilemma	3.1 Impossible bridge 3.2 Fear of blame 3.3 Silenced middle	Managerial	Explains structural constraints on upward and downward voice
4. Typology of silence	4.1 Fear-based 4.2 Loyal 4.3 Fatalistic (4) Defensive silence	Individual, Managerial, Institutional	Distinguishes forms of silence with different antecedents and remedies

1. The Founder's Shadow: Governance as a Silence Mechanism

Participants at the institutional, managerial, and individual levels highlighted the role of founder-centered governance in fostering an organizational climate of silence. The founder's authority was often perceived as unquestionable, creating an environment in which employees viewed challenging or questioning founder-led decisions as inappropriate or potentially disadvantageous (Gatdula, 2023; Schein & Schein, 2016).

1.1 The Unquestionable Founder

Participants across levels described the founder's authority as effectively beyond question. A middle manager explained: *"It is not possible to query the decisions made by the founder even when there could be a risk factor involved. As a result, risks that need to be addressed tend to be ignored."* The claim is significantly less for what it says about silence than for the finality it implies: the danger is not rejected on its merits but fails to enter into consideration entirely.

This fits into the theory of founder imprinting in which the beliefs and assumptions of the founder become part of the organizational culture despite their absence (Schein & Schein, 2016; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). The extra dimension that comes with this finding is communication. Founder imprinting is typically considered to be the process through which cultures are created, but in this case, it is an information-suppression process. Drawing attention to risks is seen as confronting the founder and thus as disloyalty rather than diligence (Gatdula, 2023).

1.2 Hierarchical Decision-Making

The sub-theme relates to the centralization of decision-making authority and the limited availability of upward communication channels. One participant explained:

"Decisions on risk are normally taken either at the president level or the Board of Directors level. But it is our duty to identify these risks, but there isn't any process by which we can discuss these risks."

This reflects a situation where the workers are supposed to be aware of the risk factors without using any form of communication or discussing their observations. This shows that the task of risk detection is given to the workers without giving them any chance to contribute to risk decision-making.

This form of silence arises due to a structural constraint and not an attitudinal one. Morrison & Milliken (2000) identified centralized decision-making and a lack of adequate communication channels to upper levels as organizational factors that create silences, both of which are present in the given situation. This kind of structure creates an asymmetric division of risk-related roles: risk identification is left to employees, while its interpretation, evaluation, and management rest on the shoulders of the organization's leadership, who may be unable to implement changes based on their suggestions for addressing the risks they reveal. In this case, employees might perform the diagnostic function of revealing vulnerabilities within the company without being able to make any changes through their suggestions as to what should be done about the risks revealed. This

structure is likely to turn risk reporting into a mere procedure and fail to facilitate discussion (Morrison, 2023; Knoll et al., 2021). It is important to remember that in this case the reason for the silence does not lie in any fears about reporting.

1.3 The Espoused-Values Gap

Espoused-Values Gap involves the reliability and consistency of the risk management signals given by leaders. One faculty member said:

"Leaders say they value risk, but then do something entirely different. When they cut budgets, risk training is the first to go."

The significance of this gap is due to the fact that workers view budgets as manifestations of intent and not statements. When risk training is the first thing to go, the underlying message is that risk management is dispensable under pressure, which undermines psychological safety and signals that raising problems will not be rewarded (Edmondson, 2023). The sub-thematic approach also explains how formal commitment to risk management can exist alongside silence. In the latter case, espoused values create expectations that are contradicted by leaders' actions.

2. The Compliance Paradox: When Regulation Reinforces Silence

While regulation is expected to improve risk management within institutions, the three sub-themes below demonstrate how this can have the unintended effect of inhibiting the establishment of a risk-oriented culture. There might be a situation where compliance replaces the actual understanding of risk; there may be too many regulatory demands that prevent any reflection on issues, and documentation is favored over judgment. The result is a regulatory paradox in which the means that would help institutions gain better risk awareness could prevent any discussion of risk.

2.1 Compliance on Risk Management

A senior administrator succinctly captured this dynamic by stating, *"Compliance has become our risk management."* The analytical significance of this statement lies in how it shows that, in this case, the process of substitution has been carried out by making compliance the defining factor for risk consciousness in the organization. In this regard, compliance has become the primary frame of reference for risk assessment.

When compliance with regulations influences an organization's attention to risks, employees are less likely to raise issues that fall outside those regulations. Raising issues which are not regulated may imply a statement on how vulnerable the institution is or that it has no control over the issue, thus turning risk communication into a matter of reputation (Alsharari, 2022; Gu et al., 2022). Organizational silence will be instrumental in maintaining the good image of compliance by the organization at the expense of its risk intelligence. This sub-theme also emphasizes the connection between risk awareness and organizational silence where employees are aware of different risks, but also they are aware of the fact that not all risks are genuine or acceptable.

2.2 Regulatory Overload

Regulatory Overload deals with the impact of regulatory requirements on organizational time and attention. The following quote provides a good illustration of this problem:

"Many regulations are imposed by CHED which keep changing and make us wary of complying with them. But there is a difference between complying with the regulations and being aware of the risks. We can get things done but we don't have enough time for anything else."

This underscores an important difference between meeting regulatory requirements and gaining a deeper insight into organizational risks. The growing number and regular changes of regulatory demands cause fear in employees while taking up the time and mental efforts that could have been spent on reflection about potential risks. Thus, regulatory overload is not just an issue related to the size of the workload but a cognitive issue because constant focus on regulatory compliance may prevent employees from noticing, interpreting and communicating new risks. Organizational silence, in this case, does not result from fear or indifference, but from the lack of time and cognitive resources required for risk communication.

2.3 The Checklist Mentality

Checklist mentality focuses on the epistemological effects of compliance-oriented risk management. As a middle manager observed,

"We have become experts in complying, but when you ask us any other risk apart from the compliance issues, we do not know."

The above statement clearly demonstrates the dichotomy between regulatory compliance and organizational awareness. While employees may be able to acquire significant skills related to their ability to comply with regulations, such skills do not necessarily mean that the employees have the skills to recognize, analyze, and communicate risks beyond compliance.

Such a result is in line with institutional theory, according to which organizations tend to develop formal structures and practices in order to maintain legitimacy of their actions, although such processes may lead to the decoupling of formal structures from real organizational processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The current finding add another aspect to the perspective by discussing the implications of decoupling in terms of organizational silence. Not only does the checklist approach limit the acquisition of more complex skills related to risk management but it also displaces the possibility of employees' independent risk thinking. As a result, risks that lie outside the boundaries of existing compliance regimes become ever more difficult to identify, express, and communicate, especially when staff lack not only the language but also the chance to speak up about them (Gu et al., 2022; Power et al., 2021). This is what the sub-theme suggests as an important implication for risk management policy: Regulatory processes can enhance risk documentation while impeding risk communication and the development of a true risk awareness culture.

3. The Middle Manager's Dilemma: Caught Between Hierarchies

Middle management is an interesting aspect of the organizational hierarchy. Middle managers are required to enforce the policies of the organization as well as voice the grievances of their subordinates. But in most cases, middle managers end up being stuck between the two responsibilities without being able to express themselves upward or downward.

3.1 The Impossible Bridge

One middle manager described this organizational dilemma:

"We are told to implement the risk policies from the top, but when we raise issues about them, nothing happens. And our staff come to us with problems, but we can't do anything because we don't have the authority or the resources."

In this case, the sub-theme shows the effects of structural impediments on the capability of middle managers to perform their risk management duties. It does not imply an issue of individual incompetence but the lack of a match between expectations and power/resources to perform the corresponding functions. Middle managers are typically regarded as organizational intermediaries who interpret strategies into practices and ensure that information flows throughout various organizational levels (Fraser & Simkins, 2016). However, this mediation requires proper decision-making capabilities, organizational responsiveness, and resources. In the current situation, the former fails to communicate up because of the lack of organizational responsiveness, whereas the latter cannot respond downwards due to limited powers and resources. Thus, middle managers are required to perform the role of intermediaries but lack institutional means to do it (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Power et al., 2013).

3.2 Fear of Blame

The fear of blame concerns the personal cost of speech. Another middle manager explained: *"If you voice your opinion, it might come across as criticism of your leaders or lack of teamwork. It's easier to just do what you're told."*

The language itself is telling: the feared penalty is not one of formal discipline but being understood as disloyal or not a good collegial team member. This fits well within the theory of quiescent silence, where self-protection drives non-disclosure (Knoll et al., 2021), and high power distance where deference is the accepted norm (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2022). Additionally, the sub-theme highlights how risk reporting has become recast as a social offense. If simply pointing out a problem can be considered criticism, then that is a sign that silent non-disclosure has become socially acceptable.

3.3 The Silenced Middle

As a whole, these subthemes explain why middle managers may appear ineffective in risk processes despite being well positioned to detect risk. The natural inference might be a lack of managerial skill or risk literacy, but the qualitative evidence suggests otherwise: middle managers were among the most vocal participants when discussing institutional risks.

Such a distinction holds significant importance in terms of the interventions that need to be designed. If the intervention strategy is designed only to enhance managerial capabilities, risk management skills, or risk literacy, such an approach might not suffice where the issue lies in lack of power and limited access to the decision-making process. Such a situation thus falls under the category of the "silenced middle" issue that needs to be solved through the application of institutional solutions. These involve delegation of power to make decisions, creation of a safe upward channel of communication, and provision of resources to match the managerial responsibilities (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Kaplan & Mikes, 2012).

4. A Typology of Silence in PHEIs

This research found that there were four types of organizational silence present in the organizations under investigation. These types are presented individually below since the motives and organizational manifestation of these forms differ from each other along with the prerequisites required for addressing them. By building on the initial differentiation offered by Morrison and Milliken (2000) regarding acquiescent silence and quiescent silence, this research provides further typology of silence based on the unique structure of F-PHEI governance systems.

4.1 Fear-Based Silence (Quiescent)

Fear-based silence is characterized by employees' reluctance to communicate concerns because of anticipated negative consequences. A middle manager illustrated this form of silence by stating, *"If you voice your opinion, it might come across as criticism of your leaders or lack of teamwork."*

The implication is indicative of typical quiescence silence behavior, where employees are motivated to remain silent about some vital information in order to protect themselves from retaliation, negative labeling, or career-related consequences (Morrison, 2023; Knoll et al., 2021). It poses special importance in terms of organizational implication, since this behavior makes it impossible to disclose the knowledge owned by employees who take part in organizational activities and can be among the earliest identifiers of potential dangers (Detert & Edmondson, 2021). As long as fear serves as the main motivation for withholding information, quiescence silence will only be addressed with an attempt to create psychological safety among employees.

4.2 Loyal Silence

The silence is due to the identification with the organization and the unwillingness to make life difficult for its leadership. One participant explained the way in which new risk protocols are received: *"Every time we come up with some new protocols on risk management, people complain about them. It shows that they think it will only increase their workload."*

This type of silence takes on the appearance of team loyalty or reputation protection and is often socially rewarded. This is why it is hard to deal with it: it looks like commitment and not withdrawal. Nevertheless, it does not allow the organization to face the risks and can be used as a more socially acceptable mask for fear-based silence because loyalty is easier to admit than fear

(Morrison, 2023; Knoll et al., 2021). The distinction between them is important for intervention because appeals to organizational commitment will not help to break such a silence.

4.3 Fatalistic Silence (Acquiescent)

Fatalistic silence is based on resignation. One of the respondents characterized it in the following manner: *"We have become professionals in complying… We can perform our duties, but we don't have enough time for anything else."*

This is an example of fatalistic silence, where employees realize that voicing their opinions will not have any impact on decision-making in the organization and thus refrain from solving the problems (Morrison, 2023). In contrast to fear-driven silence, fatalistic silence may not arise from the fear of being punished; instead, it is formed based on past experience, in which voicing their opinions had no effect. Thus, overcoming this behavior cannot be done just by fostering communication. The organization needs to show employees that their concerns result in actions taken. Instances where risks were recognized and solved will restore faith in the power of voicing opinions. Otherwise, promises of open communication will not affect employees' attitudes (Knoll et al., 2021).

4.4 Defensive Silence

Silence of defense occurs when organizational components conceal risks from one another in order to protect themselves from any possible blame or scrutiny. One of the participants explained this phenomenon as follows: *"Whenever risks have been identified by a department, they stay within that department."*

This type of silence takes place at the organizational unit level and not only at the individual level, with the department being the main actor in self-protection. This kind of silence is most apparent in situations where revealing the risks can result in the unit being blamed, made accountable, or suffering reputation damage. In such cases, the risk information becomes a liability for the department rather than a tool for learning for all. As a result, cross-departmental communication and risk awareness within the organization are hindered (Edmondson, 2023; Morrison, 2023). Since defensive silence is caused by unit-level self-protection, it should be addressed through a shared responsibility approach and an environment of blameless reporting where departments feel encouraged to reveal their risks without being blamed excessively.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Implications include theoretical, managerial, cultural, and practical, among others. Overall, the study shows that silence in such founder-based PHEIs is a systematic organization phenomenon rather than simply communication problem between individuals. Hence, approaches targeting communication only by making employees talk will not work.

Conceptually, the research extends the organizational silence literature to founder-managed higher education organizations. The antecedents described by Morrison and Milliken (2000) of centralized decision-making and lack of upward feedback are present in the study,

although with a historical dimension that comes from the founder's lasting imprint on the communication culture (Schein & Schein, 2016; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). The notion of founder's shadow identifies this process whereby authority serves as a boundary around what can be brought up. Typology of fear-based, loyal, fatalistic, and defensive silence expands the existing theory, and the identification of loyal and defensive types of silence is especially important since they are organizationally rewarded practices and can thus easily be misinterpreted as commitment or unit autonomy. The results also challenge the assumed connection between awareness, compliance, and speaking out since awareness can be high and reporting stifled, while compliance mechanisms can limit the spectrum of risks that employees feel comfortable raising. This reinforces the notion of risk culture as an attribute of the communication system rather than aggregated individual risk knowledge (Power & Ashby, 2023; Edmondson, 2023).

At the managerial and institutional levels, risk management cannot simply be something done out of obligation via documentation. Organizations need to integrate reporting throughout academic and administrative divisions, minimize the departmental silencing of risk information, and share rather than delegate accountability. The implications from the middle manager research are specific: since the silent middle represents constrained power rather than lack of capacity, skills development for managers will not solve the problem. What is needed are delegated decision rights, protected channels up, and resources commensurate with responsibility (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Fraser & Simkins, 2016). Culturally, organizations have to make sure that reporting risks does not come with a reputational cost, and leaders have to judge their commitment based on how they receive dissent. The value-rhetoric gap means that commitment is judged by resource allocation rather than rhetoric, and therefore needs to be restored through resource allocation, especially risk management training which is being cut first.

In terms of policy, the compliance paradox means that policymakers and accrediting bodies need to reflect on approaches that identify risk management with compliance with documentation. Evaluation criteria need to incorporate the proof of upward communication and psychological safety, not only the existence of mechanisms, and frameworks need to provide enough space for organizations to create risk culture tailored to its context (Alsharari, 2022; Gu et al., 2022). In practice, silence exacerbates the pre-existing vulnerabilities of tuition-based organizations by masking risks, scattering information between departments, and damaging trust. Thus, shifting from fragmentation and compliance to integration and voice is an essential precondition for sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research examined the impact of organizational silence on risk communication and embedding of risk awareness culture in Philippine PHEIs led by founders. The following four themes were identified as mutually related. Founder-oriented governance serves as the silence inducer due to the presence of unquestioned power, concentration of decision-making and discrepancy between the values proclaimed and practiced. Regulatory compliance generates a compliance dilemma in the form of the replacement of risk conversation with documentation and substitution of risk thinking with the checklist mentality. Middle management employees, who are supposed to act as risk communicators, have structural limitations to do so.

The main conclusion drawn from the study is that risk awareness, compliance, and silence can co-exist. An organization might show strong signs of awareness of risks and satisfactory signs of compliance, while at the same time employees are constantly suppressing the information on which the above depend. This is the reason why it is hard to detect such phenomenon from the outside, and also defies the notion that if risk management becomes stronger in an organization, its risk culture will improve. Silence is not a vacuum to be filled, but rather an organizational phenomenon created by governance, regulation, and culture.

The study contributes to organizational silence theory by extending it to founder-led higher education institutions, by naming the founder's shadow as a silence mechanism, and by proposing a context-specific typology that distinguishes forms of silence which are otherwise easily mistaken for loyalty, realism, or unit autonomy. Practically, it indicates that compliance is not a substitute for a risk-aware culture; that institutions require safe channels for upward reporting, empowered middle managers, and leadership behavior consistent with stated priorities; and that regulators and accrediting bodies should evaluate voice and psychological safety rather than documentary adherence alone. Future research should examine interventions that successfully break silence, track how silence evolves as founder-led institutions professionalize their governance, and test whether comparable dynamics operate in public and non-founder-led institutions and in other high-power-distance contexts.

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