Breaking Workplace Silence: How Organizational Communication Reduces The Bystander Effect And Sparks Proactivity

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Abstract

In today's complex and fast-changing work environments, organizations increasingly rely on employees who can take initiative without waiting for instruction. However, this urgency is often undermined by a persistent behavioral pattern: the bystander effect, where individuals hesitate to act due to perceived shared responsibility. While previous research has explored organizational silence and proactivity separately, few studies have examined how internal communication affects proactive behavior through the lens of the bystander effect. This study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze data from 200 employees across the public and private sectors in Bali. The results reveal that organizational communication significantly reduces the bystander effect and enhances proactive behavior, both directly and indirectly. The bystander effect is shown to be a meaningful psychological mechanism that mediates these dynamics. Future research should explore how remote work, digital communication, or leadership style influence this relationship over time.

Keywords: Communication, Bystander Effect, Proactivity, Mediation, Workplace

Introduction

Modern workplaces are more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous than ever, so organizations in every field now feel pressure to groom staff who can bounce back, adapt quickly, and take the lead even when directions are unclear (Evans, 2022). At the same time, fast-moving technology, mixed on-site and remote schedules, and knotty team designs have pushed old top-down styles of leadership toward fresher, more collaborative ways of working. These souped-up models place employee proactivity at the heart of lasting success because, without self-driven action, few plans ever gain traction (A. Zahoor, 2020). Proactive conduct means people act on their own, spot changes coming before they arrive, and steer their work toward improvement rather than waiting for orders (N. Zahoor et al., 2022). As a result, such behavior is now often labeled the backbone of organizational excellence (Carvalho et al., 2021). Workers who stretch beyond the written job outline, pitch new ideas, untangle problems solo, and chip in for teammates prove to be prized assets. Still, many firms watch in frustration as urgent moments prompt little more than silence and passivity, even though everyone claims to value that spark (Erdoğan et al., 2022).

People often notice problems and know they could speak up, yet they stay quiet, and this puzzling choice mirrors the bystander effect studied in psychology (Scaffidi Abbate et al., 2022). Originally linked to street emergencies such as accidents or visible crimes, the idea shows that onlookers freeze because they expect someone else to take action. In workplaces, the same pattern appears when staff see ethical lapses, safety risks, faulty procedures, or tense clashes, but wait, thinking that supervisors, peers, or higher management should step in (Mayer et al., 2013). Such passivity does not spring solely from indifference or lack of skill. It arises instead from role confusion, fear of backlash, shifting social norms, and above all, the way channels of communication are set up or blocked (Cookson et al., 2023). When messages move only up and down, remain vague, or leave many voices out, employees feel powerless and in the dark, so the impulse to stay on the sidelines grows stronger (Hosseini et al., 2024). Ultimately, this dynamic solidifies a habit of silence and disengagement that can damage the entire organization.

Though it occurs behind the scenes, the bystander effect at work can do real harm (Lytle et al., 2021a). Gradually, a habit of silence chips away at accountability, dulls ethical alertness, and saps employees' sense of belonging and loyalty (Jahanzeb et al., 2024). When staff grow used to watching troubles unfold without feeling obliged to speak or act, firms risk breeding an indifferent, passive, and socially anxious atmosphere (Wang et al., 2025). For this reason, it is critical to study how internal communication shapes these patterns. Communication is more than a conveyor belt for facts and figures. It serves as a lever for empowerment, inclusion, and culture-making. When well crafted, messages ease anxiety, clarify what each role demands, and instill a sense of psychological safety. All these effects together help shrink the bystander effect and encourage people to step forward (Jönsson & Muhonen, 2025).

Even though the topic matters, research that ties together workplace communication, the bystander effect, and proactive employee action is still scarce. A handful of studies have tackled, in isolation, how good communication boosts engagement or how the bystander effect plays out in social psychology. Yet only a small number have tested these ideas together within an organizational behavior framework (Jennings et al., 2024; Nielsen et al., 2025). Moreover, almost no work has examined the bystander effect as a bridge between the quality of workplace talk and proactive behavior in real office settings. This shortfall clearly leaves a notable hole in the literature that needs filling. It matters more now because today's work arrangements are often team-based and cross-functional, which heightens the chance that people will shrug off responsibility. By closing the gap, future studies could advance theory at the crossroads of communication, psychology, and management, while also offering managers practical, context-sensitive ways to encourage initiative.

Drawing on this background, the study investigates how the bystander effect mediates the link between workplace communication and employees' proactive conduct. It argues that clear, inclusive, and empowering dialogue shrinks the psychological barriers behind the bystander effect-role ambiguity, fear of exclusion, and the sense that one voice hardly counts. With those barriers eased, staff feel free to act on their own initiative. In contrast, closed or muddled communication spreads diffuse responsibility, blocking proactive steps. By testing these ideas with

data, the research seeks to explain why otherwise similar organizations vary so widely in cultivating a proactive culture.

This study is designed to enrich both theory and practice. On the theoretical side, it adds to workplace silence and behavioral accountability by introducing the bystander effect as a key reason employees vary in speaking up. By linking ideas from psychology and communication, the research creates a more integrated model of everyday workplace action. Practically, the findings offer concrete advice for leaders, managers, and HR teams. They can guide the crafting of clearer communication channels, safer internal-reporting systems, and leadership-training programs that recognize the hidden mental blocks keeping staff from voicing concerns or stepping forward. In the long run, the research hopes to help build workplaces that are more ethical, more engaged, and more psychologically secure, places where speaking up is normal, and taking initiative feels like a shared, empowered duty.

Grand Theory

To explore how workplace communication links the bystander effect with proactive conduct, this study leans on three well-known theories: Diffusion of Responsibility, Organizational Silence, and Social Exchange. When combined, they offer a solid lens through which to see how clear, open talk can cut down silence born of bystander thinking and encourage employees to take initiative.

Diffusion of Responsibility Theory arose in social psychology to show that people in a crowd often freeze during emergencies because each assumes someone else will step in (Lytle et al., 2021b). In an office or team setting, the idea translates neatly to situations where staff observe ethical lapses, conflicts, or flawed processes but wait for a manager or peer to act first (Tosuntaş, 2020). Such hesitance, the classic bystander effect, springs not from cold indifference but from mixed signals about who should do what, high social pressure, and the straightforward human tendency to look to the group for cues (Havlik et al., 2020).

Building on this idea, Organizational Silence Theory argues that tall management layers, a climate rooted in fear, and one-way, exclusive channels of talk allow silence to spread through a workplace (Nacera &

Mohamed, 2023). Staff members then hold back feedback, worries, or fresh ideas because they dread retaliation, feel powerless, or have learned that their voices are neither welcomed nor important (Lewis et al., 2025). When messages come almost exclusively from the top, remain vague, or lack transparency, employees are moved from witnesses to bystanders, deepening apathy and locking the organization in old routines (Taşkan et al., 2025).

By contrast, Social Exchange Theory shows that people step up with extra effort when they sense the firm is backing them in return (Einwiller et al., 2021). Workers who find their environment fair, open, and psychologically secure are more willing to take charge, troubleshoot without prompting, and carry out tasks that spill beyond the narrow boundaries of the contract (Ghani et al., 2023). In this view, trust and mutual respect act as the true currency, making proactive behaviour not a gift but a natural dividend of the organization's investment in its staff (Hao & Han, 2022).

Drawing on all three perspectives, the present study posits that clear, consistent communication shrinks uncertainty and closes emotional gaps, which, in turn, diminishes the diffusion of responsibility, breaks entrenched silences, and, as a reciprocal effect, encourages prompt action. This blended framework, therefore, highlights the key psychological and behavioral processes behind employee initiative while underscoring how communication can either preserve or contest passive norms inside workplaces.

Hypothesis Development
H1: Higher-quality organizational communication reduces the strength of the bystander effect in the workplace.
Rationale:

When internal messages are clear, inclusive, and empowering, ambiguity about roles shrinks, and employees feel more responsible for acting (Shahrzadi et al., 2024). The Diffusion of Responsibility Theory suggests that strong communication prevents staff from assuming someone else will step in. Thus, as communication quality rises, the tendency to

defer the bystander effect is expected to weaken (Martini & De Piccoli, 2020).

H2: A stronger bystander effect, in turn, inhibits employees' proactive behavior.
Rationale:

When the bystander effect is present, individuals may freeze rather than address visible problems because they expect others to intervene first (Wijaya et al., 2023). Drawing on Organizational Silence Theory, this mindset mirrors workplace silence born of fear, uncertainty, or shared diffusion of responsibility. Such quietude restricts staff's willingness to suggest ideas, take initiative, or resolve issues independently. Accordingly, the more pronounced the bystander effect, the lower the employees' proactive intentions and actions (Chen et al., 2024).

H3: Higher-quality organizational communication, therefore, drives greater employee proactive behavior.

Rationale:

Social Exchange Theory suggests that when organizations prioritize clear, supportive communication, employees tend to repay that investment with voluntary behaviors such as taking initiative, troubleshooting issues, and exceeding formal job descriptions (Boccoli et al., 2017). In this model, communication acts as both a source of power and a signal of trust, nurturing a workplace where proactivity can flourish.

H4: The bystander effect mediates the relationship between organizational communication and employee proactive behavior.
Rationale:

The bystander effect serves as a psychological lens through which to understand why communication shapes proactivity (Nielsen, Hansen, & Mikkelsen, 2025). When information flows poorly, workers face uncertainty, fear of being judged by peers, and so hold back from acting, thereby deepening the bystander effect (Noort, 2020). In contrast, open, empowering dialogue lessens that pressure and invites action. Therefore, this study positions the bystander effect as a mediator that transmits the

influence of organizational communication on proactive behaviors. Derived from the hypotheses formulated in the preceding section, the research model is depicted in **Figure 1** below:
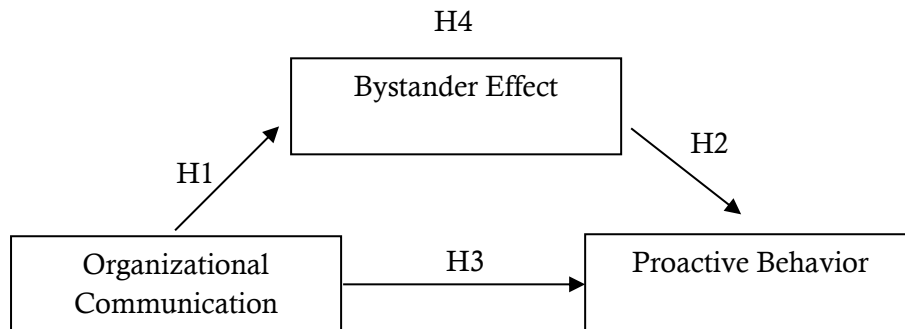

Figure 1. The Framework and Hypotheses

Research Method

This investigation took place in Bali, Indonesia, a province famous for its vibrant culture and tourist appeal, yet also experiencing rapid changes in labor patterns linked to the growing digital economy, sweeping public-sector reforms, and an upsurge in start-ups alongside creative-business ventures. As noted by the Central Statistics Agency in July 2024, Bali's population stands at around 4.4 million, a diverse mix that provides a useful backdrop for studying work behaviors shaped by psychological phenomena such as the bystander effect, organizational silence, and proactive initiative.

Participants were permanent staff drawn from both public and private organizations. Data were gathered through purposive sampling that applied three key filters: (1) residency in Bali, (2) uninterrupted service of at least twelve months in the current workplace, and (3) a position requiring regular dialogue with supervisors and coworkers. These stipulations aimed to select individuals situated in communicative settings where the research's main dynamics- and the associated behaviors- are likely to surface.

This study followed (Hair & Alamer, 2022) Guideline, which advises a baseline of ten participants per measurement indicator when estimating sample size for a complex latent model. Because the construct under

review contains five indicators, a minimum of fifty respondents was initially prescribed. To improve statistical power and model robustness, however, data were ultimately gathered from 200 individuals, a figure judged both representative and adequate for examining structural path effects with the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique.

In this investigation, every latent construct was captured with reflective indicators that were thoughtfully adapted from well-established measures and kept in step with the study's guiding theory. Organizational communication was examined through three interrelated facets- clarity, transparency, and inclusiveness- drawing on Boccoli et al.'s (2017) model, which treats communication not just as a conduit for facts but as a crucial bedrock for trust and social capital at work. The bystander effect was measured with items that record how often employees stand by instead of intervening when they see peer conflict, procedural lapses, or ethical breaches. These indicators are anchored in Martini and De Piccoli's (2020) diffusion-of-responsibility framework, which shows how unclear roles and social pressure can mute personal initiative. Proactive behavior, in turn, was captured by dimensions such as self-starting action, voluntary problem solving, and tasks done beyond the formal job description, following Hao and Han's (2022) scale. That work emphasizes that such proactivity flourishes when staff feel genuinely supported by their organization, echoing the central ideas of Social Exchange Theory.

All survey items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, where (1) meant strongly disagree and (5) meant strongly agree, a format frequently preferred in organizational behavior studies because it is straightforward and easy to read (Jebb et al., 2021). Data were analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. This option handles intricate models with latent constructs, works well with moderate samples, and remains robust when multivariate normality is not strictly met. The procedure included checks for validity and reliability, examination of structural paths, and mediation tests to assess the proposed relationships in the frameworks.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1. Descriptive Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	104	52
	Female	96	48
Age	< 25 years	30	15
	25–34 years	90	45
	35–44 years	60	30
	≥ 45 years	20	10
Education Level	High School or below	20	10
	Diploma	45	22.5
	Bachelor's Degree	105	52.5
	Master's Degree or above	30	15
Employment Tenure	< 1 year	25	12.5
	1–3 years	60	30
	4–6 years	70	35
	> 6 years	45	22.5
Position Level	Staff	100	50
	Supervisor	60	30
	Manager	30	15
	Executive/Director	10	5

Based on Table 1, the survey sample is slightly heavier toward men, with 52% male and 48% female, revealing a gender mix that is close to even. Age distribution skews young-adult: 45% are 25-34 and 30% are 35-44, suggesting that the team sits in a period of high productivity, ready to meet swift workplace shifts with mature accountability. Educationally,

52.5% hold a bachelor's, 22.5% a diploma, and 15% a postgraduate credential, pointing to a workforce literate enough to grasp the subtleties of office talk and social interaction.

Finally, on tenure, 35% report 4-6 years and 30% 1-3 years, meaning respondents have logged enough time in their current roles to form a clear sense of duties and expectations. Regarding workplace roles, 50 percent of survey participants identify as staff, 30 percent as supervisors, and 15 percent as managers. This distribution is noteworthy because the bystander effect frequently clusters among staff and middle-tier employees, where social norms and unclear responsibilities exert the greatest pressure. Their grasp of internal communication and varying willingness to intervene therefore render this group particularly valuable to the present study.

Reliability and Validity Test

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Bystander Effect	0.769	0.869	0.83	0.525
Organizational Communication	0.801	0.868	0.866	0.581
Proactive Behavior	0.784	0.882	0.863	0.593

From Table 2, the measurement model demonstrates acceptable levels of internal consistency and convergent validity across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values for Bystander Effect (0.769), Organizational Communication (0.801), and Proactive Behavior (0.784) all exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal reliability. Similarly, composite reliability values (rho_a and rho_c) for all constructs

range from 0.83 to 0.882, suggesting strong construct reliability and confirming that the items reliably reflect their respective latent variables. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for Bystander Effect (0.525), Organizational Communication (0.581), and Proactive Behavior (0.593) all surpass the minimum criterion of 0.50, providing evidence of satisfactory convergent validity. These results collectively confirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, thus suitable for further structural analysis. All values meet the threshold for acceptable model quality (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Hypothesis Test

Table 3. Regression Weight Structural Equational Model

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Organizational Communication -> Bystander Effect	-0.981	-0.982	0.002	62.204	0.000
Bystander Effect -> Proactive Behavior	-0.331	-0.322	0.073	4.526	0.000
Organizational Communication -> Proactive Behavior	1.312	1.303	0.070	18.611	0.000
Organizational Communication -> Bystander Effect -> Proactive Behavior	-0.325	-0.316	0.072	4.539	0.000

As shown in Table 3, every hypothesis tested in this survey is bolstered by strong significance and solid effect sizes. The structural model results support all proposed hypotheses. First, organizational communication shows a significant negative effect on the bystander effect (β = -0.981, t = 62.204, p < 0.001), supporting H1. This indicates that better internal communication is associated with a lower tendency for employees to engage in bystander behavior. Second, the bystander effect significantly and negatively influences proactive behavior (β = -0.331, t = 4.526, p < 0.001), confirming H2. This implies that employees who experience stronger bystander tendencies are less likely to engage in proactive actions. Third, organizational communication has a strong and positive direct effect on proactive behavior (β = 1.312, t = 18.611, p < 0.001), validating H3 and showing that high-quality communication boosts proactive conduct. Lastly, the bystander effect significantly mediates the relationship between organizational communication and proactive behavior (β = -0.325, t = 4.539, p < 0.001), supporting H4. This mediation suggests that effective communication reduces bystander passivity, which in turn facilitates greater proactive employee behavior.

Discussion

The data gathered in this study gives solid, real-world backing to the theoretical model that we built by pulling together Diffusion of Responsibility Theory, Organizational Silence Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. First, the strong negative link we found between open workplace communication and the bystander effect shows that clear, inclusive talk cuts down on uncertainty and shared avoidance of duty (H1). This result mirrors the core idea in Diffusion of Responsibility Theory, which argues that people hesitate to act when roles are unclear or social cues hint that someone else will jump in. When channels of communication are strong, those role uncertainties weaken, and individuals feel more inclined to own their part (Martini & De Piccoli, 2020; Shahrzadi et al., 2024).

Second, the analysis confirms that a stronger bystander effect significantly crowds out proactive behavior (H2), illustrating how psychological and cultural silence can quiet initiative. As Organizational

Silence Theory points out, fear, powerlessness, or learned helplessness thrive when talk is limited and hierarchy looms, and these feelings shrink the impulse to step forward. That is one reason bystander mindsets can diminish action even when problems are obvious and fixable (Wijaya et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024).

Third, the robust positive connection between workplace communication and proactive conduct (H3) lends fresh support to Social Exchange Theory, which holds that staff members repay supportive settings with extra, constructive effort. When employees regard communication as clear, empowering, and psychologically secure, they see stepping forward not as a gamble but as a routine, valued act of give-and-take in a trusted system (Boccoli et al., 2017; Hao & Han, 2022).

Finally, the noteworthy mediating role of the bystander effect (H4) illustrates the theoretical overlap among the three frameworks. Communication does not simply push proactive behavior directly; it also loosens the mental brakes that normally keep people passive at work. Put another way, clear, open dialogue shrinks the hidden barrier of the bystander mindset barrier highlighted in both social psychology and the study of organizations (Nielsen et al., 2025; Noort, 2020).

Taken together, these findings underscore communications dual function as a practical mechanism and a psychological resource. They show that nurturing a workplace culture where people feel free to voice ideas and take initiative goes beyond simply revising hierarchies; it requires steady, inclusive messages built on trust that reframe how staff understand their duties, entitlements, and opportunities to speak up. Such insights advance theory at the crossroads of communication, psychology, and organizational studies, while also providing accessible guidance for managers who wish to cultivate proactive, resilient teams.

Conclusion

This study confirms that clear and inclusive organizational communication significantly reduces the bystander effect and enhances employees' proactive behavior. By integrating the Diffusion of Responsibility Theory, Organizational Silence Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the findings demonstrate that communication serves as

both a cognitive signal and an emotional support system that shapes how employees respond to uncertainty, hierarchy, and responsibility. Furthermore, the mediating role of the bystander effect underscores the psychological pathway through which communication influences initiative-taking. Altogether, the research highlights that effective communication is not merely a tool for transmitting information but a foundational force in cultivating engagement, accountability, and a proactive culture in the workplace.

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data, which may not fully capture dynamic behavioral changes over time or contextual influences. Theoretically, the findings strengthen the integration of communication and behavioral theories in organizational psychology, particularly the mediating role of psychological mechanisms such as the bystander effect. Practically, the results encourage leaders to invest in transparent and empowering communication practices as a means to combat workplace passivity. Future research should consider longitudinal or experimental designs to explore causal pathways and examine how digital communication or remote work settings might alter the interplay between communication, silence, and proactive conduct.

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