

Winter 12-2021

Silence in the Business World

Andrew Nedeljkovic
annedel@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Business Administration, Management, and Operations Commons](#), and the [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Repository Citation

Nedeljkovic, Andrew, "Silence in the Business World" (2021). *Honors Projects*. 665.
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/665>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Nedeljkovic

Silence in the Business World

By: Andrew Nedeljkovic

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College
At Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for graduation with
UNIVERSITY HONORS

Amanda Rzicznek English Department, Advisor

Mingsheng Li Finance Department, Advisor

An Introduction to the Problem and Guiding Research Questions

Silence is a very broad concept and I want to take a moment to clarify the type of silence I will be addressing in this paper. This paper refers to silence as a practice, synonymous with the ideas of mindfulness and meditation. Silence in this paper does not refer to underrepresentation or the silencing of one's voice or opinion. While these ideas are important and unfortunate, they are not addressed in this paper. I will focus on the positive uses of silence that come from its application in practice, which can be seen as guided meditations, yoga practices, being alone with ones' thoughts, and many other practical examples.

Silence is a universally understood concept that exists in every culture as people attempt to communicate. However, the understanding of silence differs throughout these cultures, and citizens use silence in a variety of ways. I want to know, "What can western societies, like the United States of America, learn from eastern societies, like Japan, when it comes to silence?". This question has been plaguing me since the start of my first year at Bowling Green State University. My Introduction to Research Writing class was based around the topic of silence and I immediately became consumed with the idea of how silence is used in business applications. I have some personal experience with silence practices, such as yoga and guided meditations, but I know this is not the case for a vast majority of businesspeople and business students in college. At first, my own experience with silence was uncomfortable and often felt awkward. As I practiced silence more and more, I began to feel comfortable in the practices and have lost the need to fill the silence that surrounds me. Once businesspeople and business students have a better understanding of the different uses of silence, they will, like me, have more pleasant experiences with silence. This new outlook on silence can help change the negative attitude that most businesspeople currently feel regarding silence. They will be able to better appreciate

works of art, improve communication socially, enhance their experience of education, and improve productivity at work.

A Review of the Literature

The expectation and understanding of silence in America is dim, to say the least. Most people only see the negative aspects of silence and the rest usually fail to see all of the positive uses of silence. Ana Zimmermann and John Morgan are two professors who have observed the misuse and the lack of use of silence in western societies. In their article titled, *A Time for Silence? Its Possibilities for Dialogue and for Reflective Learning*, they wrote “In contemporary western society, and indeed globally, we are experiencing a tidal wave of sound and speech, together with relentless pressure for personal expression. However, much of this is noise rather than genuine communication” (Morgan and Zimmermann, 2016, p. 400). Most of this noise comes from people’s lack of comfort with silence and the feeling that everyone must be self-expressive all the time. They feel the need to fill the lack of sound with any noise, even if it makes them look foolish, rather than sit in silence. I have seen this unfold firsthand during my internship at Northwestern Mutual. Young financial advisors get so nervous to speak with clients and are so uncomfortable with silence that they begin to blurt out random things about finances and insurance products that they scare potential clients away. If these financial advisors were more comfortable with silence, they could give prospective clients a chance to think clearly, rather than feel like they are being bombarded by an overeager salesperson. Morgan and Zimmermann also described silence as being viewed as potentially terrifying and oppressive (Morgan and Zimmermann, 2016, p. 401). For example, throughout our history minorities like people of color and women have had their opinions muted or even removed all together in the

business world. This type of silence can be extremely harmful and oppressive. This is not the type of silence I suggest in this essay, but rather the ability to quiet a person's mind, not their voice. According to Michael Landers, an American author, this disdain towards silence starts from a young age in America. He points to a child receiving a silent time-out when they misbehave saying, "The message is quite clear to most kids: Silence equals punishment. Talking equals reward" (Landers, 2017, p. 1). Another punishment using silence that Landers discusses is the silent treatment. This is an example of people intentionally creating silence as a way to negatively impact others. He says these uses of silence create "a strong sense of discomfort and often signals that someone is unhappy with us" (Landers, 2017, p. 1). This is similar to Morgan and Zimmermann's description of silence being terrifying and oppressive. Silence is primarily used in a negative manner in the United States but that does not have to be the case. There are many examples of many other cultures using silence to create positive impacts on the people around them.

Japan is often seen as a society that has mastered the many uses of silence. According to Landers, "...silences are perceived as treasured moments and signs of respect, and they are expected in all forms of conversation" (Landers, 2017, p. 2). Silence is seen as a vital conversational tool in Japan. It is used to build a trusting relationship between people having a conversation by demonstrating active listening. This silence is understood by both sides of the conversation as a type of non-verbal communication. Robert Saint Clair, a communications professor from the University of Louisville, explains this value of non-verbal communication in his article *The Social and Cultural Construction of Silence*. He says, "...the use of body language, face, posture, and silence are all seen as aspects of human communication. The significance of non-verbal communication may even underscore some of the uses of the

language of silence in Japan” (Saint Clair, 2003, p. 3). This means that in Japan, how a person communicates without speaking is just as important as what they say. However, the people of Japan do not possess an innate ability to use and understand silence, it as an acquired skill taught by those around them. Landers saw this disparity in how the youth of America are taught to handle silence versus the youth of Japan when he said, “In just the same way that I was programmed early in life to associate silence with negativity, people from other cultures may have been programmed to associate silence with positive attributes like thoughtful consideration and harmony” (Landers, 2017, p. 2). While American children are being taught that silence is a punishment, children of other societies are learning to use silence as a manner of respect. American children take these lessons learned from childhood and carry them throughout their education, and even with them in their career. This has led to American businesspeople who misinterpret silence and therefore cannot achieve their maximum potential. The understanding and acceptance of silence America are drastically less than Japan’s, but with practice, the gap can be closed.

A Description of the Methods Used to Solve the Problem

One benefit American businesspeople can gain from learning about silence from the Japanese culture is how to better understand and appreciate works of art. Art is an expression that acts on our senses. Silence is used by artists to move beyond the limits that these senses hold on art and to broaden our experience of the world. Ad Reinhardt, an American artist born in 1913, drew inspiration from Chinese and Japanese art as well as eastern Asian philosophy (www.moma.org). His painting, *Abstract Painting*, may look like nothing more than a canvas painted black to some, but its greater meaning can be derived through silence. According to

Steven Binderman, a former professor of philosophy at Strayer University and the author of *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art*, the painting begins to move as it continues to be looked at. He continues to say that if it viewed for long enough, images begin to appear, and events begin to occur (Brill and Rodopi, 2017, p. 73). Binderman gives the following analysis of the artwork, "...while the canvases themselves don't change in any measurable way, our experience of them does" (Brill and Rodopi, 2017, p. 73). To fully grasp the greatness of this artwork, the audience must first grapple with silence. For a person who is not comfortable in silence, they may look at Reinhardt's work and see nothing at first. By not having the patience and understanding that comes with silence they could move on and miss the experience that his artwork creates. As Landers said, silence is a skill that allows a person to think carefully and critically about the artwork that surrounds them. This can be important for businesspeople as they approach new problems in their organizations. The need for employees who can use abstract reasoning, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving is growing rapidly as technologies evolve and businesses become more integrated.

Another famous piece of artwork that relates to silence is John Cage's famous composition *4'33*. This three-movement musical piece requires a musician to not play their instrument at all during the performance. Instead, the artist is creating negative space and the true music comes from the audience. Binderman says, "Silence thus performs the creative function of negative space when it is experienced not merely on its own but in connection with and in contrast to words, sounds, and images" (Brill and Rodopi, 2017, p. 82). The sounds of audience members shuffling, and their discomfort are the intended music created by this silent composition, however, this goal is not always immediately discovered. For some people, Cage's composition is not music or artwork at all. Many misunderstand the point of the composition,

and some have even been known to get angered by the playing of 4'33. These people do not fully understand silence but with practice could come to appreciate works of art such as 4'33 and *Abstract Painting*.

Learning to appreciate art is a great way for businesspeople to practice their use and understanding of silence outside the boundaries of their career. This is just one way that they can improve their understanding of silence, which will lead to better results at work. Finding and appreciating silence in art will help businesspeople feel comfortable in silence, think clearly and creatively in silence, and communicate more effectively with silence. These are all skills that can directly add value to their firms by creating a more efficient and creative workspace.

Another way that American businesspeople can benefit from having a better understanding of silence pertains to social situations. A very powerful proverb from the Bible says, "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise" (*English Standard Version Bible*, Proverbs 17: 28). Trouble starts for a lot of people when they feel uncomfortable in conversations. When a conversation goes silent, many people become self-conscious and attempt to talk to fill that silence, even if what they say does not add value to the conversation. People need to be comfortable in silence because it will occur naturally in conversation and a negative reaction to this silence can potentially take value away from the conversation. In the article *Language Matters: Towards an Understanding of Silence and Humour in Medical Education*, the author Lorelei Lingard says, "...silence comes in numerous forms and serves a variety of functions" (Lingard, 2013, p. 42). Silence is a major function of conversation due to the frequency in which it occurs. Whether the topic is afternoon plans or a billion-dollar business deal, having a better understanding of silence can help these conversations run smoothly. Better conversations lead to less misunderstandings and more deals being made. Landers offers advice

for those who are new to using the idea of silence in conversations and are trying to stop interrupting the other conversationalist's silent thought. He says, "... it can be hard to keep our default responses at bay, but having some patience can be a good benefit. I often suggest that my clients allow seven seconds before saying anything or starting to ask follow-up questions" (Landers, 2017, p. 2). These seven seconds will allow the other person some time to formulate their thoughts and give a careful and meaningful response. Landers continues to say that seven seconds may not be enough depending on the type of conversation taking place and the mental capacity necessary to respond (Landers, 2017, p. 2). Landers also offers advice that can help people practice silence in conversation by alerting the other person not to interrupt their thought process. He claims that saying terms such as, "Yes," "Got it," or "Let me think about it for a moment," can let the speaker know that they were heard and that the listener requires a few moments to think about what was said (Landers, 2017, p. 2). This time to reflect on what was just said will allow for a more thoughtful response. This can be especially important in today's global market as businesspeople deal with companies and representatives from countless different cultures. Taking the time to formulate the most thoughtful and appropriate response is a necessary skill that American businesspeople need to cooperate with people from other cultures. Silence is a conversational tool that many Americans do not possess but can acquire with practice and patience.

Education is another area of life that Americans can improve with a better understanding of silence. As previously mentioned, "...silence comes in numerous forms and serves a variety of functions" (Lingard, 2013, p. 42). One of these many functions is helping educators communicate an idea to their students. While the word 'student' typically refers to children, that is not the only application here. In this context, it can refer to students studying business in

school or even established businesspeople in the middle of their careers. Jacqueline Watson is a professor of education at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom and in her review of the book *Silence in Schools*, she discusses many ideas on how silence is used in education. The book discusses two types of silence, what the author calls weak and strong silence. Watson says, “Weak silence involves, for instance, coercion, the domination of teacher talk, and the avoidance of controversial issues. Weak silence is the kind of silence imposed by teachers as a punishment or means of control” (Watson, 2013, p. 408). This is the type of silence that already exists in America and is not the ideal use of silence in education. Weak silence does not offer any benefits to the student and can often be harmful. The other type of silence, strong silence, “is non-coercive and dialogic, includes philosophy and mystical experience, and can be quiet but also wild and noisy” (Watson, 2013, p. 409). Strong silence is what American businesspeople can benefit from. According to Watson, strong silence creates, “More democratic environments suited to educative purposes; An atmosphere of calm and happiness; Greater tolerance and understanding” (Watson, 2013, p. 409). Students can benefit from all three of these outcomes. First, a more democratic learning experience will allow students to feel more in control of their education. This can increase participation and desire to learn. Next, a sense of calmness in the presence of silence can remove some of the stress that comes with learning something new. Educators using silence as a way to pause and reflect on what is being taught rather than as a way to control the classroom will reduce the level of stress that students feel. Lastly, greater tolerance and understanding comes from practicing silence. This tolerance and understanding can encourage people to learn with more confidence. Using some time in silence, students can reflect on what they learned and attempt to understand it on a deeper level. This use of silence will

enhance the experience for business students specifically as they try to absorb as much information as possible.

A Description of the Results

A major theme in business today is efficiency and productivity. Managers and executives often think ‘How fast can you get this done?’ and ‘How cheap can we make this process?’. Silence usually isn’t the first thing that comes to mind for these managers and executives though when trying to limit their costs, but I believe that it should. Being able to understand silence is a critical factor in communication, and the better businesspeople can communicate at work, the more productive they can be as they complete tasks and projects. Robin Mathis is a business professor at Kennesaw State University, where she focuses on teaching human resource development and business communication. Mathis’ article, “Strategic Silence: Is a Leader’s Choice Not to Talk a Dichotomy to Innovation and Creativity?” is published in the *Journal of Leadership Studies*. Mathis acknowledges that across the United States there is a negative stigma associated with silence but says silence does not always have to be negative (2019, p. 75). She says that leaders can communicate with the entire organization through acts of silence and set the values for the entire organization. Mathis says that leaders can communicate with both internal and external parties through their use of silence in meetings, press releases, and even interviews (2019, p. 76). Businesspeople need to be comfortable enough with silence however, to decipher these messages and determine what they mean. For example, if you ask your boss a question and they don’t answer, what does that mean? As businesspeople, it is extremely important to understand these silent communication methods to determine the best course of action. It would be unproductive to sulk and have to contemplate your boss’s response. A much more productive

use of time would be to understand immediately what they were trying to communicate and act. This is Mathis' message, and it demonstrates the need for businesspeople to understand silence. The practice mentioned earlier of exploring art is an opportunity for businesspeople to practice this skill. It would teach them patience and to be willing to accept the ambiguity that accompanies silence.

Cathleen Haskins also discusses silence from a productivity perspective in her article *Integrating Silence Practices into the Classroom the Value of Quiet*. Haskins shares testimonials from her time as a teacher and explains how she believes silence can be a useful tool in education. Her findings can be directly applied to students studying business in college as well as other forms of continuing education. Haskins says, "Higher levels of concentration make learning easier, yet concentration is often elusive, interrupted by noise, either external or internal, most often both" (2010, p. 17). We have all experienced situations where we lose our focus due to some external factors, like a car driving by or a person talking nearby as you try to complete your work. Haskins' solution to this problem of outside noise is to look within and find comfort in situations with silence. She recommends practicing silence and meditation to quiet one's mind and limit the opportunities for distractions to throw off a person's focus. I agree that in order to reach our most focused mental space, we need to be devoid of distractions. Silence can be an excellent tool to foster concentration and ultimately improve productivity. This can be especially prevalent in the business world, as professionals are judged based on their performance alone. Businesspeople would be more productive at work and in meetings if they were able to focus solely on their work and limit the distractions, both internally and externally. Some progressive companies have already seen this and implemented measures to ensure that employees are operating at their maximum capacity. For example, Google headquarters has designated areas for

employees to reset in nap pods, professional therapists, and on-site yoga classes. Google realized that by providing their employees time and space to escape the constant noise of the business world they would be more productive and happier at work.

Some American businesspeople may disagree with the stance that they could benefit from a new perspective on silence. These critics may feel that silence is used to oppress their freedom. American businesspeople value their freedom, especially their right to the freedom of speech. This group of people could argue that by remaining silent they are giving up this right. They would argue that they have the right to speak their mind and that by allowing silence to infiltrate their lives they would be losing this right. However, I would like to offer people with these beliefs a quote from the philosopher Henry David Thoreau who said, “In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood” (brainyquote.com). Silence is not the problem; the problem is the lack of practice and understanding of silence in the United States. There can be both silence and the freedom of speech coexisting in American society.

These citizens, who are arguing against this stance, may be confused regarding the type of silence I have argued for. Lingard noted in her paper that there is a difference between ‘being silent’ and ‘being silenced’ (Lingard, 2013, p. 43). The type of silence that I wish to be more prevalent in the United States would not cause anyone or their ideas to be ‘silenced’. The silence that I have argued for would provide businesspeople an opportunity to practice new uses of silence. Lingard is also quoted as saying, “Silence, of course, does not necessarily mean powerlessness” (Lingard, 2013, p. 43). Adding moments of silence to the lives of American businesspeople will not make them or their ideas any less powerful. Miriam Subirana, an author and professional speaker with a doctorate from the University of Barcelona, also believes that

silence and mindfulness can lead to a more fulfilling life. One of her main counterpoints to the idea that silence is a fancy way of doing nothing is that mindfulness helps us achieve our full attention and gives us a better awareness of what we are trying to achieve (Subirana, 2014, p. 18). This is time to remove distractions from the workplace for businesspeople, not time to do nothing. In fact, this time in silence can be extremely action-oriented because it is a way for people to improve themselves. This critical thought stemming from silence can lead to the next great business tycoons of our generation.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Silence is experienced every day around the world. Some cultures are better at accepting, understanding, and using silence to enhance their lives than others. Cultures like Japan and other eastern societies have had years of practice with silence that have led to their deep understanding of it. Businesspeople in the United States of America can learn from these cultures and attempt to use silence more in their lives. This attempt to experience silence more will increase American businesspeoples' appreciation of art, their ability to communicate, their ability to learn, and their productivity. With practice, the attitude towards silence can be changed in the United States of America.

I see a greater number of organizations accepting silence and the benefits it can have on employees in the future. It is even evident here at BGSU where we have weekly mediation practices and yoga classes in the Honors College. I would recommend every student attend at least one of these sessions as an attempt to familiarize themselves with silence. The only way to improve our comfort level and understanding of silence is to practice. If multinational, innovative, Fortune 500 companies like Google are embracing silence, business students and

businesspeople are doing themselves a disservice by not being able to function in silence. My research has shown me that this comfort with silence is adjacent to a skill any businessperson would list on a resume. It is a vital part of how business is conducted around the world, and it will only continue to grow in importance.

Reference Page

Haskins, Cathleen. "Integrating Silence Practices Into the Classroom the Value of Quiet."

Encounter, vol. 23, no. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 15–20. EBSCOhost, search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=55383470&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

"Henry David Thoreau Quotes." *BrainyQuote*, Xplore,

www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henry_david_thoreau_139220.

Landers, Michael. "The Seven Second Rule: Navigating Silence." *BusinessToday*, no. 219, Feb.

2017, pp. 1–3. EBSCOhost, search.ebSCOhost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rps&AN=121239323&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Lingard, Lorelei. "Language Matters: Towards an Understanding of Silence and Humour in

Medical Education." *Medical Education*, vol. 47, no. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 40–48.

EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/medu.12098.

Mathis, Robin S. "Strategic Silence: Is a Leader's Choice Not to Talk a Dichotomy to Innovation and Creativity?" *Journal of Leadership Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spr 2019, pp. 75–77.

EBSCOhost, doi:10.1002/jls.21629.

Reinhardt. "Ad Reinhardt. Abstract Painting. 1963: MoMA." *The Museum of Modern Art*,

www.moma.org/collection/works/78976.

Saint Clair, Robert. "The Social and Cultural Construction of Silence." *Journal of Intercultural*

Communication Studies, vol. 12, no. 3, 2003.

"Silence and Creativity." *Value Inquiry Book Series*, vol. 308, Brill / Rodopi, 2017, pp. 47–56.

EBSCOhost, doi:10.1163/9789004352582_007.

“Silence and Spirituality.” Value Inquiry Book Series, vol. 308, Brill / Rodopi, 2017, pp. 73–82.

EBSCOhost, doi:10.1163/9789004352582_009.

Subirana, Miriam. “The Value of Meditation and Mindfulness: Key Facilitation Skills.” *AI*

Practitioner, vol. 16, no. 3, Aug. 2014, pp. 13–24. EBSCOhost, doi:10.12781/978-1-

907549-20-5-2.

The English Standard Version Bible: with Apocrypha, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Watson, Jacqueline. “Review of Silence in Schools.” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 43,

no. 3, Sept. 2013, pp. 408–410. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/0305764X.2013.817757.

Zimmermann, Ana, and W. Morgan. “A Time for Silence? Its Possibilities for Dialogue and for

Reflective Learning.” *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, vol. 35, no. 4, July 2016, pp.

399–413. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/s11217-015-9485-0.