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In 2017, the *New York Times* broke the now widely-known scandal of media mogul Harvey Weinstein’s apparent decades-long pattern of sexual abuse and harassment. The story came as a shock to the public. However, as details emerged it became clear that Weinstein’s transgressions were not unknown to Hollywood insiders. They were, in fact, an “open secret.”

This raises the question: Why do issues remain open secrets in organizations where multiple employees know about a problem or a concern, but no one publicly brings it up? We explore this in a set of studies recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

We found that as issues become more common knowledge among frontline employees, the willingness of any individual employee to bring those issues to the attention of the top-management *decreased*. Instead of speaking up, what we observed among our participants was something like the *bystander effect*, a [psychological phenomena](#) describing how people stay on the sidelines as passive bystanders, waiting for others to act rather than do something themselves.

The bystander effect can be understood with an example: Imagine Jane, a member of an engineering team at a company. The top management of the company is eager to release a product to the market before competitors mimic it. However, a bug in the product has been uncovered, and someone needs to bring up the issue. When Jane is the only member of the team who is aware of the issue, she would feel a personal responsibility to alert her managers of the problem. But, when her team members—John, Jack, and Julia—also know about the bug, Jane might feel that approaching leadership isn't solely her responsibility. She becomes less likely to speak up, and for the very same reason, John, Jack, and Julia are also less likely to do so.

Indeed, our research shows that when multiple individuals know about an issue, each of them experiences a *diffusion of responsibility* or the sense that they need not personally take on any costs or burden associated with speaking up. They feel that others are equally knowledgeable and, hence, capable of raising the issue with top management. They find it convenient to psychologically pass on the accountability of speaking up to others, and this makes them less likely to speak up themselves.

Considered from this perspective, it starts to make more sense why problems—such as harassment and abusive supervision—can remain unaddressed for so long without anyone taking action. Voicing such issues is, after all, risky, as individuals can often be [punished or put down](#) for speaking up. Thus, when Jane, John, Jack and Julia all know about the same concern, each tends to wait for one of the others to take on the risks of speaking up and feels less personally guilty or duty-bound to bring up the issue him or herself. The bystander effect kicks in, and diffusion of responsibility prevents issues from percolating up to managers.

Our research

We found these results consistently across three studies. Our first study was in the India branch of a Fortune 500 electronics company in which we surveyed 132 employees (from 25 teams) and their managers, about their work and how often they spoke up in the team. We carefully mapped out the workflow in each team. This allowed us track the extent to which each employee in the sample had opportunities to observe the same work-related problems as their peers. We also asked the managers to report on the extent to which their employees raised ideas or concerns with them.

We found that the more employees observed problems that they thought were also observed by their peers, the less willing they were to speak up to their managers about those problems. In other words, when multiple employees knew about an issue, each one became less willing to speak up about it.

In the second study, we conducted a behavioral experiment with 163 undergraduate students at an Eastern U.S. university. Students read about an issue concerning the lack of shuttle buses between distant campus buildings. Students then had the option to raise this issue to the University Senate, which would involve writing to the Senate and potentially meeting with a director at the Senate to discuss the issue. We then randomly assigned students to either a condition in which they learned that their peers were aware of the issue or a condition in which they learned that they were the only one aware of the issue.

As we expected, students who believed their peers were also aware of the issue reported a greater sense of diffusion of responsibility to speak up relative to those who believed they were the only ones aware of the issue. In fact, those who believed they were the only ones aware of the issue were *2.5 times more likely to volunteer* to personally raise the issue with the Senate.

In a third study, we conducted another behavioral experiment with 440 working adults, who read a realistic scenario about a problem with a product they were creating in their unit. We again found that participants were less likely to report being willing to speak up about the problem to company management when their peers also knew about the problem, because they felt psychologically less responsible for raising the concern.

In all three studies, our results held even when we statistically controlled for several other factors, such as whether participants felt it was safe to speak and whether they thought speaking up would make a difference. For instance, even when employees reported feeling confident about their ability to speak up, they did not bring up issues when they knew that their peers were equally aware of them.

What managers should take away

Our research suggests that the bystander effect can be real and strong in organizations, especially when problems linger out in the open to everyone's knowledge. So if you're wondering why that particular boss seems to get away with bad behavior, or why no one has spoken up about an obvious glitch in the company product, consider whether everyone—including yourself—might be waiting for someone else to take action.

So, what can managers do to avoid the bystander effect so that problems don't go unresolved? A few key recommendations:

To begin with, managers should tell employees that their voices are not redundant and that they need to share their opinions even if others have the same information. Put simply, managers might adjust the now-familiar injunction as follows: "If you see something, say something (*even if others see the same thing*)."

Importantly, the bystander effect occurs because the work culture of many organizations encourages passing the buck and blending into the crowd rather than individual responsibility. Employees are

afraid of standing up and speaking truth to power. Managers who explicitly reward rather than punish acts of individual courage can get their employees off the sidelines to act as engaged citizens at the workplace.

Steps such as these can help organizations avoid the burgeoning of “open secrets” and of unresolved yet commonly known problems that no one seems to do anything about.

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