ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How empowering leadership reduces employee silence in public organizations

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The intentional withholding of critical work-related information can have serious negative consequences in public organizations. Yet, few studies have examined why public employees intentionally remain silent about problems and how to prevent such behaviour. This article provides insights into how managers may lower employee silence in government organizations. We develop a model that suggests that empowering leadership by frontline supervisors reduces public employee silence, by improving employee trust in their supervisors, granting employees control over their jobs, and strengthening identification with the organization. We test the model in two cross-sectional studies with data collected from all employees working in two local governments in the United States. We find empirical support for the model in both studies. We discuss the implications of the research results for public management scholarship and practice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The reluctance of public employees to speak up about organizational problems can have serious negative consequences (Morrison and Milliken 2000). At the organizational level, silence can diminish organizational performance by reducing the chance that errors are detected and rectified (Knoll and Redman 2016) and that serious ethical transgressions are prevented (Clapham and Cooper 2005). The inability of public employees to share ideas and provide inputs may also hinder innovation (Gambarotto and Camazo 2010) and positive organizational change (Argyris and Schon 1978) and stifle employee development and creativity (Knoll and Redman 2016). At the individual level, silence can reduce employee job satisfaction, increase cynicism and stress, and cause emotional exhaustion (Cortina and Magley 2003; Whiteside and Barclay 2013).

Despite the potential damage that silence can inflict on the effectiveness of government organizations, it is surprising that few studies have examined the causes of public employee silence and mechanisms for reducing such behaviour. The existing research focuses largely on employees of private/business organizations (Morrison 2014). Only one study has been conducted in a public sector setting, with a theoretical angle related to the effects of silence on innovation in public services (Gambarotto and Camazo 2010). We contend that silence evokes a different set of issues for government organizations, and as such, is worthy of study as a public management topic. More specifically,

these issues related to the potential for employee silence undercut the public values of transparency and account-ability (Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007), may facilitate high profile disasters, such as the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion (Whiteside and Barclay 2013), promote government 'guerillas' (O'Leary 2013), and contravene constitu-tional protections for some forms of public employee speech (Norton 2009).

In addition to studying the incidences of employee silence in a government work setting, this article also draws attention to the role of public managers in mitigating silence. Specifically, we focus on the potential empowering role of supervisors, who are known to exert considerable influence on the day-to-day activities of frontline employees in government organizations (Lipsky 2010). The emerging research on empowering leadership in government organiza-tions suggests that empowering supervisors not only share power with frontline employees, but also provide support during difficult or stressful periods and motivate them to take initiatives on their own to solve organizational prob-lems (Miao et al. 2013; Hassan et al. 2018; Park and Hassan 2018). Empowering leadership practices have been linked empirically to an array of silence-related behaviours—for example, improvement-oriented voice (Park and Has-san 2018) and greater sense of agency (Kirkman and Rosen 1999; Randolph and Kemery 2011)—but not to silence of government employees per se.

To address these gaps in the silence literature, that is, the neglect of public sector settings and the dearth of empirical research on the silence effects of empowering managerial practices, we develop a conceptual model that elucidates how empowering supervisory practices may reduce the likelihood of public employees withholding infor-mation about critical organizational issues and problems. Specifically, drawing on the theories of social exchange (Blau 1964), self-determination (Deci and Ryan 1985), and social identity (Ashforth and Mael 1989), we contend that the influence of supervisor empowering leadership behaviour on subordinates' silence will be mediated by their inter-personal trust in their supervisor, perceptions about job control, and identification with their employing organization. We test this model in two studies with survey data that we collected from employees of two local governments in the United States.

This article contributes to public administration scholarship in several ways. First, by situating silence in a public sector context, we address a contemporary social problem: the need to reduce silence among public servants during a time when some argue that private concerns are overriding the public interest and the legitimacy of government is being questioned (Frederickson et al. 2015). Accordingly, this research generates evidence and insights that public managers can use to reduce subordinates' silence in their organizations. Second, along with establishing an empirical connection between empowering leadership and silence, our research sheds light on the mechanisms by which empowering supervisory behaviour may lower public employee silence, through increasing interpersonal trust in their supervisor, perceptions of job control, and organizational identification. Prior studies on employee silence in private organizations did not empirically assess these three mechanisms together in the same study. Our research provides a better understanding of the relative efficacy of the mechanisms through which empowering leadership behaviour may reduce silence of public employees.

The article is organized as follows: first, we review the extant literature on employee silence, then we develop theoretical arguments that connect empowering managerial practices to silence. Second, we present the procedures, samples, methods, and results of each study. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for public management research and practice and provide some directions for future research on employee silence in public organizations.

2 | LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS

2.1 | Employee silence

Silence refers to intentional withholding of critical information about organizational problems and practices from others in the workplace (Morrison and Milliken 2003). Not every case of non-communication denotes silence though. It is only when one chooses, due to some strategic reasons or concerns, not to disclose relevant information to others

(Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). As such, it is a suppressive communicative behaviour and is related to a broader class of expressive communication behaviours that are referred to as voice (Hirschman 1970). These behaviours include issue selling (Dutton and Ashford 1993), taking charge (Morrison and Phelps 1999), whistle blowing (Miceli and Near 1988), and principled dissent (Graham 1986; O'Leary 2013). While voice and silence are related concepts, they are not two ends of a continuum (Morrison 2014). The absence of voice does not necessarily imply intentional withholding of information. A person may choose not to use voice, for example, because they have no concerns or questions or simply nothing useful to offer (Pinder and Harlos 2001).

Silence is widespread in organizations. A survey conducted by Milliken et al. (2003) showed that almost 85 per cent of the respondents could recall a recent event in which they did not speak up about a problem or something of concern. Although common, silence is not easily observable because it often involves people's inner thoughts and feelings. Even when an observer is able to discern someone else's silence, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to pinpoint the underlying cause. This creates a potential difficulty for organizational researchers in measuring employee silence because supervisor or peer reports are likely to be inaccurate.

Silence is a multifaceted construct (Brinsfield 2013). An individual may remain silent about a variety of issues including problems about work processes, workload, manager and co-worker competence and behaviour, concerns about pay, equity, and mistreatment of co-workers, disagreement about organizational policies and decisions, and ethical misconduct of organizational members (Milliken et al. 2003; Brinsfield 2013). The targets of silence can also vary considerably from supervisors to peers to external regulators. Moreover, an employee may remain silent about some issues, for example, a co-worker's intentional absence or minor infraction of organizational rules, but not others, for example, incidences of sexual harassment and racial discrimination. Individuals may also choose to withhold information from some targets, for example, regulators and media, but not others, for example, co-workers. The multifaceted nature of silence suggests that its antecedents may vary for different combinations of actors, topics, and targets (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). The focus of our research is on a widespread form of employee silence, that is, the withholding of concerns and opinions about organizational problems (Morrison and Milliken 2000).

2.2 | Empowering leadership

Empowering leadership is part of the broader construct of employee empowerment. The literature on empowerment is vast. To briefly summarize, two separate conceptual approaches have emerged over the past two decades. The first approach conceptualizes empowerment as a relational construct, while the second approach treats it as a motivational construct, focusing on the cognitive states that are empowering (Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2011).

We rely on the relational perspective of empowerment which has roots in social exchange theory (Emerson 1962; Blau 1964). The relational perspective suggests that power comes about when the performance outcomes of an individual depend on the actions and resources of others (Pfeffer 2010). All organizational members have some power, but it varies according to one's dependence on others (Emerson 1962). The key sources of power for individuals in organizations are the formal positions that they occupy, their personal characteristics, such as reputation, charisma, expertise, and their ability to access resources that others value (Bacharach and Lawler 1980). Empowerment in this perspective is a process in which people who hold power in an organization share it with those who are relatively powerless (Conger and Kanungo 1988).

In the extensive research on participative management, management by objectives, shared goal-setting, and self-managing teams, empowerment has been described from the relational perspective with an emphasis on sharing authority or power with individuals at the lower levels of an organizational hierarchy (Kanter 1977; Bowen and Lawler 1995; Conger and Kanungo 1988). The empowering practices identified in the early studies are soliciting feedback from subordinates, including subordinates in decision-making, and delegating authority to allow subordinates to make decisions about work on their own without prior approval (Kanter 1977; Vroom and Jago 1988). Recent studies have expanded the boundary of the construct and included other relation-oriented managerial practices, such as coaching subordinates, recognizing subordinates' performance, and providing subordinates with the information and resources

necessary to carry out their job duties (Bowen and Lawler 1992, 1995; Arnold et al. 2000; Ahearne et al. 2005; Hassan et al. 2018; Park and Hassan 2018).

We contend that empowering leadership of frontline supervisors will play a critical role in a public employee's decision calculus about whether to raise concerns or remain silent. We consider the behaviour of the supervisor to be particularly important because perceptions and expectations of an employee's work behaviour are strongly influenced by the frequent interactions the employee has with their immediate supervisor (Graen 1976). The behaviour of the senior manager may also be important, but interactions with upper management are generally infrequent and an employee's perceptions of upper management are largely shaped by the behaviour and quality of interactions they have with their immediate supervisor (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). Among the diverse managerial practices that have been studied in leadership research (Yukl 2012), practices that are empowering are likely to be particularly important in reducing the safety concerns and feelings of powerlessness and exclusion that often preclude employees from sharing information about work problems with others in the workgroup.

2.3 | Research model

Silence stems primarily from fears about the risks of speaking up, a sense of powerlessness, and emotional detachment from the workplace (Morrison 2014). Raising concerns about problems involves taking risks because it can potentially upset others and lead to negative outcomes (Detert and Edmondson 2011). By raising concerns about an organizational problem, one may be labelled, for example, as a 'trouble maker', 'complainer', or 'not a team player' (Edmonson 1999). These image concerns are likely to be acute when there are status differences within the organization or when the employee wants to speak up to their direct supervisor. Even when the supervisor appears receptive to inputs, the employee may have qualms about conveying bad news or raising a problem that may portray the workgroup or organization in a negative light (Detert and Edmondson 2011; Morrison 2014; Hassan 2015).

In addition to the concerns related to emotional safety, the employee may also remain silent due to a sense of helplessness (Morrison 2014). The employee may feel that raising the issue will not make any difference or change the situation and, hence, remaining silent is a more sensible choice. This issue is likely to be more salient when the employee has little control over their work processes or influence on work decisions (Hassan 2015). Identified in the earlier research, another key factor that may influence employees to withhold critical information about organizational problems is a sense of alienation from their workplace (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). This represents feelings such as 'Why do I care?' and 'It is not my problem.'

We contend that the likelihood that a public employee will withhold critical information about work problems will be lower when her immediate supervisor demonstrates empowering leadership and this effect, as shown in Figure 1, will be mediated by three perceptual job-related factors: (a) the extent to which the employee trusts her
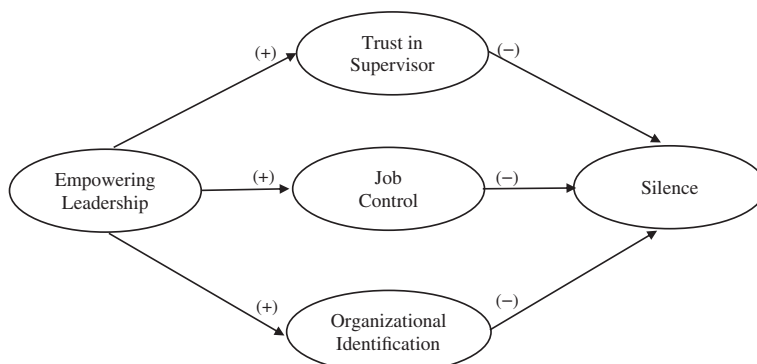

FIGURE 1 Research model

supervisor, (b) her perceptions of job control, and (c) her level of identification with the organization. Next, we discuss each of these three hypothesized indirect effects and the underlying theoretical arguments.

According to our proposed model, the first mechanism through which supervisor empowering leadership behaviour is likely to reduce subordinate silence is by improving the subordinate's interpersonal trust in the supervisor. Trust in general is defined as one's willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another based upon the expectation that the other will act in good faith (Mayer et al. 1995). It is a multidimensional construct that consists of a cognitive and an affective component (Yang et al. 2009). The cognitive component represents perceptions about one's competence and reliability, while the affective aspect captures interpersonal loyalty and bond (Mayer et al. 1995; Yang et al. 2009). In the current research, we focus on the affective aspect of subordinates' trust in their supervisor.

We hypothesize that supervisor-empowering leadership will reduce the likelihood of subordinate silence by improving the subordinates' interpersonal trust in their supervisor. This follows directly from the assertions of social exchange theory (Homans 1961; Blau 1964), which suggests that repeated positive social exchanges between two parties promote mutual respect, trust and liking that lead to an implicit expectation that the parties involved will not act in ways that undermine the other's interests. Moreover, an individual's calculus about whether to raise an issue or not depends on the favourability of the decision context. If the employees feel that speaking up will lead to negative consequences, they are more likely to remain silent (Morrison 2014). These safety concerns, however, are likely to be lower when their supervisor is receptive to their inputs and the supervisor actively encourages them to take ownership of their work and resolve work-related problems on their own (Morrison et al. 2015). Such behaviour will provide positive cues to the subordinate that the supervisor trusts their judgements and has their best interests at heart (Miao et al. 2013). Accordingly, we test the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Supervisor empowering leadership will reduce subordinate silence by improving the subordinate's interpersonal trust in their supervisor.

The second mechanism through which empowering leadership may reduce silence is by improving subordinate perceptions of job control. Job control refers to the perceived ability to exert some influence over one's work environment to make it more rewarding and less taxing (Ganster 1989). It reflects the extent to which one has the freedom to initiate and regulate their own work behaviour in their workplace. Bandura (2001, p. 10) notes that 'Among the mechanisms of personal agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs in the capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events.'

Because autonomy is a basic psychological need (Deci and Ryan 1985), the lack of job control often increases stress and anxiety and leads to a sense of helplessness (Spreitzer 1996). This sense of helplessness may preclude public employees from raising issues and concerns even when they are aware of them. Edmondson (1999, 2003), for example, found that a key reason why members of product development and surgical teams do not raise issues is due to a belief that speaking up or raising a concern will not make a difference or change the situation. A recent public sector study showed that perceptions of higher personal control were associated positively with constructive suggestions provided by employees in a state government organization about how to improve their workgroup's performance (Hassan 2015).

We expect that supervisor-empowering leadership will have a positive effect on subordinate perceptions of job control which will, in turn, reduce their silence. This is because sharing power and allowing subordinates to make decisions about their work on their own are likely to have a positive influence on their perceived autonomy (Park and Hassan 2018). Moreover, when supervisors solicit ideas and suggestions from their subordinates and include them in the decision-making process, it sends a positive signal to subordinates that their efforts and ideas make a difference and are valued by the organization (Blader and Tyler 2009; Morrison et al. 2015). These positive cues, in turn, are likely to improve their perceptions of job control. Following these arguments, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Supervisor empowering leadership will reduce subordinate silence by improving the subordinate's perceptions of job control.

The third mechanism through which empowering leadership may have a negative effect on employee silence is by enhancing their identification with the organization. Organizational identification refers to a perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organization, where individuals define themselves in terms of the organization of which they are a member (Ashforth and Mael 1989). It reflects the emotional significance and value that individuals attach to membership of their organization (Dutton et al. 1994). When individuals identify strongly with their organization, the distinction between their personal and the organization's identities become blurred and they feel psychologically intertwined with the successes and failures of the organizations (Pratt 1998). Accordingly, employees who identify strongly with their organization are more likely to engage in behaviours that advance the organization's goals and refrain from behaviours that may undermine its interests.

As noted earlier, other than safety and efficacy concerns, a key reason for silence is a sense of alienation or detachment from the workplace (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008; Morrison 2014). This is because when employees feel emotionally disconnected from their workplaces, they are less likely to feel responsible for the successes and failures of their workgroup and organization and take personal initiatives to resolve issues that affect their performance. This argument is also consistent with the assertions of the group engagement model (Tyler and Blader 2000, 2003), which suggests that identification with the workgroup is a strong predictor of members' prosocial behaviours. Moreover, the group engagement model suggests that the extent to which people identify with a group depends on their social standing in the workgroup and the quality of interpersonal treatment that they receive from group members, especially those who have higher social status (Tyler and Blader 2000, 2003; Blader and Tyler 2009). Accordingly, we expect that empowering leadership practices will reduce the likelihood of silence by improving employees' identification with their organization. Public employees are more likely to construe themselves as having a higher social standing in the workgroup when their supervisor invites their inputs and ideas and shares decision-making authority. Such practices will indicate that the subordinates are valued members of the organization and their efforts contribute to the organization's effectiveness. Hence, we test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Supervisor-empowering leadership will reduce subordinate silence by improving the subordinate's identification with the organization.

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Sample and procedures

We tested the research model and the three hypotheses first with data collected using a survey that was administered in 2016 to the employees of a large metropolitan area city in a Southeastern state. The questionnaire was distributed to all full-time regular employees, totalling 1,247 employees working in 43 departments in the city government. The survey process was implemented using the principles of the Tailored Design Method, featuring multiple contacts and consistent messaging with prospective research participants (Dillman et al. 2014). The process began with an email from the top organizational leader expressing support for the study, encouraging voluntary participation and guaranteeing confidentiality. Within two weeks of the alert email, surveys were distributed through Qualtrics, an online survey platform. All survey responses were returned directly to the research team. This process yielded 1,060 usable responses, representing a response rate of 85 per cent. Twenty-nine per cent of the respondents identified as female, 88 per cent as White, 8 per cent as African American, 2 per cent as Hispanic, and 2 per cent as other races. The average age of the respondents was 43.42 years and the average tenure in their organization was 9.41 years. Twenty-three per cent of the respondents reported having supervisory job responsibilities. The

sample closely represents the population of employees in the distribution of departments, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and managerial status.

3.2 | Measures

We measured *silence* with five items from the survey that were adapted from Tangirala and Ramanujam's (2008) silence scale. The items are: When it comes to keeping your opinions to yourself, how often do you do the following: (1) You choose to remain silent when you have concerns, (2) Although you have ideas for improving your work unit, you do not speak up, (3) You say nothing to co-workers about problems you notice, (4) You keep quiet instead of asking questions when you want to get more information, and (5) You remain silent when you have information that might help prevent an incident. All ratings were provided on 5-point frequency scales from 0 = never to 4 = always. The internal reliability coefficient (i.e., Cronbach's alpha) for the measure is 0.78.

We used a self-reported measure of silence for several reasons. Silence is not easily observable. As noted earlier, it is difficult for a co-worker or supervisor to accurately recognize silence and even when they do, they may not fully understand the underlying rationale. The observer may attribute silence to, for example, the employee having nothing to raise or that the employee is agreeing with the dominant perspective or the status quo (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). The employee may also express agreement with others' views in public but hold very different private views and feelings about the issue (Zand 1972). Independent ratings of silence, therefore, can be more inaccurate than self-ratings or they may be based on broad generalizations about the observers' interpretation of the events and reasons behind the silence.

We assessed *empowering leadership* with six items taken from the Managerial Practices Survey developed by Yukl et al. (2002). The items are: How often does your supervisor do the following: (1) Encourages employees to take responsibility for determining how to do their work, (2) Asks employees for their ideas and suggestions when making important work decisions, (3) Encourages employees to resolve problems on their own, (4) Modifies a proposal or plan to include employees' suggestions and deal with their concerns, (5) Makes assignments that allow employees to develop more skills and confidence, and (6) Encourages employees to use available opportunities for improving their skills? The items were previously used by Hassan et al. (2013) to measure empowering leadership practices of public sector managers. All ratings were provided on 5-point frequency scales from 1 = never to 5 = always. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.91.

We measured *trust in supervisors* with five items from the survey that were adapted from the trust in management scale developed by Cammann et al. (1983). The items are: (1) When supervisors here say something, you can believe it's true, (2) Employees trust supervisors to do the right thing on their behalf, (3) I trust my supervisor, (4) Employees here trust supervisors, and (5) My supervisor trusts me. The ratings were provided on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.91.

We measured *organizational identification* with three items taken from Mael and Ashforth's (1992) organizational identification scale. These items are: (1) When I talk about this organization, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they', (2) This organization's successes are my successes, and (3) When someone praises this organization, it feels like a personal compliment. The ratings for these three items were provided on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.88.

We measured *job control* with three items taken from Aiken and Hage's (1966) work autonomy scale. The items are: (1) I feel that I am my own boss in most matters, (2) Generally, I'm allowed to work independently in my job, and (3) I have the right amount of independence for my job. The ratings for these three items were provided on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.79.

We control for employee age, organization tenure, gender (female = 1, male = 0), race (nonwhite = 1, white = 0), and supervisor status (Supervisor: yes = 1, no = 0) in the analysis.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for variables in Study 1

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Silence	2.21	.64	–								
2. Female	.28	.45	−.05								
3. Nonwhite	.11	.31	.03	.03							
4. Age	43.31	11.16	−.05	.13	−.09						
5. Tenure	9.48	7.60	.02	−.12	−.09	.42					
6. Supervisor	.24	.43	−.15	−.11	−.02	.23	.47				
7. Empowering Leadership	3.47	.87	−.34	.00	−.01	−.05	−.12	−.01			
8. Trust in Supervisors	5.20	1.29	−.41	.04	−.05	.02	−.12	.04	.59		
9. Job Control	5.01	1.19	−.33	.10	−.05	.19	.08	.15	.42	.44	
10. Organizational Identification	5.22	1.36	−.37	.06	−.01	.09	−.04	.14	.43	.57	.36

Notes: $N = 1{,}000$; all correlation coefficients greater than .07 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

3.3 | Results

Before testing the research model, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the validity of the measures. Following recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999), multiple indices—Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)—were used to assess the fit of the measurement model. The CFA results indicate that the measurement model fit the data well. The fit indices for the model are: (χ^2 (197) = 879.98, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, and RMSEA = .06). The standardized factor loadings (λs) for the measurement model range from .46 to .93 (see appendix) and only four of the 19 items have a factor loading lower than .70. The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than the square root of the correlation between each latent construct and the other latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981), indicating that the measures have discriminant validity.

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables included in Study 1. Silence, as shown in Table 1, is correlated negatively with all of the predicator variables (rs = −.34, −.41, −.33, and − .37, for empowering leadership, trust in supervisors, job control, and organizational identification, respectively, $p < .01$). We also observe that supervisors are less likely to remain silent than those who are non-supervisors ($r = −.15$, $p < .01$).

We performed structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the hypotheses. We included employee gender, race, tenure, and supervisor status as controls in the structural model. Amongst the control variables, only supervisor status was statistically significant ($\beta = −.12$, $p < .01$). The SEM results indicated that the best fitting model is the one in which empowering leadership has a direct effect on silence in addition to its indirect effects on the three mediators. The fit indices for the structural model are as follows: χ^2 (294) = 1174.48, CFI = .94, TLI = .93, and RMSEA = .06. These results indicate that the structural model fit the data well.

Figure 2 reports the statistically significant standardized regression coefficients found in SEM.[1] We observe that empowering leadership is associated positively with all three mediators (βs = .61, .49, and .50, for trust in supervisors, job control, and organization identification, respectively, $p < .01$). The mediating variables, in turn, are associated negatively with subordinate silence (βs = −.22, −.17, and − .12, for trust in supervisors, job control, and organization identification, respectively, $p < .01$). The direct path from empowering leadership to subordinate silence is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = −.15$, $p < .01$). The standardized regression coefficients for the three indirect effects (empowering leadership → trust in supervisors → silence, empowering leadership → job control → silence, and empowering leadership → organizational identification → silence) are: −.13, −.08, and − .06, respectively, and they are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

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[1]Standardized or beta coefficients are the regression coefficients obtained when the variables included in the regression model were all converted to *z*-scores before running the analysis.
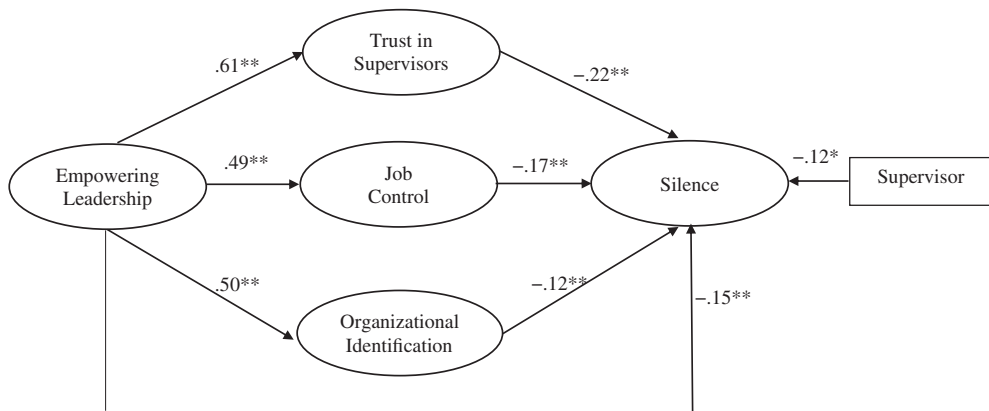
FIGURE 2   Study 1 SEM results

3.4 | Study 1 summary

Study 1 shows that the empowering leadership behaviour of supervisors reduces public employees' silence by improving their trust in supervisors, control in their jobs, and identification with the organization. Empowering leadership also has a direct association with public employee silence. With respect to the associations of empowering leadership with the three mediating variables, we observe that trust in the supervisor has a stronger relationship than the other two mediating variables. Trust in supervisors is also more strongly related to employee silence than either job control or organizational identification .

One might conclude from the Study 1 results that improving trust in supervisors is the most influential mechanism by which empowering leadership reduces the silence of public employees. However, we are not fully confident about this conclusion because three of the five items of our measure of trust asked employees to report about their overall trust in supervisors in the organization instead of their trust in their immediate supervisor. Moreover, we found that the three intervening variables only partially mediated the influence of empowering leadership behaviour on employee silence. It is possible that the indirect effect of empowering leadership on silence through improving trust in the supervisor is actually stronger than what we observe in our study. To address this issue, we conducted a second study in a different local government in the same state with an improved measure of trust in supervisors.

4 | STUDY 2

4.1 | Sample and procedures

The data collection procedures for the second study were the same as for the first study. We distributed a survey to all 949 employees working in 18 departments of the city government. Altogether 552 surveys were returned for an overall response rate of 58 per cent. Twenty-five per cent of the respondents identified as female, 84 per cent as White, 11 per cent as African American, 1 per cent as Hispanic, and 4 per cent as other races. The average age of the respondents was 41.13 years and the average tenure in their organization was 10.34 years. Thirty-six per cent of the respondents reported having supervisory responsibilities. The sample closely represents the population of employees in the distribution of departments, age, gender, race, and ethnicity.

4.2 | Measures

Except for trust in the supervisor, all measures for Study 2 were the same as those for Study 1. Three of the five items of the trust in supervisors measure in Study 1 focused on the employees' perceptions of overall trust in all

supervisors as opposed to their direct supervisor. We improved these items in Study 2 to measure the focal employee's trust in their direct supervisor. The employees were asked: Thinking about trust between your supervisor and you, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) My supervisor trusts me to get the job done, (2) I trust my supervisor to tell me what I need to know, (3) I trust my supervisor to act in my best interest, (4) I trust my supervisor do what they say they are going to do, and (5) I trust my supervisor. The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.95. The Cronbach's alphas for the other variables are 0.79, 0.88, 0.89, and 0.77, for silence, empowering leadership, organizational identification, and job control, respectively.

4.3 | Results

We performed CFA to assess fit of the measurement model for Study 2. The CFA results indicate that the measurement model fits the data satisfactorily. The fit indices for the model are: (χ^2 (198) = 635.23, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, and RMSEA = .06). The standardized factor loadings (λs) for the measurement model range from .50 to .95 (see appendix); only four of the 20 items had a loading lower than .70. The AVE for each construct is greater than the square root of the correlation between each latent construct and the other latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981), indicating that the measures have discriminant validity.

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables included in Study 2. Silence is correlated negatively with the predicator variables (rs = −.32, −.33, −.31, and −.29, for empowering leadership, trust in supervisor, job control, and organizational identification, respectively, p < .01). Similar to Study 1, we observe that supervisors are less likely to remain silent than those who are not supervisors (r = −.18, p < .01).

We conducted SEM to re-test the research model and three hypotheses. We included employee gender, race, tenure, and supervisor status as controls. We found that the best fitting model is the one in which the effects of empowering leadership on silence are fully mediated by subordinate trust in their supervisor, perceptions of job control, and organizational identification (χ^2 (301) = 865.89, CFI = .94, TLI = .93, and RMSEA = .06). As shown in Figure 3, empowering leadership has a significant positive effect on all three mediating variables (βs = .80, .40, and .43, for trust in supervisor, job control, and organization identification, respectively, p < .01). All three mediating variables, in turn, are associated negatively with silence (βs = −.21, −.28, and −.12, for trust in supervisor, job control, and organization identification, respectively, p < .05). The standardized regression coefficients for the three indirect effects (empowering leadership → trust in supervisor → silence, empowering leadership → job control → silence, and empowering leadership → organizational identification → silence) are: −.16, −.12, and − .06, respectively, and they are statistically significant (p < .05). Amongst the controls, supervisors are less likely to remain silent than non-

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for variables in Study 2

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	9	10
1. Silence	2.18	.68	–								
2. Female	.25	.43	.03								
3. Nonwhite	.15	.36	.01	.11							
4. Age	41.12	10.50	.03	.07	.02						
5. Tenure	10.39	7.91	.00	−.16	−.23	.53					
6. Supervisor	.37	.48	−.18	−.15	−.07	.18	.33				
7. Empowering Leadership	3.28	.88	−.32	−.02	.11	.01	−.04	.06			
8. Trust in Direct Supervisor	5.72	1.36	−.33	.02	.02	−.04	−.07	.04	.70		
9. Job Control	4.89	1.31	−.31	.08	.01	.26	.18	.07	.40	.37	
10. Organizational Identification	5.26	1.37	−.29	−.00	.06	.10	.06	.21	.42	.45	.34

Notes: N = 541; all correlation coefficients greater than .08 are statistically significant at p < .05.
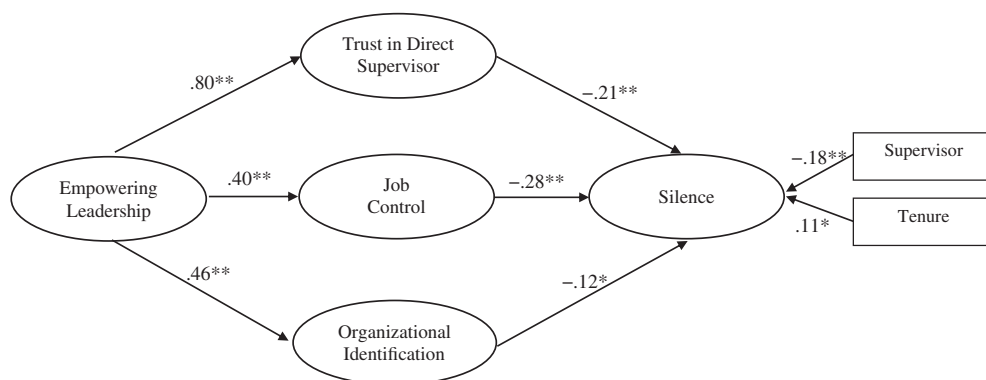
FIGURE 3 Study 2 SEM results

supervisors ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .01$) and employees with longer tenure are more likely to remain silent than those with shorter tenure ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$).

4.4 | Study 2 summary

Study 2 provides stronger support for our research model. The three intervening variables fully mediate the influence of empowering leadership on employee silence. The indirect effects of empowering leadership on employee silence through trust in supervisor and job control are also stronger in Study 2. The better results are likely due to the improved measure of trust, but they could also be due to systematic differences between the two samples. In both studies, we observed that supervisors are less likely to remain silent than non-supervisors. This finding, however, is unsurprising because supervisors due to their higher authority and status in the organization are likely to feel safer in voicing their concerns.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

The intentional withholding of critical work-related information by public employees can have serious negative outcomes in government organizations. When employees do not speak up and share information about work-related problems and issues, the information on which senior managers base their decisions becomes distorted, leading to poor decisions and costly errors (Whiteside and Barclay 2013). Employee silence not only hinders a public organization's ability to detect errors and prevent misconduct; it can also create unnecessary stress, cynicism, and mistrust and disengagement among employees (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Milliken et al. 2003; Morrison 2014). Moreover, it can lead to spirals of organizational silence which may undercut public sector transparency and accountability (Jorgensen and Bozeman 2007) and threaten constitutional protections for some forms of public employee speech (Norton 2009).

Surprisingly, few studies in public administration have assessed the determinants of public employee silence and how managers in public organizations may address this problem. The purpose of this article was to assess how frontline public managers may lower public employee silence by studying the influence of empowering supervisors on the silence of local government employees. We hypothesized that the empowering leadership behaviour of frontline supervisors would lower public employee silence by increasing trust, giving employees more control over their jobs, and strengthening their identification with or emotional attachment to their organizations. We empirically tested these expectations with data collected by different studies of over 1,000 employees of two different local governments in the United States. We found empirical support for our research model and three hypotheses in both studies. The results of the second study, however, were more convincing than the results of the first study.

Research in private sector work settings has identified the professional risks of speaking up as a major factor in discouraging employees from sharing critical information and speaking up about problems (Morrison 2014). Given that risk is an antecedent of silence, it follows that trust—a willingness to behave vulnerably based on the perceived goodwill of the other party (Mayer et al. 1995)—would mitigate the risks associated with speaking up. That is exactly what our findings suggest: that frontline supervisors' empowering leadership increases employees' trust which, in turn, lowers the likelihood of silence. Empowering leadership was also expected to increase an employee's sense of job control, in turn lowering the likelihood of silence. This expectation was based on theories suggesting that empowering leaders increase employee autonomy (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Spreitzer 1996), which, in turn, increases an employee's sense of control over her job. Job control, in turn, signals to employees that their independent contributions to the organization are valued, thereby encouraging them to speak up. These expectations were met in both studies. Finally, empowering leadership was hypothesized to lower silence through organizational identification, in which employees feel 'psychologically intertwined' with the fate of their organizations (Pratt 1998). While this expectation was also met, in both studies the connection between organizational identification and employee silence was weaker in magnitude than the mediating influences of trust and job control on silence. Taken together, our findings provide better understanding of the underlying processes through which empowering leadership reduces the likelihood of silence among public sector employees. To the best of our knowledge, no prior study has examined all three mediators in the same research. The current research, therefore, makes an important contribution to the literature on employee silence.

From a practical perspective, there is good news in the finding that frontline managers can reduce silence by exerting empowering leadership. The results suggest that empowering supervisors can help subordinates feel safe and comfortable sharing information about work problems. The results also imply that, if employees sense that supervisors are not willing to listen, are not interested to learn about organizational problems, or they feel that they will react negatively to bad news, they will not share information. We measured empowering leadership with items that asked employees whether their supervisors encourage them to take responsibility and solve problems independently, ask for inputs into decisions and modify plans in response, and assign confidence and skill-building tasks. While we are unaware about supervisory training methods in the two local governments, these are skills that can be taught.

All studies have limitations and this one is no exception. We relied on a cross-sectional design to test the research model in both studies. With such a design and survey data, we are unable to make causal inferences about the observed connections between the variables or rule out the potential of reverse causation. It is, for example, possible that mutual trust leads to empowering leadership, which in turn reduces employee silence. Alternatively, it could be that employee silence leads to lower levels of trust and lower levels of empowering leadership.

The use of the same source data, as always, incurs the risk of common source bias. However, the use of multisource data is not always appropriate, especially when the research goal is to assess employee perceptions and attitudes towards their job, supervisor, and organization. Moreover, supervisors are not always able to observe subordinate silence. Even when supervisors are able to detect subordinate silence, they may not fully grasp the causes and feelings behind such behaviour. The use of the same source data to measure the three mediating variables and the outcome variable, therefore, was appropriate. However, a longitudinal research design with data collected at different times for the predictor, mediator, and outcome variables would have allowed us to perform a stronger empirical test of the hypothesized relationships. The consistent findings in the two studies provide some assurance that the results were not due to a unique sample. Nevertheless, the sampling frame of two local governments in the Southeastern United States may limit the generalizability of the results. But the functional diversity of the local governments may render generalizability less of an issue than other government organizations with more homogeneous functions.

In conclusion, silence of public employees places government organizations at risk, by increasing the likelihood that errors go undetected, facilitating ethical lapses, hindering innovation and slowing organizational change. The results of this study suggest that frontline supervisors, who profoundly influence the day-to-day lives of public employees, can lower silence by building trust, enabling job control and strengthening organizational identification. In

an era in which government legitimacy and public values are under intense pressure, this is a positive finding that allows public managers to take active steps to reduce organizational silence and improve organizational effectiveness.

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APPENDIX A

Standardized factor loadings (λs) for the variables

Items	Study 1	Study 2
Silence 1	.80	.78
Silence 2	.79	.75
Silence 3	.56	.58
Silence 4	.46	.50
Silence 5	.62	.66
Empowering Leadership 1	.76	.81
Empowering Leadership 2	.87	.87
Empowering Leadership 3	.90	.89
Empowering Leadership 4	.62	.63
Empowering Leadership 5	.73	.85
Empowering Leadership 6	.73	.84
Trust in Supervisor 1	.89	.68
Trust in Supervisor 2	.66	.91
Trust in Supervisor 3	.89	.95
Trust in Supervisor 4	.86	.93
Trust in Supervisor 5	.73	.93
Job Control 1	.77	.76

Items	Study 1	Study 2
Job Control 2	.74	.73
Job Control 3	.77	.70
Organizational Identification 1	.76	.77
Organizational Identification 2	.93	.95
Organizational Identification 3	.86	.85

Notes: $N1$ = 1,000, $N2$ = 541; all λs are statistically significant at p < .01.