

COMMENTARY

Finding balance: Silence and nature in employee restoration

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Asselineau et al. (2024) propose we recategorize silence as its own positive construct rather than as just a lack of voice. The increasing stimuli, interconnectedness, and distractions of the modern office are draining our cognitive resources, from the energy it takes to adhere to social pressures of constant work to the energy we waste ignoring all the external stimuli competing for our attention. These experiences are amplified in the rapid urbanization of communities, which nature researchers are starting to connect to the significant rise in mental health disorders (Bratman et al., 2015). We propose several parallels between silence and nature in their restorative abilities, applications at work, and eventual outcomes. The mechanisms and frameworks in which nature researchers have found they can positively influence employee perceptions, behaviors, and other organization-level outcomes are the same avenues that silence researchers should begin to frame their study designs and hypotheses around.

Connecting silence and nature in theory

Researchers were motivated to pursue the value of incorporating nature at work because of how positive their effects were on general mental states in everyday life (Brossoit et al., 2024). Just as a lack of nature is harmful, a lack of literal silence in our workspaces may be hurting our employees and organizations as well. We recommend utilizing attention restoration theory (ART; Kaplan, 1995) and Brossoit et al. (2024) nature and work theoretical framework to assess the value of intentional silence at work.

ART posits that an environment can have a positive impact on individual resources and recover cognitive resources through the sensations of fascination, being away, extent, and compatibility (Bratman et al., 2015; Kaplan, 1995). We propose silence can improve cognitive functioning at work through the components of *fascination* and *being away* (Bratman et al., 2015; Kaplan, 1995), specifically soft fascination. *Soft fascination* refers to calm atmospheres that promote the processes of unwinding from mental fatigue through engaging with nature for its restorative effects. We believe silence can, and often is (as seen in athletics and meditation; Asselineau et al.), used to create calm atmospheres for its restorative benefits and should be applied to organizational contexts. The similar functions of silence and nature when analyzed with the construct of soft fascination is a lens that could be used to explain and highlight the positive utility of literal silence at work.

Being away is similar to psychological detachment in that the mind is intentionally disconnecting and mentally “leaving” the present stressful environment so the individual can restore their cognitive resources (Kaplan, 1995). Bratman et al. (2015) found that nature can facilitate disconnecting and settling into a calm state by giving the mind something else to focus on. The concept of being away relates to meditation as it is the practice of disengaging mental

processes in which the mind is focused on other things such as the breath or a mantra (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). There is already evidence that meditation, a type of intentional silence, can positively influence trait and state anxiety, negative emotions, and even work performance and engagement (Asselineau et al.; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017; Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Integrating the components of soft fascination and being away when developing silence practices at work could provide employees with a restorative experience and environment resulting in enhanced job performance and satisfaction, similar to that of nature and meditation practices (Brossoit et al., 2024, Petchsawang & McLean, 2017).

The nature and work framework used by Brossoit et al. (2024) proposes that urban versus natural outdoor environments indirectly affect the extent of positive work-related outcomes through time spent outside and the level of enjoyment (Brossoit et al., 2024). We propose that loud, highly stimulating environments can be indirectly affecting workplace performance through similar dimensions recognized by Asselineau et al.: *duration* (i.e. time spent intentionally engaging in literal silence), *intention* (i.e., to punish as in elementary school versus to connect as in secular groups), and *voluntary* (i.e., the extent of choice an individual has in how and whether to engage in silence). Future research could follow this model and test whether engaging in literal and intentional silence can influence work-related outcomes through how much time is spent in silence, how much one enjoys silence, and whether that is mediated by the relative or typical “quiet” levels of the workspace.

Applied similarities between silence and nature

Another area within nature literature that silence researchers can begin to model future experiments on is the existing intervention methods that are being used to incorporate more natural experiences at work. Some common ways that organizations encourage their employees to incorporate nature throughout their days are *microbreaks*, *greenspaces*, *outdoor meetings*, and even *outdoor nonwork activities*.

Microbreaks are characterized as being around 5 minutes and are renowned for their restorative properties, especially when they are shorter and more frequent. A popular suggestion is to use microbreaks as a time to incorporate nature, through “nature walks” or just spending the time outside (Bratman et al., 2015; Hunter & Wu, 2016). Incorporating silence in place of nature can help make the restorative effects more accessible to individuals and organizations who do not have as much access to nature. We also emphasize the importance of these similarities as communities are rapidly urbanizing.

Creating *greenspaces* in organizations is another way researchers and practitioners are utilizing nature to improve individual and organizational work-related outcomes. This is another intervention method that is not always accessible to *all* individuals and organizations. Silence could be an easier way to attain these benefits through implementations like a low-stimulation space. Modern-day workplaces have evolved into being fast-paced environments, highly integrated, with little privacy or opportunity to relax and decompress (Asselineau et al.). Replacing one or two offices with a low-stimulation space for employees to visit when they are feeling overwhelmed or depleted could be an easier and less expensive way to utilize the same mechanisms as greenspaces to energize and replenish employees.

Outdoor meetings are also becoming more common; this entails holding a meeting in an outdoor space rather than a windowless room. Silent meetings have the potential to serve as a parallel. Workplaces in big cities without access to natural environments could utilize the benefits of silent meetings to improve employee attitudes and subsequent organizational-level outcomes. Similar to the Quakers intentions, beginning meetings with a period of silence helps refocus everyone’s attention, helps set a collective goal, and encourages concentration and higher level thinking (Asselineau et al.). Silent meetings could be a more easily accessible alternative that has the potential to reap the same benefits.

Engaging in *nonwork outdoor activities* is another way organizations are encouraging their employees to take advantage of the restorative properties gained through interacting with nature. Large companies such as REI and Patagonia are already beginning to implement nature well-being policies that encourage employees to spend time outside (Brossoit *et al.*, 2024). This is signaling that the organization cares about nature and the individual benefits it can produce while also being able to benefit from the downstream effects of increased employee engagement. Creating or partnering with other organizations to provide access to meditation spaces and classes is a similar idea that instead utilizes silence to improve individual's well-being and work-related outcomes. This could be an especially beneficial alternative in communities lacking green spaces or those who do not have equal accessibility to visit National Parks.

Suggestions for future researchers and practitioners

As practitioners start to use these intervention methods (e.g., silence and nature), they simultaneously need to be seeking feedback. If silent meetings are institutionalized, ask for employee feedback to understand if it is benefiting employee restoration. We also recognize the importance of understanding this across subgroups. Silence is still perceived as a lack of voice, and it's important to ensure that formal implementation of intentional silence in the workplace will not signal to already silenced employees that their voice is not important. Literal silence at work is a surprisingly underrepresented idea in organizational literature. To jumpstart this much-needed area of research, researchers, and practitioners should reference nature literature to gain some insights for hypothesis development or organizational practices. As our environments are rapidly urbanizing and silence is becoming scarce, we need to learn what will keep our people focused, motivated, and most importantly, happy.

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