Stewardship Readiness Institute (SRI)
Applied Stewardship Case Study Series

Case Study No. 02
The Culture of Quiet Avoidance
Domain: Systems & Organizational Dynamics
Level: I — Pattern Recognition
Themes: Conflict Avoidance, Psychological Safety, Organizational Culture

These case studies are reflective stewardship instruments designed to support discernment in complex human systems. They are not prescriptive solutions but invitations to thoughtful engagement.

Applied Stewardship Simulation

Case Study 02 — The Culture of Quiet Avoidance

Workbook Edition (ASF Field Guide Format)

(Downloadable PDF version)
Level: I — Pattern Recognition
Themes: Conflict Avoidance, Psychological Safety, Organizational Culture

Learning Objective: Recognizing early signals that an organization has developed norms discouraging open disagreement.

Opening Reflection

Healthy organizations are not defined by the absence of disagreement. In many cases, constructive disagreement is a sign that people feel safe enough to speak honestly. This case explores how cultures that emphasize harmony can sometimes drift into patterns where disagreement becomes difficult to express openly. The purpose of this exercise is not to judge individuals but to learn how to recognize early cultural signals that may affect institutional health.

Scenario Narrative

A mid-sized nonprofit organization has built a strong reputation for collaboration and teamwork. Employees often describe the workplace culture as supportive and positive. Staff turnover is low, and internal meetings are generally calm and respectful.

However, a subtle pattern has begun to emerge.

During leadership meetings, most discussions proceed quickly with minimal disagreement. Proposals are usually approved without much debate, and decisions tend to move forward smoothly. At first glance, this appears to reflect a highly aligned team.

Yet in informal conversations outside meetings, a different dynamic surfaces.

Staff members frequently express reservations about decisions that were just approved. Concerns about program design, resource allocation, or strategic priorities are often discussed privately after meetings rather than raised during them.

Several team members admit they sometimes hold back their opinions in formal discussions. Some worry that raising objections might make them appear negative or disruptive. Others feel that leadership has already made up its mind before meetings begin.

Over time, this pattern has created an unusual communication dynamic. Important disagreements still exist — but they rarely appear in official conversations. Instead, they circulate through informal channels: hallway conversations, private messages, or quiet exchanges among trusted colleagues.

Most employees would not describe the organization as unhealthy. People remain polite, supportive, and committed to the mission.

But some senior staff members are beginning to wonder whether the organization's emphasis on harmony has unintentionally created a culture where disagreement feels uncomfortable or risky.

As the organization prepares for several major strategic decisions in the coming year, leadership faces a subtle but important question: How can an organization maintain a culture of respect and collaboration while still making space for honest disagreement?

Section 1 — Pattern Recognition

- What signals in the scenario suggest that disagreement exists but is not being expressed openly?

- Why might employees hesitate to raise concerns during formal meetings?

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- What cultural norms might unintentionally discourage open disagreement?

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- What behaviors or meeting dynamics might indicate declining psychological safety?

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Reflection Notes:

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Section 2 — Stewardship Considerations

- Why might leaders interpret the absence of disagreement as alignment?

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- What responsibilities do leaders have when they notice disagreement emerging only informally?

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- What risks arise when important concerns remain outside formal decision processes?

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Reflection Notes:

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Section 3 — Risk Mapping

Scenario	Possible Consequences
If the pattern continues	
If disagreement becomes more visible	

Section 4 — Responsible Leadership

- What actions could leaders take to signal that respectful disagreement is welcome?

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- What meeting practices might encourage more open dialogue?

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- How can leaders model curiosity rather than defensiveness when receiving feedback?

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Leadership Design Notes:

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Closing Reflection

Before considering specific solutions, pause with the deeper stewardship question. What signals help leaders distinguish between genuine alignment and quiet avoidance? Healthy organizations cultivate both respect and honesty. The task of stewardship is to ensure that cultural norms do not unintentionally silence important perspectives.