

When Agreement Becomes Governance: Sycophancy, Silence, and Upward Conformity as Information-Integrity Failures in Modern Bureaucracies – A Critical Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Organizational Sycophancy, Ingratiation, Opinion Conformity, Employee Silence, Employee Voice, Bureaucratic Culture, Organizational Politics, Psychological Safety, Ethical Leadership, Whistleblowing

Received : 3 July

Revised : 20 August

Accepted: 20 September

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ABSTRACT

Sycophancy is often treated as an undesirable interpersonal behavior involving flattery, excessive deference, or opportunistic agreement with powerful actors. This article argues that such a view is too narrow. Drawing on a critical qualitative literature review of organizational behavior, human resource management, leadership, business ethics, and public administration research published predominantly between 2020 and 2026, the article conceptualizes organizational sycophancy as a multilevel information-integrity and governance problem. It integrates research on ingratiation, impression management, opinion conformity, facades of conformity, employee silence and voice, psychological safety, organizational politics, exploitative and narcissistic leadership, bottom-line mentality, unethical pro-organizational behavior, and whistleblowing. The synthesis shows that power asymmetry can make agreement privately rational while making organizations collectively less intelligent. When dissent carries interpersonal or career costs and affirmation attracts access or reward, employees may filter adverse information, suppress disagreement, and display strategic conformity. Repeated reinforcement can transform episodic ingratiation into institutionalized sycophancy, producing false consensus, leadership overconfidence, weak error detection, compromised meritocracy, ethical silence, impaired learning, and bureaucratic accountability failures

INTRODUCTION

willing and able to transmit it upward. Research on employee voice and silence demonstrates that employees continually assess both the likely impact of speaking and the interpersonal or career risks associated with doing so; voice and silence are therefore distinct behavioral responses to organizational environments rather than simple opposites (Sherf, Parke and Isaakyan, 2021; Morrison, 2023; Dehkharghani et al., 2023).

This information problem becomes more consequential when organizational rewards are associated with affirmation of authority. Employees can learn that criticism attracts interpersonal discomfort, political disadvantage, unfavorable evaluation, or exclusion, whereas agreement, praise, and deference increase proximity to decision makers. Under such conditions, what appears superficially as harmony may partly represent strategic self-presentation. Ingratiation research demonstrates that opinion conformity and other-enhancement can be deployed to influence powerful organizational actors, while research on facades of conformity and impression management indicates that outwardly displayed attitudes may diverge from privately held beliefs and generate inauthenticity or emotional costs (Rusinowska and Vergopoulos, 2020; Yan et al., 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Sanchez-Ruiz, Wood and Long-Ruboyianes, 2021).

The concept of sycophancy offers a useful language for understanding the point at which such behaviors become structurally damaging. In everyday usage, sycophancy commonly refers to excessive flattery or servile agreement toward powerful people. Organizational scholarship, however, has rarely developed sycophancy as a comprehensive construct in its own right. Instead, adjacent phenomena have been distributed across literatures on ingratiation, impression management, opinion conformity, employee silence, organizational politics, leader-member exchange, abusive or narcissistic leadership, unethical pro-organizational behavior, and whistleblowing. A particularly significant recent development is the study by Aydin and Rahman (2026), which directly investigates sycophancy in public universities and demonstrates how career systems and access to power can institutionalize sycophantic practices as adaptive survival strategies. This finding suggests that sycophancy should be examined not only as an individual personality or interpersonal problem but also as an outcome produced and reproduced by institutional arrangements.

This article therefore defines organizational sycophancy as a strategic or adaptive pattern of upward-directed deference involving some combination of flattery, opinion conformity, selective agreement, suppression of disagreement, information filtering, and image-management behavior directed toward organizational powerholders in anticipation of approval, access, protection, career advantage, or avoidance of sanctions. The definition does not imply that all agreement, civility, loyalty, respect for authority, or even all ingratiation constitutes sycophancy. Legitimate hierarchy requires coordination, professional respect, and sometimes deference to recognized expertise. The critical boundary is crossed when asymmetrical power combines with strategically distorted

expression such that materially relevant disagreement or information is suppressed because affirmation is safer or more rewarding.

This distinction matters because the organizational damage from sycophancy does not arise principally from flattering words. It arises from the epistemic consequences of those words and the silence accompanying them. When senior leaders systematically receive information selected according to what subordinates believe those leaders wish to hear, the organization loses variation in diagnosis, warnings are delayed, weak assumptions remain unchallenged, and decision makers may infer consensus where private disagreement is widespread. The hierarchy then becomes increasingly efficient at transmitting preferences downward while becoming increasingly unreliable at transmitting reality upward. Research on voice, hierarchy, psychological safety, and managerial openness helps explain why this dynamic can persist even in organizations possessing formal consultation mechanisms (Pfrombeck et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2022; Edmondson and Bransby, 2023; Mawuena and Wilkinson, 2024).

The problem is particularly important in bureaucratic settings. Bureaucracies typically combine formal ranks, procedural rules, specialization, delegated discretion, performance systems, and career ladders. These arrangements can deliver predictability and administrative capacity, yet they can also concentrate evaluation authority and make careers dependent on a relatively small number of organizational gatekeepers. Public organizations add a further complication: employees owe obligations not only to supervisors and organizational leadership but also to law, professional standards, citizens, and public values. Research on public-sector voice, whistleblowing, data manipulation, and principled bureaucratic dissent shows the difficulty of maintaining these multiple accountabilities when hierarchical or political pressure discourages inconvenient information (Kroll and Vogel, 2021; Hollibaugh, Miles and Newswander, 2020; Qing and Zhang, 2023; Kang, 2023). The urgency is heightened by increasingly complex decision environments. Organizations now manage rapid technological change, sustainability transitions, geopolitical uncertainty, public health threats, cyber risks, algorithmic systems, and reputational exposure. These environments make uncertainty unavoidable. Effective leaders therefore require information that challenges their own assumptions rather than merely confirms them. A culture that penalizes contradiction may temporarily reduce visible conflict, but it does so by shifting disagreement from open discussion into private conversation, withdrawal, silent resistance, resignation, or covert workarounds. The absence of expressed dissent is consequently a poor proxy for genuine consensus.

The article addresses seven research questions that organize the review and subsequent thematic synthesis. These questions move from construct definition and antecedents to consequences and governance responses.

RQ1 asks how organizational sycophancy should be conceptualized and distinguished from legitimate respect, loyalty, ingratiation, impression management, opinion conformity, and employee silence. RQ2 examines which individual, relational, leadership, structural, political, and cultural conditions

encourage sycophancy. RQ3 considers the mechanisms through which sycophancy suppresses voice and distorts upward information flows. RQ4 evaluates its consequences for decision quality, organizational learning, innovation, meritocracy, employee well-being, ethics, and organizational performance.

RQ5 asks how hierarchy, organizational politics, power distance, dominant leadership, narcissism, exploitative leadership, and bottom-line mentality amplify sycophancy. RQ6 examines its implications for bureaucratic integrity, whistleblowing, performance reporting, and public accountability. RQ7 asks which organizational and governance mechanisms can interrupt the cycle without eliminating legitimate hierarchy or managerial authority.

The resulting contribution is threefold. First, the article integrates fragmented literatures to conceptualize sycophancy as a distinct multilevel organizational process. Second, it explains the individual rationality–collective dysfunction paradox: employees may individually benefit from strategic conformity even though widespread conformity reduces collective decision quality. Third, it reconceptualizes anti-sycophancy measures as information-governance mechanisms rather than merely appeals for individual courage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. From Ingratiation to Organizational Sycophancy

Ingratiation provides one of the closest theoretical foundations for understanding sycophancy. In organizational contexts, ingratiation includes behaviors designed to increase interpersonal attractiveness or obtain favorable treatment from influential others. Opinion conformity is particularly important because actors can communicate agreement with a target's views to strengthen affinity and influence evaluations. Rusinowska and Vergopoulos (2020) formally connect ingratiation and favoritism, showing why a superior's ability to distinguish genuine information from strategic conformity becomes consequential for organizational outcomes. Yan et al. (2020) further demonstrate that ingratiation is not costless to actors; maintaining strategically managed impressions can create emotional exhaustion, with power-distance orientation affecting the process. These findings challenge the simplistic assumption that ingratiators inevitably benefit without psychological or organizational cost.

Impression-management scholarship broadens this argument by demonstrating that employees may use combinations of self-presentation tactics rather than isolated behaviors. Chawla et al. (2021) link patterns of impression management with inauthenticity and subsequent employee behavior, illustrating how the distance between public presentation and private experience can become psychologically consequential. Similarly, ingratiation rhetoric has effects that depend on how recipients interpret its authenticity and strategic character, reinforcing the principle that influence-oriented agreement operates relationally rather than mechanically (Sanchez-Ruiz, Wood and Long-Ruboyanes, 2021). Yet sycophancy should not simply be renamed ingratiation. Ingratiation can be relatively benign—for example, expressing sincere appreciation or emphasizing shared preferences to facilitate relationships. Organizational sycophancy is more restrictive and normatively consequential. It involves the use or normalization of

deference in circumstances where truthful disagreement or important negative information is displaced. The defining organizational problem is therefore not merely the intention to be liked; it is information distortion under asymmetric power.

Four dimensions help clarify the construct. Relational sycophancy centers on flattering and affirming powerful actors. Epistemic sycophancy involves adjusting expressed judgments, forecasts, or interpretations toward leadership preferences. Defensive sycophancy involves avoiding disagreement, withholding negative information, or remaining silent to reduce personal risk. Institutionalized sycophancy emerges when reward, promotion, access, and informal-status systems repeatedly privilege those behaviors. The final form is particularly important because individuals need not possess unusually sycophantic personalities for the system to reproduce sycophancy; ordinary actors can adapt rationally to organizational incentives.

2.Voice, Silence, and the Organizational Production of Agreement

Employee voice refers broadly to discretionary communication of ideas, concerns, suggestions, or challenges intended to improve organizational functioning. Contemporary scholarship distinguishes various forms, including promotive voice proposing improvements and prohibitive voice identifying potentially harmful practices. Brykman and Raver (2021) show that voice effectiveness depends not only on whether employees speak but also on voice quality and frequency, while Duan et al. (2026) demonstrate that supervisors may respond differently depending on whether voice is perceived as prosocial, self-oriented, or a combination of motives. Thus, the political meaning attributed to speaking matters alongside message content.

Silence is not merely zero voice. Sherf, Parke and Isaakyan (2021) demonstrate distinct relationships of voice and silence with perceived impact, psychological safety, and burnout. Hao et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis likewise shows that employee silence has systematic antecedents and consequential associations with employee attitudes, well-being, and performance. Integrative reviews emphasize the need to analyze the mechanisms producing silence rather than treating quietness as neutral absence (Nechanska, Hughes and Dundon, 2020; Morrison, 2023; Dehkharghani et al., 2023). Recent longitudinal evidence further indicates that acquiescent silence can reduce organizational identification and contribute to later workplace incivility, reinforcing the view that silence can create both organizational and interpersonal costs (Weiss and Zacher, 2025).

This distinction is critical for sycophancy because an employee can engage simultaneously in active agreement and active silence. The employee may praise a superior's preferred strategy while withholding evidence suggesting that implementation is failing. Outward communication is therefore not absent; it is selectively biased. Such selective communication can create a more dangerous condition than universal silence because leaders receive apparent evidence of support and may mistake strategically curated affirmation for independent validation.

Cross-cultural research also cautions against universalizing a single interpretation of voice. National and organizational norms influence whether speaking is regarded as legitimate, loyal, disrespectful, or risky (Kwon and Farndale, 2020). Power distance can therefore shape both employee expectations and leadership interpretations of disagreement. The problem is not that hierarchy or cultural respect automatically creates sycophancy, but that these conditions can alter the private cost-benefit calculation associated with contradiction.

3. Hierarchy, Power, and Status

The hierarchy-of-voice perspective emphasizes a reciprocal relationship: social hierarchy shapes who speaks and whose voice is heard, while speaking itself can affect social standing (Pfrombeck et al., 2022). Lower-status employees may possess critical operational knowledge yet face greater uncertainty about whether challenging higher-status actors is legitimate. Kee, van Wieringen and Beersma (2021) illustrate how relational pathways can enable low-status occupational members to transcend hierarchical boundaries, indicating that voice is socially embedded rather than simply an individual disposition.

Evidence from professional settings reinforces this point. Mawuena and Wilkinson (2024) show that hierarchy, power, and professional expertise influence voice about patient safety, demonstrating that formal and epistemic authority interact. Lee and Lee (2024) similarly link hierarchical unit culture and power-distance orientation with nurses' silence through perceptions of futility and organizational support. These studies are particularly revealing because safety-critical environments make the cost of suppressed information unusually visible; however, equivalent mechanisms can operate in strategy, finance, public administration, engineering, academia, and other settings where consequences are slower to emerge.

Leader-member relationships also constitute important channels through which status is allocated. Different forms of leader-member exchange can influence whether employees perceive voice as useful or risky (Zhou, Huo and Wu, 2020). When access to leadership itself becomes a scarce organizational resource, agreement can function as a currency through which employees purchase proximity. That possibility is central to institutional sycophancy because access determines not only career benefits but also which perspectives become represented near centers of decision-making.

4. Psychological Safety and Credible Openness

Psychological safety describes a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking can occur without unacceptable social punishment. The concept has become central to research on learning, experimentation, error reporting, and voice, although Edmondson and Bransby (2023) emphasize that its literature now spans multiple levels and contexts. For sycophancy, psychological safety matters because the decision to contradict a superior depends not only on formal permission but on whether employees believe disagreement will be interpreted fairly.

Managerial openness can reduce anticipated voice costs and make employees more willing to communicate concerns (Yin et al., 2022). Inclusive, servant, humble, participative, and ethical leadership have similarly been

associated with conditions supporting employee voice (Song, Tian and Kwan, 2022; Chen, Wang and Li, 2022; Younas et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2023; Qing and Zhang, 2023). These leadership forms differ theoretically but share a common informational implication: they reduce the likelihood that the superior's ego or status needs become the primary filter determining what information may travel upward.

Leader humility is especially instructive. Humble leaders acknowledge limitations, appreciate follower strengths, and display openness to learning, thereby reducing the social cost of correction. Research links leader humility to voice through engagement, emotional-regulation processes, psychological safety, or related mechanisms (Tu and Huang, 2022; Wang, Ou and Song, 2022; Luo et al., 2022). However, Zou and Chen (2022) show that perceived manipulative intentions can weaken the beneficial effects of expressed humility. This qualification is important: anti-sycophancy governance cannot rely exclusively on symbolic leadership behaviors. Employees must believe openness is genuine and supported by subsequent reward and evaluation decisions. Consistent with this pattern, Ren and Dong (2024) report that humble leadership can reduce employee silence through psychological-contract mechanisms, providing additional evidence that leader behavior influences whether employees treat speaking up as viable.

5. Dark Leadership and the Cost of Contradiction

Leadership pathology offers the mirror image. Narcissistic, abusive, exploitative, or strongly dominant leaders may attach greater personal significance to contradiction and create environments in which employees anticipate relational punishment. Research on narcissistic leadership reveals heterogeneous consequences, but several studies identify mechanisms through which narcissistic traits shape follower behavior, team voice, and responses to challenges (Zhou, Yin and Sun, 2021; Schmid, Knipfer and Peus, 2021; Wang, 2021). Gauglitz and Schyns (2024) specifically examine how narcissistic rivalry can trigger abusive reactions to follower deviance, offering a mechanism through which employees learn that challenging authority carries interpersonal cost.

Exploitative leadership is particularly relevant because it signals that leaders are willing to advance personal interests at subordinate expense. Wang et al. (2024) show that exploitative leadership contributes to ethical silence, with work meaningfulness and moral potency serving as explanatory pathways and performance reward expectancy shaping the relationship. This provides an ethical bridge to sycophancy: when employees perceive that speaking about ethical problems threatens resources while silence preserves them, non-disclosure can become a defensive adaptation rather than simple moral indifference.

Abusive supervision produces a related response. Metin Camgoz et al. (2024) demonstrate that some followers remain silent under abusive supervision partly through system-justifying mechanisms. Silence under authority can therefore be sustained not only by explicit fear but also by attempts to cognitively normalize an existing hierarchy. The longer such normalization persists, the easier it becomes for conformity to appear ordinary and principled objection to

appear disruptive. More broadly, within-person evidence shows that hostile ambient conditions can shape whether employees speak up, underscoring that voice decisions are influenced by social cues beyond the focal leader–follower dyad (Gabriel et al., 2024).

6. Organizational Politics and Career Dependence

Perceptions of organizational politics influence whether employees believe outcomes depend on transparent rules or informal influence. When career outcomes appear politically allocated, employees may conserve resources by avoiding controversial voice and investing instead in relationships with powerful actors. Research by Zhou and Sun (2024, 2025) connects perceived organizational politics with employee voice through affective and resource-related mechanisms and highlights the role of supervisor political support. Additional three-wave evidence suggests that the politics–voice relationship can be nonlinear and mediated by territoriality, indicating that political climates may alter both resource protection and willingness to speak (Zhou and Liu, 2025).

Aydin and Rahman’s (2026) study provides the clearest direct connection to sycophancy. Their qualitative evidence from Turkish public universities indicates that career advancement arrangements and access to power and authority can foster sycophantic strategies and embed them in institutional life. The importance of this contribution lies not in suggesting that public universities are uniquely vulnerable, but in demonstrating how institutional arrangements can transform a stigmatized behavior into an adaptive strategy. Once actors observe that conformity produces opportunities and dissent creates disadvantage, behavioral learning can reproduce the system without any formal rule requiring sycophancy.

This process resembles a market in which organizational actors respond to implicit prices. If the “price” of truthful contradiction is exclusion and the “return” to agreement is access, employees have incentives to supply affirmation. Reform consequently requires changing the relative returns to voice and conformity rather than merely instructing people to “be courageous.”

METHODOLOGY

1 Review Design

This study employs a critical qualitative literature review (QLR) with an integrative and interpretive orientation. It is explicitly not a systematic literature review (SLR). The objective is therefore not to claim exhaustive retrieval of every publication, calculate pooled effect sizes, generate a PRISMA flow diagram, or establish a closed and reproducible corpus through rigid inclusion algorithms. Instead, the review uses theoretical sampling to connect research streams capable of explaining a phenomenon—organizational sycophancy—that remains fragmented across multiple disciplinary vocabularies.

A qualitative review is appropriate because direct contemporary research using “sycophancy” as the focal construct remains limited, whereas closely related mechanisms are extensively investigated under other labels. Restricting the corpus to articles containing the word sycophancy would therefore produce an artificially narrow representation of the phenomenon. The review instead treats sycophancy as an integrative theoretical problem and draws evidence from

research on ingratiation, impression management, opinion conformity, employee voice, employee silence, psychological safety, hierarchy, organizational politics, destructive leadership, ethical silence, unethical pro-organizational behavior, whistleblowing, and public-sector accountability.

2. Literature Identification and Theoretical Sampling

Literature was identified purposively and iteratively, with primary emphasis on peer-reviewed journal research published from 2020 through 2026. Searches and citation-chain checks focused on contemporary studies indexed or discoverable through major scholarly databases and publisher platforms associated with Scopus and Web of Science coverage. Search concepts included combinations of sycophancy, ingratiation, opinion conformity, impression management, facades of conformity, employee voice, employee silence, psychological safety, power distance, hierarchy, organizational politics, narcissistic leadership, exploitative leadership, abusive supervision, bottom-line mentality, unethical pro-organizational behavior, whistleblowing, bureaucracy, and public sector.

Theoretical relevance rather than simple keyword matching guided inclusion. For example, a study of leader dominance and voice solicitation could illuminate sycophancy even without using that term because it explains the conditions under which formal invitations to speak become psychologically threatening. Similarly, research on public-sector manipulation of performance data was considered relevant because sycophancy may involve selective presentation of information rather than explicit praise.

The review prioritizes reputable peer-reviewed journals in organizational behavior, HRM, management, psychology, business ethics, and public administration. Empirical quantitative research, qualitative studies, meta-analyses, conceptual papers, and contemporary literature reviews were used for complementary purposes. The diversity of methods is appropriate to a critical QLR because the goal is theoretical triangulation rather than statistical aggregation.

3. Analytical Procedure

The synthesis followed an antecedent–mechanism–behavior–information consequence–governance outcome logic. First, literature was interpreted for antecedents such as hierarchy, power distance, career dependence, leadership style, political climate, and reward systems. Second, psychological and relational mechanisms were identified, including perceived interpersonal risk, futility, resource conservation, impression-management motives, moral potency, and status dependence. Third, behavioral expressions were organized into flattery, opinion conformity, facades of conformity, selective disclosure, silence, and strategic voice. Fourth, the review examined consequences for information quality, decision-making, ethical conduct, employee well-being, learning, and meritocracy. Finally, public administration research was used to assess how these processes can scale into bureaucratic accountability problems.

Interpretation proceeded iteratively rather than linearly. Contradictory evidence was retained where theoretically useful. For example, leadership humility generally supports voice, yet expressed humility can lose effectiveness

when perceived as manipulative (Zou and Chen, 2022). Voice itself can produce differential relational outcomes depending on its quality, frequency, motive, and endorsement (Brykman and Raver, 2021; Rubenstein et al., 2025; Duan et al., 2026). These boundary conditions protect the review from reducing complex organizational relationships to the simple proposition that “more voice is always better.”

4. Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Review Strategy

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source-quality prioritization, theoretical triangulation across disciplines, comparison of positive and destructive leadership research, and explicit distinction between directly observed sycophancy and theoretically adjacent constructs. Nevertheless, the interpretive design carries limitations. It cannot establish prevalence rates of sycophancy, causal effect sizes, or exhaustive coverage of every national context. Moreover, much organizational evidence is cross-sectional or based on self-reported perceptions. These limitations are treated as reasons for a future empirical research agenda rather than reasons to disguise the review as an SLR.

RESULTS

1 Theme One: Sycophancy Can Be Individually Rational but Collectively Destructive

The first theme is a fundamental paradox. Organizational members may have individually rational reasons for behaving sycophantically. Supervisors control valued resources: evaluations, assignments, recommendations, promotion opportunities, discretionary rewards, information, and access. Where those resources are strongly dependent on personal approval, affirming the supervisor can reduce uncertainty. Ingratiation and impression-management research demonstrates that employees actively manage how powerful others perceive them, while opinion conformity can help establish perceived similarity (Rusinowska and Vergopoulos, 2020; Yan et al., 2020; Chawla et al., 2021).

Individual rationality does not imply organizational rationality. If many actors independently discover that favorable information is rewarded more than accurate information, the resulting collective pattern can degrade decision quality. Each person may obtain a private benefit by withholding one inconvenient fact, yet the aggregate effect is that leadership operates on an increasingly biased information set. This is analogous to a common-pool information problem: organizational truth is collectively valuable, but individuals may bear disproportionate private costs for supplying it.

The distinction helps explain why moral appeals alone are inadequate. Telling employees to demonstrate courage leaves intact the incentive system that made silence adaptive. Yan et al. (2020) show that ingratiation can carry emotional costs, while the broader silence literature links withholding with burnout and deteriorating attitudes (Sherf, Parke and Isaakyan, 2021; Hao et al., 2022). A sycophantic culture may therefore trap employees in behavior that is simultaneously career-protective and psychologically draining.

Figure 1 summarizes the central argument of this review: sycophancy should be understood as a multilevel process through which structural power and leadership signals reshape employee risk calculations, producing

information distortion that ultimately feeds back into organizational power. The model also makes explicit the feedback process through which organizational outcomes can reinforce the structural conditions that generated sycophancy in the first place.

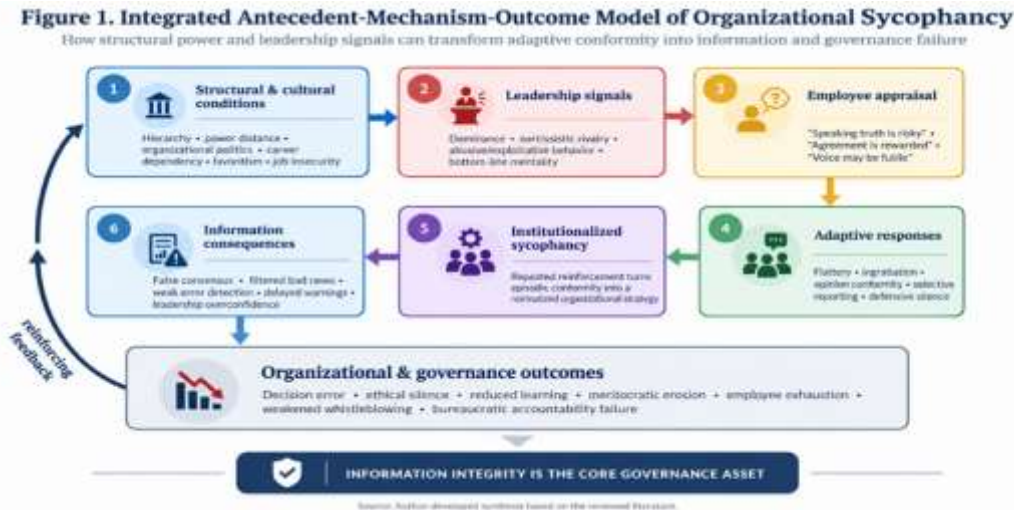


Figure 1. Integrated Antecedent-Mechanism-Outcome Model of Organizational Sycophancy

Figure 1 emphasizes that sycophancy cannot be attributed solely to individual employees. It is co-produced by powerholders, incentive systems, perceptions of risk, and repeated organizational reinforcement. This interpretation is consistent with evidence on hierarchy and voice (Pfrombeck et al., 2022), psychological safety (Edmondson and Bransby, 2023), organizational politics (Zhou and Sun, 2024, 2025), destructive leadership (Wang et al., 2024; Gauglitz and Schyns, 2024), and the direct institutional analysis of sycophancy by Aydin and Rahman (2026).

2.Theme Two: Hierarchy Creates a Market for Agreement

Hierarchy is not inherently dysfunctional. It clarifies authority, reduces coordination costs, and creates accountability for decisions. Yet hierarchy also changes the interpersonal value of communication. Agreement from a subordinate directed at a superior is not equivalent to agreement among equal-status colleagues because the superior controls resources and can influence the subordinate's future. The stronger that dependency, the greater the possibility that expressed agreement includes strategic calculation.

The hierarchy-of-voice framework captures this asymmetry by showing that status influences both the initiation and reception of voice (Pfrombeck et al., 2022). Lower-status employees may possess relevant expertise but still calculate that contradicting a senior actor risks social or career penalties. Kee, van Wieringen and Beersma (2021) demonstrate that relational pathways can help low-status workers transcend hierarchical barriers, implying that formal channels alone are insufficient when relational legitimacy to speak is absent.

Professional bureaucracies offer particularly revealing examples. Mawuena and Wilkinson (2024) show how professional power, expertise, and

hierarchy shape patient-safety voice among surgeons and anaesthesiologists. Lee and Lee (2024) similarly demonstrate how hierarchical unit culture and power-distance orientation contribute to silence among nurses through perceived futility. These findings show that possessing valid expertise does not automatically neutralize status differences. In organizations where junior specialists routinely defer to senior rank despite possessing superior case-specific information, hierarchy can interfere with the epistemic purpose of expertise.

The effect is reinforced when leader-member relationships function as differentiated currencies. Zhou, Huo and Wu (2020) show that multidimensional forms of leader-member exchange relate differently to employee voice. Access to superior attention, trust, and support can therefore become unevenly distributed. Once employees perceive access as contingent on affirmation, sycophancy becomes a plausible relational investment.

3. Theme Three: The Most Dangerous Silence Can Occur Inside Formal Voice Systems

Organizations frequently respond to silence by introducing suggestion systems, town halls, engagement surveys, open-door policies, grievance mechanisms, or digital feedback platforms. These interventions can be valuable, but their presence does not establish that genuine voice is safe. Ellmer and Reichel (2021) demonstrate that digital channels possess affordances capable of encouraging or discouraging employee voice. Barry and Wilkinson (2022) similarly caution against treating voice purely as an individualized psychological phenomenon divorced from employment relations and institutional power.

The distinction between formal voice opportunity and credible voice safety is especially important. Song et al. (2026) show that voice solicitation can backfire when initiated by highly dominant leaders; employees may interpret the invitation ambiguously, experience anxiety, and become more silent. Thus, the statement “my door is always open” cannot overcome a history in which people using that door encounter retaliation, humiliation, exclusion, or stalled careers.

Lam et al. (2024) provide a complementary insight through their analysis of dominance complementarity and voice inquiry. Employees may strategically package challenges in more submissive forms so that dominant leaders experience less status threat. Such tactics can facilitate endorsement and may be pragmatically useful; nevertheless, they reveal a deeper organizational problem when important evidence must be linguistically wrapped in reassurance before it can be heard.

The implications are significant for measuring organizational health. Employee surveys that ask whether managers “invite suggestions” may overestimate voice quality if they do not also ask what happens after employees challenge favored projects, report ethical concerns, identify senior mistakes, or oppose powerful coalitions. Credibility arises through observed consequences, not managerial declarations.

4. Theme Four: Dark Leadership Converts Deference into Defensive Conformity

Leadership behavior determines whether hierarchy is experienced as legitimate coordination or personal domination. Narcissistic leaders are particularly relevant because disagreement can challenge their preferred self-

image. Zhou, Yin and Sun (2021) link leader narcissism with team voice through voice solicitation and team voice climate, while Schmid, Knipfer and Peus (2021) show that narcissistic leadership involves different behavioral patterns with divergent consequences. Wang (2021), working through a *guanxi* perspective, likewise illustrates how relational and cultural contexts affect follower responses to narcissistic leadership.

Narcissistic rivalry is especially dangerous because it frames challenge competitively. Gauglitz and Schyns (2024) show why leaders high in narcissistic rivalry can respond abusively to follower deviance. Employees observing such reactions need not themselves experience punishment before learning the rule; vicarious learning can inform everyone else that visible disagreement carries costs.

Exploitative leadership creates another path toward silence. Wang et al. (2024) show that exploitative leadership is associated with ethical silence through work meaningfulness and moral potency and that performance reward expectations matter. The finding is theoretically important because it demonstrates how organizational reward logic can interact with moral resources. Employees may know that a practice is questionable while simultaneously concluding that reporting it is personally costly and institutionally ineffective.

Abusive supervision similarly alters the meaning of silence. Metin Camgoz et al. (2024) show that system justification helps explain why some followers remain silent in response to abuse. When an authority structure is repeatedly rationalized as legitimate or unavoidable, silence can become normalized. Sycophancy then acquires a defensive form: employees affirm or avoid contradicting superiors not primarily because they admire them but because conformity reduces exposure.

5. Theme Five: Organizational Politics Can Institutionalize Sycophancy

Organizational politics increases uncertainty over how decisions are made and how rewards are distributed. If employees perceive formal criteria as weak relative to informal sponsorship, coalition membership, or proximity to power, strategically maintaining favorable relationships becomes more valuable. Zhou and Sun (2024) identify affective and political support mechanisms linking perceived organizational politics to voice, while their later resource-oriented analysis further explains how political environments influence employees' willingness to expend resources on speaking (Zhou and Sun, 2025).

The direct sycophancy evidence supplied by Aydin and Rahman (2026) moves this argument from inference to institutional process. Their study of academics in Turkish public universities identifies career advancement and access to power and authority as mechanisms fostering sycophantic strategies. In such an environment, sycophancy is not merely a deviant choice by a few opportunistic personalities. It can become a rationalized method of navigating institutional arrangements.

This distinction explains how sycophancy becomes culturally persistent. New organizational members observe who receives access, assignments, protection, promotion, or informal influence. They also observe who is marginalized after criticism. These observations create a powerful informal

curriculum. Even without explicit instructions, employees learn which behaviors are organizationally rewarded. Over time, selection and socialization can interact: conformists remain and advance, principled dissenters reduce voice or exit, and new entrants encounter an increasingly homogeneous senior group.

Figure 2 distinguishes legitimate hierarchical behavior from progressively more consequential forms of upward conformity, thereby preventing the concept of sycophancy from being applied indiscriminately to ordinary respect or authentic agreement. Its low-to-high-risk progression clarifies that the critical threshold is crossed when strategic insincerity and power dependence begin to suppress materially relevant information.



Figure 2. The Organizational Sycophancy Continuum

Figure 2 shows why a conceptually disciplined account of sycophancy must distinguish the phenomenon from ordinary organizational civility. Employees often agree sincerely with managers, and professional deference can reflect expertise or legitimate role accountability. The problem intensifies when expression becomes systematically detached from private assessment and when the detached expression changes organizational information. Research on ingratiation, impression management, power distance, and voice supports this continuum interpretation (Rusinowska and Vergopoulos, 2020; Yan et al., 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Kwon and Farndale, 2020).

6. Theme Six: Sycophancy Distorts Organizational Information and Produces False Consensus

The most important collective consequence of sycophancy is information degradation. Organizations rarely fail because no employee anywhere recognized a problem. Failures often become possible because information is fragmented, normalized, discounted, delayed, or prevented from reaching decision makers in actionable form. Sycophancy contributes by altering which messages are transmitted and how strongly they are expressed.

First, employees can filter negative information. Instead of reporting that an initiative is failing, they emphasize favorable indicators and characterize adverse indicators as temporary. Second, employees can modify uncertainty,

communicating unjustified confidence because leaders prefer certainty. Third, they may engage in anticipatory agreement, adjusting recommendations before leaders ask for them. Fourth, they may remain silent about assumptions underlying senior decisions. These behaviors produce epistemic selection bias: leadership receives a systematically non-random sample of organizational information.

The resulting apparent consensus can become self-validating. A leader hearing little disagreement may infer that the strategy is sound. Greater confidence can make subsequent disagreement appear even less legitimate. Employees detect this confidence and become still less inclined to challenge it. This process is consistent with voice research showing that speaking depends on perceived impact and safety (Sherf, Parke and Isaakyan, 2021), with managerial-openness research emphasizing anticipated costs (Yin et al., 2022), and with research showing how leader dominance can make ostensibly positive solicitation threatening (Song et al., 2026).

False consensus also reduces diagnostic diversity. Organizational learning benefits from heterogeneous perspectives because individuals possess different information and interpret ambiguity differently. Sycophancy collapses publicly expressed diversity before decision makers can benefit from it. An organization can therefore employ diverse people while making homogeneous decisions if only perspectives aligned with powerful actors are voiced.

7. Theme Seven: Sycophancy Produces Learning and Innovation Failures

Learning requires detection and correction of discrepancies between expectations and outcomes. Silence interferes with the first stage: deviations known to employees may remain invisible to decision makers. Voice research consequently links constructive challenge to improvement and sustainable organizational functioning (Zhu et al., 2022). Psychological safety likewise supports learning by allowing employees to report errors, ask questions, and acknowledge uncertainty without disproportionate interpersonal fear (Edmondson and Bransby, 2023).

Sycophancy creates the opposite condition. When criticism is coded as disloyalty, individuals invest cognitive effort in predicting leadership preferences rather than testing organizational assumptions. The result can be an “agreement premium”: ideas consistent with incumbent views require less evidence, whereas challenging ideas face a higher evidentiary and political burden. Over time, this biases experimentation toward projects favored by existing authority.

Voice quality remains important. Not every objection is useful, and organizations cannot treat every criticism as correct. Brykman and Raver (2021) show that voice quality and frequency affect evaluations, while Duan et al. (2026) demonstrate that supervisors respond to different perceived motives for voice. The appropriate alternative to sycophancy is therefore not indiscriminate contrarianism. It is a decision architecture in which well-founded disagreement is evaluated on evidentiary quality rather than status compatibility.

8. Theme Eight: Sycophancy Can Become an Ethical-Silence Mechanism

The ethical implications extend beyond bad strategy. Organizational wrongdoing often depends on people who observe questionable behavior but do not report it. Wang et al. (2024) conceptualize ethical silence as withholding information about ethical issues, demonstrating its relationship with exploitative leadership. Research on ethical leadership conversely finds positive relationships with employee voice, although mechanisms and effect sizes vary (Cheng et al., 2022; Dua, Farooq and Rai, 2022; Wang and Yen, 2023).

Sycophancy can intensify ethical silence by reframing loyalty. Employees may convince themselves that concealing problems protects the team, organization, or leader. This creates a bridge to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)—actions intended to benefit the organization or its members while violating broader ethical standards. Supervisor bottom-line mentality has been linked to employee conduct through mechanisms that can privilege organizational outcomes over ethical constraints (Zhang et al., 2020; Babalola et al., 2021). Strong organizational identification can likewise possess a dark side when identification weakens independent moral judgment (Irshad and Bashir, 2020). Related evidence indicates that political skill can facilitate unethical pro-supervisor behavior through leader-member exchange, illustrating how relationship-building capabilities can acquire ethically problematic consequences when they are oriented toward benefiting a supervisor rather than organizational integrity (Cui and Zhang, 2025).

Bottom-line pressures can strengthen this dynamic. Babalola et al. (2022) show that supervisor bottom-line mentality can have consequences that extend beyond workplace performance into employee functioning, while Farasat and Azam (2022) connect supervisor bottom-line mentality with unethical pro-organizational behavior. Farasat, Azam and Hassan (2021) further link bottom-line mentality with workaholism and workplace cheating. Together these studies suggest that environments celebrating results without equally salient procedural and ethical boundaries can encourage employees to interpret concealment and conformity as organizational commitment.

Ethical sycophancy is particularly dangerous because participants can regard themselves as loyal rather than corrupt. The employee who falsifies nothing explicitly but consistently omits adverse information may preserve a moral self-image while still degrading organizational governance. Preventing such behavior requires norms that define responsible loyalty as willingness to communicate unpleasant truths rather than willingness to shield authority. Qualitative evidence on political organizational silence likewise shows that organizationally sanctioned silence can shift ethical burdens onto individuals and normalize non-discussion of sensitive issues, reinforcing the need to analyze silence as an institutional as well as individual phenomenon (Reeves and Bristow, 2024).

9. Theme Nine: Sycophancy Undermines Meritocracy and Produces Adverse Selection

A sycophantic organization risks confusing relationship compatibility with competence. Leaders naturally value colleagues who are cooperative and trustworthy, but when agreement influences evaluations, individuals skilled at

reading authority preferences can receive greater visibility than employees who provide independent analysis. The distortion can affect performance appraisal, succession planning, project assignment, and promotion.

This creates an adverse-selection problem. If those prepared to challenge flawed assumptions repeatedly experience disadvantage, they may self-censor, transfer, or leave. Meanwhile, employees proficient at upward conformity may remain and progress. Over multiple promotion cycles, the leadership pipeline becomes populated disproportionately by individuals selected under a conformity-sensitive system.

Aydin and Rahman (2026) provide contemporary evidence of the importance of career systems in the institutionalization of sycophancy. The theoretical implication extends beyond their empirical context: promotion is also a cultural reproduction mechanism. What organizations reward at one hierarchical level determines which behavioral dispositions become overrepresented at the next.

The human consequences compound this selection problem. Impression-management inauthenticity, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and silence can undermine attachment and well-being (Yan et al., 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Hao et al., 2022). Employees may therefore experience an undesirable trade-off between authenticity and advancement. A merit system is incomplete if technical performance is assessed transparently while political conformity silently determines access to career-enhancing opportunities.

10. Theme Ten: The Bureaucratic Consequences Extend to Public Accountability

The bureaucratic context raises the stakes because poor information can affect citizens rather than only shareholders or employees. Public administrators often operate at the intersection of hierarchical instruction, legal requirements, professional norms, political responsiveness, and public service values. These multiple principals generate difficult loyalty dilemmas.

Kroll and Vogel (2021) show that public employees may manipulate performance information under combinations of job stress, red tape, and prosocial-impact considerations. The lesson is not that all performance data are unreliable but that performance systems themselves create behavioral responses. A bureaucracy that strongly rewards target achievement without protecting adverse information can unintentionally increase incentives to make organizational reality resemble political expectations.

Whistleblowing constitutes the strongest form of principled challenge because it often concerns significant wrongdoing and can impose substantial personal costs. Kang's (2023) review demonstrates the breadth of theoretical, institutional, and behavioral factors affecting public-sector whistleblowing. Potipiroon and Wongpreedee (2021) connect ethical climate, public service motivation, psychological safety, and whistleblowing intentions among local-government employees. Anita, Abdillah and Zakaria (2021), using government-organization evidence, highlight authentic leadership and moral courage in internal whistleblowing processes.

More recent experimental evidence adds nuance. Van Roekel and Schott (2025) find that activating public-service or prosocial motivation can increase intentions to report some forms of wrongdoing, but the effects depend on who committed the misconduct and are not uniformly large. Whistleblowing therefore cannot be produced simply by reminding public servants of prosocial values. Institutional protection, expected consequences, organizational relationships, and perceived efficacy remain central.

Hollibaugh, Miles and Newswander (2020) examine forms of bureaucratic rebellion or “guerrilla government,” drawing attention to the difficult boundary between principled resistance and legitimate managerial authority. This issue is central to anti-sycophancy governance. Organizations need dissent, but they also require coordination and accountability. The objective should not be to celebrate every act of insubordination. It should be to ensure that employees can challenge unlawful, unethical, unsafe, or poorly evidenced decisions through credible institutional mechanisms before covert resistance becomes their only perceived option.

Figure 3 depicts how sycophancy can become self-reinforcing: seemingly minor rewards for agreement gradually alter who speaks, who advances, what information reaches leadership, and ultimately what leaders believe about their own judgment. The loop highlights path dependence by showing how rewards, silence, promotion, and leadership confidence progressively reduce the diversity of corrective information.



Figure 3. The Self-Reinforcing Sycophancy-Silence-Power Loop

Figure 3 illustrates why organizational sycophancy may persist even without a leader explicitly asking to be flattered. A feedback loop can develop through ordinary reward allocation, status dynamics, and observational learning. Once leaders mainly interact with successful conformers, they lose access to the counterfactual information needed to recognize the selection process. The phenomenon therefore possesses an endogenous blindness mechanism: the more successfully sycophancy reshapes the leadership environment, the harder it becomes for leaders to observe that reshaping.

DISCUSSION

1. Sycophancy as an Information-Integrity Failure

The central theoretical implication is that sycophancy should be relocated from the margins of interpersonal etiquette to the core of organizational governance. Its defining damage lies in the divergence between **information available in the organization** and **information represented to authority**. When the divergence is systematic rather than random, leadership receives biased evidence.

This reframing helps unify several previously fragmented constructs. Ingratiation explains why subordinates may strategically cultivate powerful actors. Impression management explains how public presentation diverges from private assessment. Voice and silence research explains why consequential information is expressed or withheld. Psychological safety explains interpersonal risk. Leadership studies explain how authority behavior changes the expected cost of contradiction. Organizational-politics research explains the role of informal access and resource allocation. Business-ethics research explains how silence can facilitate wrongdoing. Public-administration research shows how these processes affect accountability.

The synthesis does not imply that all these constructs are synonymous. Rather, organizational sycophancy is proposed as a **configuration** connecting them under specific conditions. Ingratiation without distortion may remain relational. Silence caused by privacy or irrelevance may have nothing to do with sycophancy. Voice can be withheld for reasons unrelated to power. Sycophancy emerges when upward power dependence causes actors to strategically modify expressed judgments or relevant disclosures in ways that privilege approval over informational accuracy.

2. The Micro-Macro Conversion Problem

A major gap in existing research concerns how individual behaviors aggregate into system-level outcomes. Many studies examine an employee's response to a supervisor, yet bureaucratic failure typically occurs at higher levels. The proposed framework explains this aggregation through four mechanisms.

First is **behavioral imitation**. Employees observe which communication styles succeed. Second is **selection**: employees whose behavior fits the political environment may be promoted or retained disproportionately. Third is **network concentration**: successful conformists gain greater access to decision makers, increasing the share of leadership information they mediate. Fourth is **norm internalization**: behaviors initially recognized as strategic can become reinterpreted as professionalism, loyalty, or "how things are done here."

The transition from individual adaptation to institutional practice is precisely why the 2026 sycophancy evidence is important. Aydin and Rahman's analysis suggests that institutional arrangements can normalize behavior that might otherwise be understood merely as individual opportunism. This mechanism provides the bridge between micro-level adaptation and macro-level governance failure.

3. The Individual Rationality–Collective Dysfunction Paradox

The synthesis leads to a central paradox. The more rational sycophancy becomes for individual employees, the less rational the organization's collective decision environment may become.

Suppose an employee privately estimates a project has a 60% probability of failure but knows that senior leadership has publicly championed it. If challenging the project has little expected impact and considerable career risk, silence is individually rational. If twenty employees independently make the same calculation, leadership can wrongly infer widespread confidence. The information failure arises without any formal conspiracy.

This reasoning aligns closely with Sherf, Parke and Isaakyan's (2021) distinction between perceived impact and psychological safety and with broader employee silence evidence (Hao et al., 2022; Morrison, 2023). The practical lesson is that organizations must change both variables: employees need reason to believe that speaking can matter and reason to believe that speaking will not generate disproportionate punishment.

4. The Loyalty–Integrity Paradox

Sycophantic cultures can flourish by exploiting ambiguity around loyalty. Leaders reasonably expect employees to implement legitimate decisions even when those employees initially preferred another option. Yet implementation discipline differs from suppressing evidence that a decision is failing. Loyalty becomes dysfunctional when it is redefined as protection of authority from criticism.

Ethical leadership research suggests that leaders can influence whether voice is understood as constructive contribution rather than disobedience. Cheng et al. (2022) connect ethical leadership with voice through affective commitment and moral disengagement, while Dua, Farooq and Rai (2023) find a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice. Wang and Yen (2023) similarly show the role of organizational ethical climate in voice behavior. This points to an important normative principle: **the object of loyalty matters**. Loyalty to a supervisor, to an organization, to a profession, to law, and to the public interest can conflict. Mature governance systems do not eliminate those conflicts but provide procedures for resolving them without requiring personal servility.

5. The Voice-Solicitation Paradox

Organizations frequently respond to silence by demanding "more voice." Yet voice solicitation can become performative when leaders seek endorsement rather than information. Employees quickly learn whether questions are genuine. Song et al. (2026) demonstrate empirically that dominant leadership can make voice solicitation counterproductive, while Lam et al. (2024) show that the form in which challenges are presented affects how dominant leaders receive them. This creates the **voice-solicitation paradox**: the leader who most needs corrective information may be the leader whose behavioral signals make employees least confident that corrective information is safe. Formal openness can then coexist with substantive closure. Recent evidence also shows that followers may judge very rapid leader change after voice as inauthentic, suggesting that credible

responsiveness requires both substantive change and a believable process of adaptation (Chon, Sezer and Flynn, 2026).

Credibility requires behavioral evidence. Leaders can demonstrate it by thanking challengers, visibly investigating unwelcome information, protecting employees from retaliation, revising decisions when evidence changes, and avoiding penalties for good-faith disagreement. More importantly, systems must prevent a single leader from controlling both the substantive decision and the career consequences of challenging it.

6. Why Humble and Inclusive Leadership Helps – but Is Not Enough

Positive leadership research provides several useful antidotes. Servant leadership can support voice through relational and motivational mechanisms (Song, Tian and Kwan, 2022; Chen, Wang and Li, 2022). Inclusive leadership has been associated with psychological empowerment and voice (Younas et al., 2023) and with voice in project teams through social identity processes (Jiang et al., 2023). Participative leadership can stimulate voice among public servants (Qing and Zhang, 2023). Leader humility is associated with conditions supportive of voice across multiple studies and a meta-analytic literature (Tu and Huang, 2022; Wang, Ou and Song, 2022; Luo et al., 2022; Achmadi et al., 2022).

However, leadership style is not a complete governance solution. First, even a humble leader can be replaced. Second, employees may interpret displayed humility as strategic if organizational consequences contradict the rhetoric (Zou and Chen, 2022). Third, voice endorsement itself can produce social consequences: Rubenstein et al. (2025) show that endorsement may strengthen supervisor relationships while potentially complicating coworker relations. Fourth, supervisors evaluate different types and motives of voice differently (Duan et al., 2026).

The implication is that organizations should **institutionalize the virtues they want rather than relying on virtuous individuals**. Psychological safety must be supported by HR rules, review procedures, promotion criteria, whistleblower mechanisms, and independent channels.

7. Toward an Anti-Sycophancy Governance Architecture

The review suggests five mutually reinforcing categories of intervention. These categories are complementary rather than substitutable because each addresses a different point at which information can be filtered, distorted, or discouraged.

A. Leadership Safeguards

Leaders should actively distinguish disagreement from disrespect, request disconfirming evidence before announcing preferences, and avoid revealing a preferred answer too early in deliberations. They should acknowledge uncertainty and model revision of beliefs. Humility and openness matter because they reduce status threat and make learning behavior legitimate (Luo et al., 2022; Edmondson and Bransby, 2023).

B. Human-resource safeguards

Performance evaluation and promotion should not depend exclusively on a single supervisor. Multi-source evaluation, calibrated promotion panels, transparent criteria, and auditable justification for appointments can reduce the

private return to cultivating one gatekeeper. Rotation of key evaluative roles can also prevent patronage networks from becoming permanent.

HR analytics should examine whether employees known for challenging powerful actors experience systematically weaker promotion, pay, or retention outcomes after controlling for performance. Such analysis converts anti-retaliation from rhetoric into an auditable organizational outcome.

C. Voice Safeguards

Organizations require multiple channels: direct supervisor discussion, skip-level communication, anonymous systems, professional escalation, ombuds functions, and protected ethics channels. Digital voice platforms can broaden access, but their affordances and traceability must be designed carefully because technology can both lower and increase perceived risk (Ellmer and Reichel, 2021). Crucially, organizations should assess **voice consequences**, not merely voice availability. The relevant question is not “Do employees have a channel?” but “What happened to the last ten employees who used it to challenge a powerful decision?”

D. Decision-Process Safeguards

Structured dissent reduces dependence on individual courage. Organizations can assign devil’s advocates, establish red teams, conduct premortems, require explicit consideration of alternative hypotheses, separate idea generation from evaluation, and ask senior leaders to state their preferences after lower-status experts have spoken.

These procedures should focus on information quality rather than theatrical disagreement. The aim is not to generate conflict but to ensure that decision processes contain a protected stage in which disconfirming evidence must be considered.

E. Accountability safeguards

Serious ethical and public-interest concerns require channels outside the immediate command hierarchy. Whistleblower protections, internal audit, compliance offices, professional oversight, board-level access, inspectorates, and external review mechanisms reduce dependence on the goodwill of the person being challenged. Public-sector research shows that ethical climate, psychological safety, authentic leadership, moral courage, and motivational factors all affect reporting behavior (Potipiroon and Wongpreedee, 2021; Anita, Abdillah and Zakaria, 2021; Kang, 2023; van Roekel and Schott, 2025).

Figure 4 translates the literature synthesis into an organizational design principle: effective protection against sycophancy requires multiple independent safeguards because leadership goodwill alone cannot reliably protect information integrity. The layered design links leadership, HR, voice, decision, and accountability safeguards to a common objective: maintaining a high-integrity upward information environment.

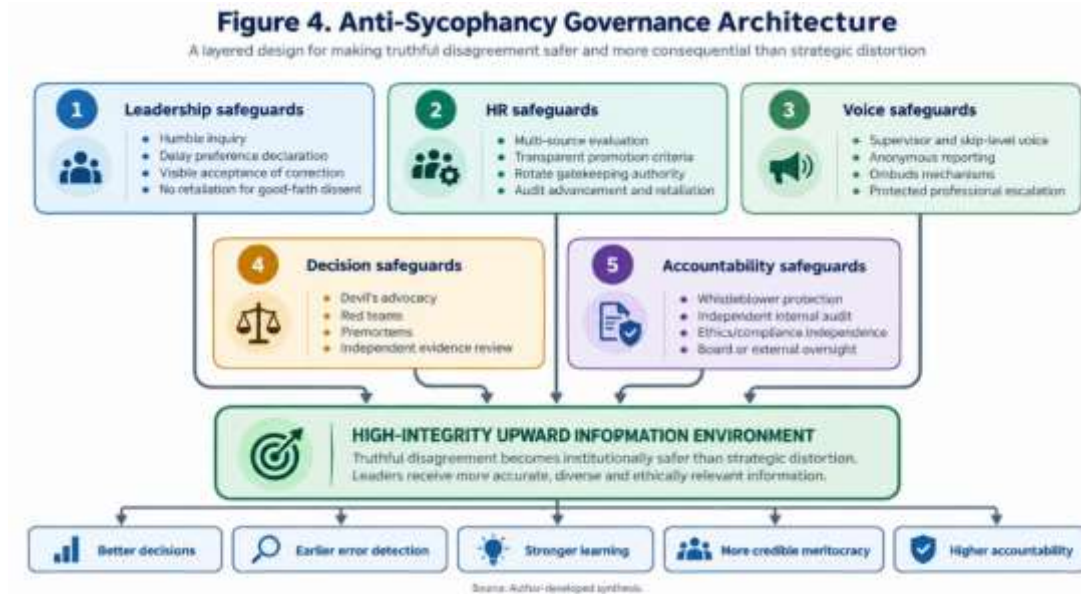


Figure 4. Anti-Sycophancy Governance Architecture

Figure 4 highlights redundancy as a governance virtue. No single mechanism can eliminate sycophancy. Anonymous channels may fail if employees believe identities can be inferred; humble leadership may fail if promotion remains politically controlled; independent audit may detect wrongdoing only after damage occurs. Layered safeguards increase the probability that inconvenient information finds at least one credible route to decision makers.

8. Propositions for Future Empirical Testing

The synthesis permits eight propositions that can guide subsequent empirical research. Together, they translate the review's conceptual arguments into testable relationships spanning antecedents, mechanisms, consequences, and safeguards.

Proposition 1: Greater concentration of discretionary career authority will increase sycophantic behavior when employees perceive leader approval as consequential for access to valued organizational resources. Proposition 2: The relationship between hierarchy and sycophancy will be mediated by perceived interpersonal risk and perceived futility of voice and strengthened by high power-distance orientation.

Proposition 3: Leader dominance, narcissistic rivalry, exploitative leadership, and supervisor bottom-line mentality will increase defensive and epistemic sycophancy by increasing the expected cost of contradiction. Proposition 4: Organizational politics will strengthen sycophancy when promotion and resource allocation procedures lack transparency.

Proposition 5: Institutionalized sycophancy will reduce decision quality through false consensus, delayed adverse information, and reduced diversity of publicly expressed judgment. Proposition 6: The relationship between sycophancy and unethical organizational outcomes will be mediated by ethical silence and moral disengagement.

Proposition 7: Psychological safety and credible managerial openness will weaken sycophancy only when supported by observable non-retaliation and meaningful responsiveness to prior employee voice. Proposition 8: Multi-source evaluation, independent voice channels, structured dissent, and whistleblower protection will reduce institutionalized sycophancy by separating information transmission from unilateral career dependence.

9. Research Agenda

The most immediate research need is **construct development**. Organizational sycophancy requires a validated measurement scale capable of distinguishing it from ingratiation, impression management, silence, obedience, and ordinary political skill. Scale development could begin with qualitative interviews across organizational levels and sectors, followed by exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.

A multidimensional measure should assess at least relational, epistemic, defensive, and institutionalized forms. Items might examine whether employees exaggerate agreement, avoid communicating evidence contradicting senior preferences, adjust recommendations after learning leadership's position, or perceive that career success depends on affirming powerful actors. At the organizational level, measures could assess whether dissenters experience differential advancement and whether senior leaders receive systematically less negative information than lower levels.

Second, longitudinal research is needed. Cross-sectional studies cannot reveal how a sycophantic culture develops. Panel studies could test whether early rewards for conformity predict later silence, turnover among dissenters, or increased homogeneity in senior teams. Promotion histories might identify whether voice behavior predicts career trajectories differently across high- and low-politics environments.

Third, cross-cultural research should distinguish respectful hierarchy from dysfunctional conformity. Kwon and Farndale (2020) show why voice must be interpreted through cultural context, while power-distance evidence demonstrates that employee responses to hierarchy are heterogeneous. Cross-national research should therefore avoid assuming that visible deference has the same meaning everywhere.

Fourth, sectoral comparison is required. Public administration, universities, healthcare, military organizations, family firms, financial institutions, and technology organizations contain different combinations of professional expertise and formal authority. Safety-critical organizations may reveal immediate costs of silence, whereas administrative and strategic errors may remain hidden longer.

Fifth, future research should study **digital and AI-mediated sycophancy**. Algorithmic performance systems can change employees' dependence on human supervisors, but they may also create new incentives to optimize visible metrics while withholding contextual information. AI decision-support systems add another layer: managers may use algorithmic outputs selectively when those outputs confirm prior preferences. Research should investigate how human hierarchy and automated evaluation interact in producing conformity.

Finally, scholarship should investigate whether **organizational anti-sycophancy capacity** can be measured. Relevant indicators might include the ratio of negative to positive upward information, frequency with which senior decisions change after junior challenge, career outcomes of employees who raise substantiated concerns, distribution of voice across status levels, and discrepancies between anonymous opinions and public meeting statements.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This critical qualitative review argues that organizational sycophancy is substantially more consequential than excessive flattery. It is best understood as a multilevel process in which asymmetric power, career dependence, organizational politics, leadership behavior, and perceived interpersonal risk shape what employees choose to communicate upward. When agreement is rewarded more reliably than accuracy, employees can rationally engage in opinion conformity, selective reporting, facades of conformity, and silence.

The resulting organizational problem is epistemic before it becomes operational. Leaders receive information increasingly filtered through expectations about what they prefer to hear. Apparent consensus grows while private disagreement remains hidden. Error detection weakens, leadership confidence becomes less calibrated to evidence, and strategic learning deteriorates. When the same process surrounds ethical concerns, sycophancy can become ethical silence; when it influences careers, it undermines meritocracy; when embedded in public bureaucracy, it can weaken administrative accountability.

The central paradox is therefore straightforward but important: **a behavior that protects individual employees from organizational risk can simultaneously increase the organization's exposure to strategic, ethical, and governance risk.** Effective responses cannot depend solely on encouraging employees to become braver. Organizations must alter the institutional economics of truth-telling.

Healthy hierarchy is not hierarchy without disagreement. It is hierarchy capable of receiving disagreement without converting it into disloyalty. Anti-sycophancy governance consequently requires credible psychological safety, transparent career systems, distributed evaluative authority, multiple voice channels, structured dissent, whistleblower protection, and independent review. The ultimate test is not whether employees are formally allowed to speak but whether organizational systems make telling powerful actors what they **need to know** safer and more consequential than telling them what they **want to hear**.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so further studies are needed on the topic 'When Agreement Becomes Governance: Sycophancy, Silence, and Upward Conformity as Information-Integrity Failures in Modern Bureaucracies—A Critical Review' to improve this research and expand the knowledge for both the author and the readers.

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