

TRANSPARENCY

How a Culture of Silence Eats Away at Your Company

by David Maxfield

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Most people think they will speak up when something negative happens at work, but few actually do. Take these examples from a recent survey we did with managers and employees:

“We had an assistant who created a very adversarial atmosphere. We walked on eggshells around her. People would rather do her work themselves than engage with her. Her boss wouldn’t even cross her. This went on for years until she retired.”

“Instead of confronting a problem in a project plan, it was whispered about. Several months of work were put into implementing the plan even though all those involved knew it contained fatal flaws. The organization fell behind on its output goals and didn’t have the data it needed to forecast projected outcomes.”

“When our president and CEO suddenly passed away, the top-level execs (including myself) dealt with a gaping sense of loss and grief. Although we felt lost without our CEO, we knew what we had to do in order to navigate through the situation. However, we never addressed the company other than to say: ‘It’s business as usual.’ Because we didn’t reach out to ease employees’ worries and fears we created an atmosphere of anxiety (i.e., ‘Will the company survive?’ ‘Is my job secure?’, ‘What’s going on?’ etc.) which ultimately led to nearly 25% of our staff leaving within six months of the CEO’s passing.”

These aren’t trivial examples. In each case, they had real consequences and costs for the organizations.

At VitalSmarts, we’ve researched the propensity for people to stay silent before. In a previous study, we asked people what they would do if someone cut in front of them in line. Most people said they’d promptly and skillfully tell the person to head to the back of the line. But when we put their predictions to the test, we found something else. We went into a busy mall with confederates and a hidden camera to see what people really do when faced with a line-cutter. Here’s what we found: The line-cutting victims stand around looking frustrated yet never say a word. A few make dirty faces behind our confederates’ backs or complain to their neighbor. In our study, only one in 25 spoke up.

Speaking up about line cutting may seem frivolous – but in many other cases, giving voice to concerns saves lives. Consider our study in healthcare where we found that 90% of nurses don’t speak up to a physician even when they know a patient’s safety is at risk. We’ve also studied workplace safety. We found that 93% of people say their organization is at risk of an accident waiting to happen because people are either unwilling or unable to speak up.

What are the costs and consequences of this kind of silence? We surveyed 1,025 managers and employees and asked them about a time when they had a concern at work, but failed to voice it. We

then asked them to tell us the story of what happened and to detail the impact on the organization. Of the hundreds of stories we gathered, five categories of conversations emerged as the most common and costly topics that people remain silent around. They include:

- **Prickly peers.** Failure to confront rude, abrasive, defensive, and disrespectful colleagues. Examples included failing to confront harsh language, backbiting, bullying, harassment, withholding information, and resistance to feedback and input.
- **Strategic missteps.** Failure to speak up when proposals and procedures are riddled with inaccuracies or faulty thinking. The problem is exacerbated when leadership makes decisions without first consulting experts or is unresponsive to employee concerns.
- **Lazy and incompetent colleagues.** Failure to talk to peers and direct reports about poor work habits, incompetence and lack of engagement.
- **Abusive bosses.** Failure to openly discuss damage done when people in power resort to control and reliance on position to push their agenda.
- **Management chaos.** Failure to get clarification when people feel uncertain around roles, responsibilities, specs, and timelines. A perceived lack of safety to share concerns without retribution makes asking for clarification feel risky.

Instead of speaking up in these situations, our subjects admitted to engaging in one or more resource-sapping behaviors including: complaining to others (78%), doing extra or unnecessary work (66%), ruminating about the problem (53%), or getting angry (50%).

These behaviors aren't just unhelpful; they're costly. We found the average person wasted 7 days complaining, doing unnecessary work, ruminating about the problem, or getting angry – instead of speaking up. A shocking 40% of our respondents admitted to wasting two weeks or more.

The hit to the bottom line is even more remarkable. The average person estimated the cost of silence at \$7,500, and 20% of our sample estimated the cost of avoiding a difficult conversation to be more than \$50,000. Our subjects described ways that silence damages employee engagement, relationships, deadlines, budgets, and culture. Given that the fact that *every one* of our subjects identified at least one costly example, we concluded that it's likely that every employee in your organization is adding to the cumulative organizational cost of silence eating away at your bottom line.

Luckily, cultures of silence can be changed – but only if leaders become teachers and models of candor. People won't speak up unless they feel safe and competent to do so. When leaders engage in dialogue, people acquire both the skills to present their concerns and the confidence to share their views. They also speak up knowing their thoughts, opinions, and views are welcomed and valued.

Here are four key tactics for transforming a culture of silence into a culture of dialogue. These strategies are the results of thousands of hours of observation of those who speak up about even very risky topics but do so in a way that doesn't provoke defensiveness in others.

- **Reverse your thinking.** Most of us decide whether or not to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. Those who are best at having crucial conversations don't think first about the risks of speaking up. They think first about the risks of *not* speaking up. This simple reversal of risk assessment makes them far more likely to speak up.
- **Change your emotions.** The reason these conversations often go poorly is because we are irritated, angry, or disgusted. Our counterparts react to these emotions they sense more than the words we speak. So, before opening your mouth, open your mind. Try to see others as reasonable, rational, and decent human beings—a practice that softens strong emotions and ensures you come across more agreeably.
- **Make others feel safe.** People become defensive when they feel unsafe. Start a high-stakes conversation by assuring the other person of your positive intentions and your respect for them. When others feel respected and trust your motives, they feel safe, let their guard down, and begin to listen - even if the topic is unpleasant.
- **Invite dialogue.** After you create an environment of safety, express your concerns, and then invite dialogue. Encourage the other person to disagree with you. Those who are best at crucial conversations don't just come to make their point; they come to learn.

When leaders model these behaviors, they lay the foundation for a culture of dialogue where employees can speak up, share concerns, confront colleagues, advocate for better solutions, and achieve alignment and agreement where it may be lacking. Cultures of dialogue are not only full of happier, more engaged employees – they also reap the kind of bottom-line results that can mean the difference between success and failure.



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