

**RESOURCE PACK**

**ACTION PLANS FOR HEALTHIER  
DEPARTMENTAL CLIMATES**

**MAY 2019**



## INCIVILITY AND BULLYING - QUICK TIPS

*Incivility and bullying are damaging to academic unit culture, collegiality, and productivity. If left unchecked, these behaviors can become the norm. Creating a culture of civility that minimizes these behaviors is the leaders' job. Such a culture doesn't occur by accident; positive professional interactions must be modeled, encouraged and rewarded. If cultivated and maintained, a positive culture supports creativity, better employee health, greater levels of cooperation, and higher retention of top performers.*

### *Incivility and Bullying in Academic Units*

- We begin with a brief description of incivility and bullying behaviors effectively summarized by Bob Sutton in his "dirty dozen":
  1. Insults
  2. Violation of personal space
  3. Unsolicited touching
  4. Threats
  5. Sarcasm
  6. Flames
  7. Humiliation
  8. Shaming
  9. Interruption
  10. Backbiting
  11. Glaring
  12. Snubbing
- Colleagues do not always get along. Complete consensus is not required; for the academic mission to be fulfilled, disagreements and antipathy must be professionally bounded. It is possible for an otherwise positive unit culture to be undermined or destroyed through negative, uncivil, or anti-social behaviors if these are not confined and limited.
- In a 2016 US survey, 64 percent of academic respondents said they have been the target of faculty incivility; 77 percent said they have witnessed someone else being targeted (Gluckman, 2017). Yet it is rarely reported—only an estimated 1-6% of employees who experience incivility ever file a complaint (Cortina & Magley, 2009).
- Examples of damaging incivility include:
  - Unrealistic expectations for responses and requests
  - Continued complaining
  - Making belittling or denigrating comments
  - Engaging in disrespectful meeting conduct: eye-rolling, negative side comments, etc.
  - Faculty dismissing or disrespecting staff, viewing them as lower class group members
  - Public shaming or blaming
  - Taking credit for work done by someone else
  - Ignoring the contributions of colleagues
  - Forming silent coalitions that do not surface disagreements and express them in a passive-aggressive manner
- Examples of bullying include:
  - Expressing rude or aggressive judgment of others
  - Pushing relentlessly for one's own views
  - Being intolerant of other perspectives or positions
- Another type of bullying, victim bullying, superficially appears passive and considerate: the perpetrator expresses excessive concern about his or her fear and victimization, and the effect is to put others on the defensive and advance the priorities of the "victim" in a way that shields him or her from questioning.

### *When Incivility and Bullying go Unchecked, It is Costly*

- Unchecked incivility escalates and spreads because it sets the norm for "how we do it here"—it provides evidence that incivility is what works if one wishes to succeed in the immediate environment.





- Endemic uncivil conduct diminishes cohesion, commitment, and communication. It can aggravate disagreements into the development of factions. It makes it harder to recruit and retain top performers, and spreads hostility and division.
- Rude, uncivil, and unprofessional behavior can be costly for organizations through reduced performance, productivity, and creativity, as well as increased distraction and negative emotions (Cortina & Magley, 2009).
- The effects of incivility on individuals accumulate and can raise stress levels, cause health problems, increase absenteeism, and lower achievement (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). It can lead even to acts of violence.
- The effects of incivility generally, and bullying specifically, are to distort communication and make it harder for certain people to express some or any views without fear. Even more seriously, whole views or positions can simply get excluded even from consideration. Incivility thus works against one of the main goals of an academic community: idea generation. Creating and maintaining a respectful research, teaching, and learning environment enhances collegial relationships and creates psychological safety, thus supporting increased creativity and productivity.

## How it Spreads: The Contagion Effect

- Incivility and bullying flourish where:
  - the risks of exposure are low; and
  - the likelihood of being held accountable is low.
- If faculty and staff see these behaviors and see no intervention, the behaviors are likely to spread. This contagion is dangerous.
  - *An individual's emotions, perceptions, and behaviors can be "caught" by others in the group through social contagion.*
  - *Negative emotions and behaviors are more contagious, and can be more powerful, than positive behaviors.*
  - *Uncivil behavior can, over time, become the group norm even if initially only deployed by one or a few group members.*
- Be aware of your own behavior as a leader. Incivility from your unit members can spread to you, influencing how you behave. If you model incivility as a leader, it will increase the contagion effect within the unit, hastening the spread of these behaviors. Incivility from a leader is even more powerful and deleterious than incivility from peers (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

## Establishing Community Norms: Leadership Action Plan

- A culture of civility doesn't occur by accident; positive academic and professional interactions must be modeled, encouraged and rewarded.
- Action—or lack of action—by authority figures and opinion leaders can unintentionally reward uncivil behavior, and thus encourage it.
- Good administrative hygiene matters: communicate expectations about how members of a unit should interact with each other, especially in disagreements, and reinforce those expectations.
- Leaders who model courteous, respectful professional conduct help set and enforce community norms. Members of the unit (and beyond) are watching.
- Listen and interact respectfully:
  - *Frequently and regularly check for understanding, for example by saying "Let me see if I understood correctly ...".*
  - *Ask open-ended questions that begin with a request, such as "Tell me more about ...".*
  - *Restate what was heard to ensure understanding, and demonstrate active listening.*





- Establish meeting protocols: Step in if conduct is over the line, and firmly and respectfully ask for inappropriate comments to be rephrased to be more constructive and actionable.
- Do not permit insults or belittling of others in meetings. Develop personal scripts to address these.
- Provide opportunities for quiet members to speak.
- Be vigilant: Many of your colleagues will not report incidents. Instead, it is more common (and the path of least resistance) to ignore or avoid unpleasantness. Many will seek to re-frame incidents of incivility as “no big deal” (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

## Respond to All Reports Seriously

- Prevention is better than reaction. Sometimes, though, it is too late for anything other than responding. If you are too late to prevent, make sure you respond.
- Practice how to respond effectively, including preparing personal scripts for speaking up, for asking for comments to be reframed, or for when you hear concerns about uncivil or bullying behavior (NCPRE, 2017). For example:
  - *Your remarks about [colleague] are making me uncomfortable. Let's stick to facts in our staff meetings.*
  - *I understand you do not like [colleague]. Can you explain your complaint again without using sarcasm? It will help me understand it better.*
  - *I am sorry you had these negative experiences. We want a workplace where we all feel valued. I will think over my course of action and get back to you by [timeframe].*
- Cultivate open communication. All members of a unit should be aware of the appropriate channels for assistance in dealing with uncivil or bullying behavior.
- Speak to your faculty and staff about having disputes civilly and respectfully. Encourage them to take their issues to the person closest to the problem first, and offer assistance (impartial third parties, for example) to assist in facilitating difficult conversations if necessary.
- Apply consistent consequences for the same conduct. This is essential for establishing and maintaining healthy social norms in the unit.

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# Issue Spotting

## Issue Spotting – 5 Quick Tips

### 1. Don't take it personally

People coming to you with problems and complaints may often be upset or agitated. Their distress may well have nothing to do with you as an administrator, but is simply a byproduct of their familiarity and proximity to the issue in question. To the maximum extent possible, try not to get defensive when they complain and do not jump to conclusions about their causes or solutions. Thank the person for reporting the problem – better you know about it than not, especially if it turns out to be a misunderstanding – and then set about collecting the facts.

### 2. Never act on a complaint without hearing all sides of the story

Many complaints and problems stem from people perceiving the same set of facts in different ways. Get as full a picture of any situation as possible by telling all involved that the issue has been brought to your attention and that you need to collect more information on it. Avoid accusations while gathering information, simply inform people in a low-key manner that an issue has been brought to your attention and you are attempting to collect basic information about it.

### 3. Follow up!

Just as problems can arise from a difference in perspective, a meeting with someone bringing a complaint to you can be remembered differently by different parties. If you have concerns that your advice was not clearly heard, send a short note or email about your meeting summarizing what was said and what subsequent actions were discussed. Good news can be put in writing, but bad news should be delivered in person.

### 4. Never attribute to malice that which incompetence will explain

The person bringing a complaint to you may have concerns or biases which are deeply rooted and possibly irrelevant to the actual issue. Their own opinions of another individual or group may color their interpretation of what happened. Sometimes what seems like intentionally bad behavior is actually the result of inattention, inaction, miscommunication or ineptitude. These may require dealing with in their own right, but do not assume malicious intent without clarifying the situation. Ask questions and repeat back answers to confirm your understanding.

### 5. Say what you'll do and do what you say

Once you have decided on a course of action, no matter what it is, follow through on it when you say you will. Nothing will compromise your credibility more than to make commitments you do not fulfill or to declare boundaries you do not ultimately enforce. Stick to your plan or people may end up doubting you in future situations, making your job more difficult in the long run. Follow up on your actions as you do them, keeping each party apprised of developments. Leaving distraught or anxious people hanging can make matters worse – what they imagine might be happening during that time is often worse than the reality.

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## Additional Material

[Issue Spotting: Quick Tips](#) (PDF)

## Issue Spotting (Video)



A school chair meets with an adjunct professor and research team member from another department. They discuss a dispute between the adjunct and a professor in the school chair's department. The chair identifies the key issues from the adjunct's perspective and repeats them back to ensure understanding before she gets the other professor's side of the story.

## Ed Feser on Learning from your Mistakes



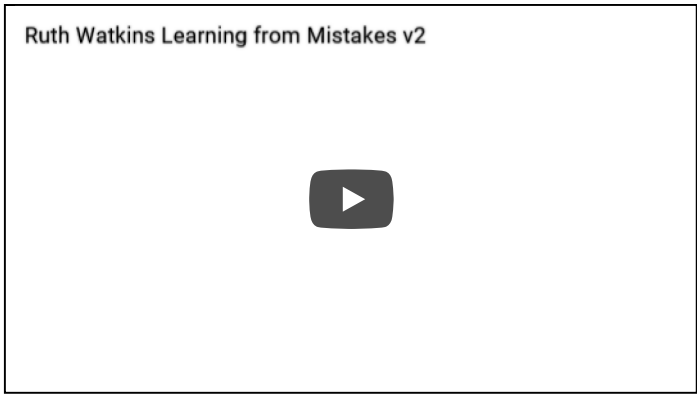
Edward Feser, Provost & Executive Vice President at Oregon State University, discusses times when he has learned from his mistakes and how he uses that information going forward.

## Richard Wheeler on Learning from your Mistakes



Richard Wheeler, former Provost at the University of Illinois, talks about mistakes he made and how he tried to learn from them over his career.

## Ruth Watkins on Learning from your Mistakes



Sonya Stephens on Learning from you Mistakes



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# Setting Boundaries

## Setting Boundaries – Quick Tips

*Five quick tips for setting personal and professional boundaries in the workplace.*

### Manage Your Time

- As a new leader, you will find yourself having to manage your time dealing with your own issues, and all the issues of those who work for you as well. The latter can quickly become overwhelming if you are unable to set clear boundaries on both the types of things your subordinates feel they can bring to you, as well as the time that you spend dealing with them.
- If there is a good time of day for people to be able to meet with you, try to make it well known and keep it routine. Simply knowing that they can rely on you to be there if they have an issue can assuage a lot of problems for your employees before they become more complicated.
- Establish some time for yourself. Everyone needs to have a way to decompress, to disconnect and get some distance from issues at work. Setting aside some “me time” will help you to maintain sanity, creativity and patience in dealing with challenging issues at work.

### It's All About Balance

- Maintaining a balance between the things in your life is important. Too much or too little of anything can be a detriment. This is particularly crucial when you step into a leadership role.
- If you are too closed with your employees, you will never connect with them and build the trust that truly productive relationships are founded upon. If you are too open, you risk losing respect and getting bogged down in dealing with every little problem that arises.
- Try to find the “just right” zone of being friendly and open, while maintaining the propriety that is expected of your more senior position.

### Think About the “Why?” First

- Try not to get caught up in establishing your boundaries too hastily. Before you can be effective in setting those boundaries, you should know why you have set them and be able to clearly communicate those reasons to your subordinates.
- Setting a lot of rules very fast can make them seem arbitrary or contrived, and invites casual dismissal of them by those who work for you.
- A more patient and methodical approach, in which each of your employees comes to understand for themselves why such a rule or boundary exists, will result in more compliance and fewer misunderstandings.

### Know the Limits and Expectations of Your Position

- Some of the interactions that go on at work between two peers may be perfectly acceptable for them in their respective positions, but not for you if you are their leader.
  - For example, two peers may borrow and lend a few dollars here and there for lunch money. It is an altogether different situation if the boss asks for or makes a loan.
  - Likewise, asking a peer to babysit for a couple of hours might be an understandable favor between equal friends ... but if your boss asked you to do it, it would come with a host of additional issues. Would refusing the boss put your job in jeopardy? Would your boss pay you for babysitting? What's the HR payout policy? Is such a thing explicitly against the rules? Is it simply frowned upon?
- Things can get complicated very quickly in those circumstances. The savvy leader respects role boundaries and refrains from becoming overly familiar in tone, language choice, conversation topics, or requests for action.



### Know When “Enough is Enough”

- Mistakes and transgressions happen... we are each of us only human, after all. When they do occur, it can sometimes pay to give people second chances – especially the young.
- That said, giving someone a second chance simply because you feel sympathy for them is often not the best course of action. When people cross that perceptual line of “too far,” examine how they behave in the aftermath:
  - Did the transgressor accept responsibility for his or her behavior and apologize? Or make excuses and equivocate?
  - Did the person take any action to prevent recurrence and make amends? Or just express regret at being caught?
- Empathy is a valuable quality in a leader; don't let it obfuscate a more clinical analysis of the situation. If there is no “teachable moment,” in which the transgressor can truly come to understand his or her mistakes and atone in the appropriate fashion, then you might just be letting your emotions scam you into giving the person a second chance that he or she hasn't actually earned.

In general, for setting boundaries, a helpful tool is to have some words and personal scripts for some of the predictable moments that will arise. Some approaches others have found helpful for setting and maintaining professional boundaries with colleagues and members of your unit include:

<b>Information Sharing</b>	<p>“Yes, we are friends and I hope you can understand there are things I cannot discuss”</p> <p>“That's not something I can discuss with you, as much as I'd love to have your perspective. My duty now is to follow the university's regulations/the law.”</p>
<b>Performance feedback</b>	<p>“This is awkward for both of us because we are friends and I value that relationship. My duty in this role is to give you candid feedback and I do that because I am interested in your success and care about you.”</p>

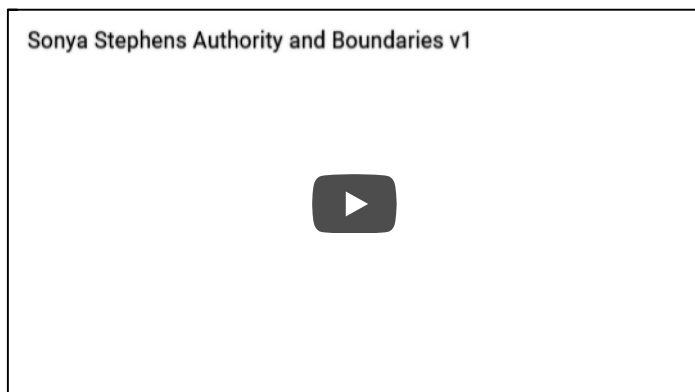
Adapt these examples to your own personality, situation, and voice, and consider other moments where having considered words in advance would be helpful.

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### Additional Material

[Setting Boundaries: Quick Tips](#) (PDF)

Sonya Stephens on Authority and Boundaries



Setting Boundaries



Rob Rutenbar, Senior Vice Chancellor for Research at the University of Pittsburgh, discusses the challenges of setting and keeping boundaries in your leadership role.

### Boundaries and Communication



Edward Feser, Provost & Executive Vice President at Oregon State University, on communicating as a leader and setting boundaries.



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# Pink Slips *of the* Tongue

## THE **TOP 5** ONE-SENTENCE CAREER *Killers* & How to Recover When You Commit One

By Joseph Grenny,  
David Maxfield,  
& Brittney Maxfield

Marianne C. thought she was in a “safe” staff meeting where open discussion was encouraged so she spoke up and shared her opinions. After the meeting, she found herself in and out of the discipline process and shortly thereafter demoted. Ultimately, she lost her chance for advancement at the hospital.

Pam S. witnessed a coworker sabotage his own career when he slandered their workplace on his personal Facebook account. Another colleague he was “friends” with turned him in to HR and he was immediately terminated.

And then there’s Sarah D., who was hired as a sales lead in a retail store. Within a month of being hired, both store managers quit. Sarah and one other colleague were left to run the store with zero training or management support during the busy holiday season. Exasperated, she finally sent a formal e-mail to the regional manager asking for help and letting her know they were “understaffed and overworked” and that “the situation needed to be dealt with immediately.” The next day, Sarah received a phone call from the regional manager who reprimanded her for her “hostile” tone and “gross insubordination.” Most damaging to the business, was being told that the possibility of any support was “out the window.”

Our latest research shows nearly every employee has either seen or suffered from a catastrophic comment like Marianne, Pam, and Sarah did. Specifically, **83 percent have witnessed their colleagues say something that has had catastrophic results on their careers, reputations, and businesses. And 69 percent admit to personally making a catastrophic comment.**

No one is immune to verbal blunders. Just look at some of the more public examples from the last year.

While attempting to rally women voters in the 2016 presidential election, Madeleine Albright, the first female secretary of state, rebuked women for not supporting the female candidate saying, “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!” Albright endured great backlash from young, female voters and the media. One woman’s response stated, “Shame on . . . Madeleine Albright for implying that we as women should be voting for a candidate based solely on gender. I can tell you that shaming me and essentially calling me misinformed and stupid is NOT the way to win my vote.” Albright’s reputation took a major blow and her comments shed a negative light on the female candidate’s campaign.

Or, consider Brian Williams who lost his job as anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News after stretching the truth about his experiences during the Iraq War. After Williams’ initial suspension, more incidents of “inaccurate statements” were uncovered and his ten-year career on the Nightly News came to an end. Not only did he lose his job, he lost the trust of his viewers and his credibility as a news reporter.

The truth is, putting your foot in your mouth—whether consciously or accidentally—is easy to do, and as a result we get to observe the ugly aftermath of catastrophic conversations all around us. But can just any slip of the tongue be fatal to your career, or are there some comments that are far more damaging than others?

## The Top Five One-Sentence Career *Killers*

We asked the 780 respondents of our survey to tell the story of the catastrophic comment they either committed or observed. We combed through each story to uncover the top five career-killing comments people made. Here’s what we found:

### 1) *Suicide* BY FEEDBACK: You thought others could handle the truth—but they didn’t.

*How common?*  
Experienced by 23 percent of respondents.

#### What it looks like:

“A new coworker made suggestions to a technical process in a department meeting. Although he was more than qualified and his comments had merit, the manager took the suggestion as a personal insult. He verbally attacked this coworker and put him in his place in front of everyone—effectively shutting down all other constructive comments from then on. My coworker spent the next year trying to dig himself out of a hole. Everyone was afraid to associate or collaborate too closely with him in case of retribution. He was eventually pillaged by another firm that recognized his technical skills.”

“Our supervisor did not provide us with important details involved in the reorganization of the company. My team was broadsided with issues that significantly impacted our work. I and others voiced concerns about the impending reorganization and we were completely shut down. Two of us were passed over for promotion. We both definitely felt it was retaliation for raising important issues for our unit. The person who got the promotion did not have the qualifications but he does schmooze the management.”

"In a meeting I challenged a colleague's credibility. I spoke out of frustration because she would not accept coaching or advice. While I was right in that she lacked the credibility to make the statements she made, she never recovered and eventually left the company. This incident negatively affected me and I realized I was wrong for doing it. I feel that I lost the trust of others as they feared I might do the same to them. I also paid a price for this comment in subsequent performance reviews."

## 2) GOSSIP *Karma*: You talked about someone or something in confidence with a colleague only to have your damning comments made public.

*How common?  
Experienced by 21 percent of respondents.*

### What it looks like:

"I had recently found out my husband was cheating. At work, the company was circling the drain financially and morally. My department was one of the few in the green and was under pressure to perform even better. Fed up and frustrated with my current married boss flirting with peers (and triggering my own heartache), I blurted out to one of my staff—who turned out to be a friend of the boss—that the boss was sleeping with one of her married direct reports. My boss blamed me for that rumor and probably was jealous of my department's performance versus the dearth in her other areas of responsibility. It took two years for her to find something to use to force me out of my job. In those two years, I received death threats, my car tires were slashed, and well-meaning peers even suggested I leave the state. I took that option, living happily ever after, remarried."

"A friend and school teacher thought she was 'talking' in private on Facebook and made an insensitive (presumably funny) comment about all kids being germ bags, meaning they bring their germs to school. As luck had it, her social media privacy filters had been turned off without her knowing it. Parents of her students saw the comment and were outraged. They went to the school administration and she was asked to resign her position. Her confidence was shattered. It has been very hard for her to find another position in a school system."

"A colleague made derogatory remarks in an e-mail to her 'friend.' When that friend responded, she either accidentally or purposely CC'd the colleague who was being torn down. The person making the remarks was counseled but the relationship never recovered. The friend now 'hates' her colleague who made the remarks and makes it miserable for her at work. And the colleague who was torn down is considering leaving the 'hostile' work environment."

## 3) *Taboo* TOPICS: What it looks like: You said something about race, sex, politics, or religion that others distorted, misunderstood, took wrong, used against you, etc.

*How common?  
Experienced by 20 percent of respondents.*

### What it looks like:

"During an exchange with a much younger, less experienced nurse, an older nurse became exasperated after repeating the same instruction multiple times. She finally said, 'Am I not speaking English?' The younger nurse who was of Laotian heritage, but born and raised in the US, used this statement to claim racial profiling. As a result, the older nurse was treated like a social pariah, even though she apologized to the young nurse. Although the older nurse had extensive experience, all the other younger nurses no longer listened to anything she had to say and additionally excluded her from all conversation and social events—even whispering when she came into the department."

"A male coworker made an inappropriate sexual comment about an older female coworker. He said it too loud so more people heard it than he intended. He was the first to go in layoffs that happened a few months later."

"A Fortune 100 company clearly stated and communicated corporate values of inclusion. Therefore, the company intranet site promoted various activities associated with LGBTQ groups including a pride and inclusion week. An employee posted a comment on the site which was inconsistent with the stated company values of inclusion and which was critical of the LGBTQ lifestyle. The moderator of the site asked our IT department to identify who posted the comment. The manager and HR were notified and the employee was fired that same day—no questions asked and without discussion—for violating the company values of inclusion and civility."

## 4) WORD *Rage*: You lost your temper and used profanity or obscenities to make your point.

*How common?  
Experienced by 20 percent of respondents.*

### What it looks like:

"I watched a colleague tell his manager that he didn't know what he was talking about while in a technical meeting with other team members. After he verbally assaulted his manager he got up and stormed out of the room. He was asked to leave that afternoon."

“Someone was frustrated by the project partner’s lack of response and decided to verbally confront this person in the heat of his frustration. He raised his voice and others around the interaction heard it. It was a very aggressive and unprofessional way to approach the situation. As this person’s leader, I had to administer disciplinary action which unfortunately has contributed to a year-end performance evaluation that will cost him his incentive.”

“One of my subordinate managers resigned verbally in a rage of anger, then proceeded to announce his resignation to all of his staff and our client only to try and retract it a day later. No luck, we accepted his resignation.”

## 5) “REPLY ALL” *Blunders*. You accidentally shared something harmful via technology (e-mail, text, virtual meeting tools, etc).

*How common?  
Experienced by 10 percent of respondents.*

### What it looks like:

“I am the manager of 114 team members. I have one supervisor who reports to me. She had been struggling and I started the uncomfortable process of documenting her. She felt picked on and unfairly judged so she went directly to our Director and spouted off a laundry list of ‘unfair!’ and ‘why me?’ complaints. The Director listened and said he would look into it and involve HR. The policy is that HR has to look into any complaint—whether valid or false. The supervisor felt so vindicated in the Director’s response that she wanted to share the news with her boyfriend, so she texted him. She called him a slang name, included cuss words, and went on to tell him how the Director and HR were going to talk to me after the holidays. She did not look, nor double check, that she used her work cell instead of her personal phone to text her boyfriend. She ended up texting the entire 114 members of the staff. As you can imagine, the entire group lost it. They were frustrated with her before and then after this incident, it was all-out cold war. She apologized but her ability to advance and take over any part of this group is completely gone.”

“About six or seven people were in an in-person meeting and one person was remote. At one point, we did a Lync screen share with the remote person so she could show something to the group. After a while, she evidently forgot she was sharing her screen. She started a separate messaging conversation with her boss. I (Scott) was the official leader of the meeting, but was still new to the organization and this was one of my first times leading this meeting. She chatted her boss, ‘Do you think it is possible Scott could be more incompetent than the previous person in this role?’ To which her boss responded, ‘Ha ha! Doubtful, but we’ll see.’ My predecessor in this role was in the meeting too. Finally, someone said, ‘Emily, did you know you are still screen sharing?’ She quickly took it down and tried to offer a quick, subtle apology. Apparently there were other issues with Emily’s boss and this was the straw

that put him over the edge. Within two weeks of this incident, he was terminated.”

“Two employees were discussing the sexuality of our Director in a disparaging way in e-mail and one of them accidentally hit ‘reply all’ and all of the administrators saw the comments. The two employees were terminated the same day.”

## The *Damage*

While these stories vividly document the ugly consequences, the research also confirms the results of a slip of the tongue or momentary lapse of judgment are never good. In fact, only 5 percent reported getting away with a nasty comment with little to no repercussions. The other 95 percent experienced the following aftermath:

**31** percent said it cost them a pay increase, a promotion, or their job.

**27** percent said it undercut or destroyed the working relationship.

**11** percent said it destroyed their reputation.

**6** percent said it resulted in a poor performance review.

**1** percent said it cost them a client or partner.

These results are why we have come to call these verbal blunders catastrophic. You can literally ruin your career with just a few words. In some cases, these comments do reveal people’s incompetence to perform their job, their unsavory moral compass, or their true colors which may be ill-suited for the team dynamics or corporate culture. And when it comes to discrimination, racism, or violence, there are clearly comments that should never be tolerated in the workplace—or any place.

Yet so many of these comments are uttered by well-meaning and talented employees who maybe just had a bad day. According to the data, every one of us is bound to make an unintentional slip of the tongue or misjudge a situation at some point during our career. And when you introduce the X factor of technology into the communication equation, all sorts of things are bound to go wrong despite our best intentions. So when, not if, we put our foot in our mouth, **what can we do to ensure the results of our verbal blunder aren’t catastrophic, but rather recoverable?**



*Committing* a verbal blunder takes no skill. Recovering from one does.

When it comes to recovering from a poorly-made comment, the data isn't very encouraging. In fact, the results show that more than one in four people (27 percent) lack the skills to smooth things over and only one in five are extremely confident in their ability to fix mistakes.

And we get it. Apologizing when you've said something hurtful is hard. Recognizing your role in an ugly situation isn't fun. Finding the right words to smooth over the words you just said that were very wrong takes true skill. Yet all of these are completely possible. You can make reparations to your mistakes in a way that can save a compromised reputation or a damaged relationship.

We've spent the last thirty years researching the nuances of communication and the skills used by the best of the best. We wrote an entire book about this research called *Crucial Conversations*. What we found is that the most influential leaders, when in the midst of a crucial conversation (high stakes, opposing opinions, and strong emotions), know how to communicate their real intentions in a way that is both honest and respectful. And what could have higher stakes and stronger emotions than finding yourself at the tail-end of an unintentional catastrophic comment? It's time more of us learned how to return to dialogue when what you may have said just shut it down completely.

# The Art of the Apology

## 6 Ways to Say "I'm Sorry"

The consummate skill in recovering from a catastrophic comment is to apologize. But we're not talking about a simple "I'm sorry." Rather, there is a right and a wrong way to demonstrate your sincere regret. Below are six common scenarios you may find yourself in after committing a verbal blunder and tips for apologizing appropriately.

### 1) The *blunder*: You said something that was just wrong, rude or completely inappropriate.

**The apology:** The only thing that will work in this situation is a clear, unvarnished, unrestrained apology. The bandage needs to be as large as the wound. If you aired your colorful resentment for your boss, a simple "I'm sorry" won't cut it. Others need to hear an apology as intense as their disgust for you at the moment.

### 2) The *blunder*: You said something that was right, but it came across wrong.

**The apology:** The apology in this situation is more complex but must still match the fervor of the upset. You have three tasks: 1) Acknowledge that the message people heard from you sounded as offensive as they've taken it to be. And don't move to step two until they're satisfied. 2) Say what you *really* think on the topic in the way you *should* have said it. 3) Repeat step one.

### 3) The *blunder*: You said something you believe, but that you shouldn't have said in your position.

**The apology:** Your apology must right the real wrong—your irresponsible lapse of judgment in realizing you should have weighed the potential consequences before voicing all your opinions. For example, if you stated an opinion that is not the opinion of your company and as a result, lost the good faith of your client, then you must apologize and let the client know you regret making the comments you did or take complete personal responsibility for the misunderstanding and therefore the heat off your company. This could sound disingenuous, but it's not. It isn't "you" that's apologizing, it's your position. So your apology is righting the real wrong—your acknowledgement to the client that you don't get to represent your company in any way you see fit.

### 4) The *blunder*: You lost your temper and said something you regret or said it with a tone of voice and words you regret using.

**The apology:** The only hope for recovering from an angry outburst is to apologize. The sooner the better. Time allows others to integrate the offense more deeply into their view of you. If you have a reasonably good relationship with people, a sincere apology can act as a reset button. The instant you regain control of your brain—begin by simply acknowledging your lack of control. It might sound something like: "I just lost my temper. I am sorry." Next describe what you did from their point of view—not yours. You'll be tempted to lace it with self-justification. Don't. Think how the outburst came across to *them*: "I insisted on my decision and even bullied you—raising my voice and behaving more like a dictator than a teammate. I'm very sorry; I shouldn't have treated you that way." Full stop. Do not allow any attempt to explain yourself to creep in—no one will care that you dropped your toast butter-side down that morning. Apologies restore trust because they show your ego is worth less to you than the victim's trust. Explanations or half-apologies demonstrate ego comes first placing the value of the apology at zero. After you apologize for the inappropriateness of your outburst, then set a clear expectation that you will never react so harshly in the future. This promise will offer others hope that this was a one-time incident rather than something that will happen again—accelerating a return to trust.

5) The *blunder*: Your transgression is in the past but it has damaged a valued relationship—things have never been the same since.

The apology: To rebuild a strained relationship, you must acknowledge and apologize for the past incident specifically—even if it feels like raising the dead. Don't assume others have forgotten about what happened—likely they remember it every time they see your face. So, apologize like it happened that day. Ask for forgiveness and then ask what you can do to make it right. Emphasize that you recognize the strain your actions put on the relationship and you'd like to know how you can regain trust or good will. Then, over-respond to their requests. For example, if they say they need you to listen rather than criticizing their views, do so deeply. Reiterate what they say before moving on with your ideas. Point out the merits of what they say—pause to confirm you understand. And only then, engage with your own ideas. You can also accelerate the return of trust by asking for periodic feedback about how you are doing in keeping the new commitment.

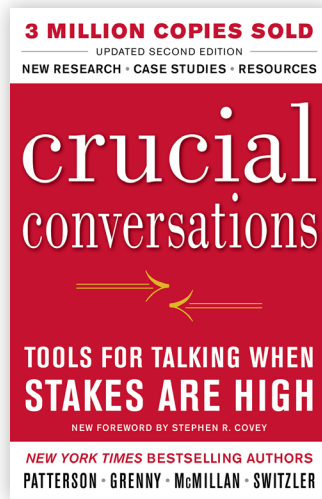
6) The *blunder*: You accidentally sent someone a message that you shouldn't have sent via email, text, or other technology.

The apology: While you made the mistake electronically, don't apologize electronically. When at all possible, express your sincere regret face-to-face. Apologize both for the content of the message and for the means in which it was communicated. You must own up to both errors. If you can't meet face-to-face, then find a reasonable substitute like the phone or video-chat software. It's important you see the disgust on the other person's face, or hear it in his or her voice, in order to apologize to the degree with which he or she feels hurt or violated. Then, if appropriate, go public with the apology in electronic view of all who may have been affected. For example, if you accidentally sent a private comment to a large group, send a brief acknowledgement of the error to that same group with a brief admission of your thoughtlessness. The goal—as in #4—is to demonstrate to the offended party your willingness to sacrifice your ego in order to regain their trust. They are more likely to believe your apology is more than words if offering it costs you more than simple typing time.

When you learn how to apologize with honesty and respect, you can take control of any catastrophic situation and right the wrong. These skills put the power back in your hands to exemplify the kind of person you really are—underneath the comments. Don't let a momentary slip of the tongue define you as anything other than someone who is honest, kind, and competent.

## TO LEARN MORE

Whenever you're not getting results, it's likely a crucial conversation is keeping you stuck. Learn how to speak up and reach dialogue in high stakes, emotional, or politically risky situations with the *New York*



*Times* bestselling book, *Crucial Conversations* (available everywhere books are sold). VitalSmarts also offers classroom and virtual training on these skills. Learn more at [www.vitalismarts.com/crucialconversationstraining](http://www.vitalismarts.com/crucialconversationstraining).

To receive more tips and skills like these from Joseph and David on how to improve your communication and increase your personal influence, subscribe to the award-winning *Crucial Skills Newsletter*. Each week, the authors share advice on how to navigate

tricky, high-stakes situations at work and at home.

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**About VitalSmarts.** Named one of the Top 20 Leadership Training Companies by Training Industry, Inc., VitalSmarts, a TwentyEighty, Inc. company, is home to the award-winning Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Accountability®, Change Anything®, and Influencer Training® and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles. When used in combination, these courses enable organizations to achieve new levels of performance by changing employee behavior. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than 1.5 million people worldwide.

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## KNOWING WHEN TO ESCALATE - 5 QUICK TIPS

### 1. *Know the warning signs*

There are some 'classic' scenarios you will want to be aware of that often warrant a formal process for handling the complaint. These can include cases where there is a large power difference between the people in question; when the problem is deeply rooted and extends back many years; the problem may involve serious or possibly criminal allegations; or where multiple people in the situation are involved in a sexual relationship. Know in advance who is on campus that can help you: human resources, the counseling center, even the provost's office. Find out who they are and what they offer before you find yourself in need of them.

### 2. *Have a third party present*

In cases where emotions are running very high, such as when you're delivering bad news or receiving a complaint from an unusually volatile individual, it can be beneficial to ask a colleague to sit in on the meeting to act as a witness. Sometimes people who are wrapped up in a problem can display selective hearing for what they were told during a meeting. Some people may have a history of turning on those who have tried to help them. In these cases it can be particularly helpful to have another person present during the meeting, both to record what was said, and to help maintain a level of calmness.

### 3. *Avoid false compassion*

You can't rescue people from the natural consequences of their own bad choices. While it can pay to give extra chances to people, be sure to consider the repercussions of doing so. False compassion can cost time and money by encouraging repeated poor performance or behavior. Further, when the line is finally drawn, it will incur unpleasant consequences and the resulting problem may be much more difficult to handle than the outcome of an even-handed application of the rules. Even worse, granting exceptions to rules may make them unenforceable and lead to claims that they are enforced arbitrarily or in a discriminatory fashion.

### 4. *Trust your instincts*

If you're worried that someone may be in danger when you're dealing with a situation, trust your instincts and call upon someone else in the University for help. Be sure to choose someone you trust who will not talk about the situation beyond the appropriate boundaries. No one will think less of you for asking for help and it's far better to be safe than sorry.

### 5. *Don't believe everything you hear...*

Sometimes a fantastical story is just that – fantasy. If someone tells you that “everybody knows” about a certain aspect of a situation, dig a bit deeper and ask how that person heard about it. Go for specifics: ask for dates, times, places and names of people involved who may have relevant information. Many widely known “truths” have no factual basis. Stick to the facts.



# Eliminating Cultures of Silence

Could the disasters at Enron and WorldCom have been easily avoided? What about the mistakes at the Duke and Baylor hospitals, or the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Columbia?

Sadly, before each disaster, stake holders saw clear warning signs for catastrophe and yet they said nothing. Trends show that similar cultures of silence proliferate in organizations across the country.

VitalSmarts' research reveals that there are five key issues that if not handled correctly will ultimately lead to failed execution or worse, tragedy. They also found that 90 percent of businesses routinely suffer from one or more of these five key issues.

The good news is that organizations who successfully handle these five issues transform cultures of silence into cultures of honesty and effective communication—eliminating potential catastrophes and saving lives.

## Eliminating Cultures of Silence

*As well-trained and highly motivated people imagine their careers unfolding, nobody envisions making a steady climb up the ladder (punctuated with notable successes and laudable accomplishments) only to be brought to ruin by a wide-sweeping and devastating disaster. And yet a number of highly publicized catastrophes over the last few years send a warning that leaders need to be more aware of the very real dangers they face. For instance, who can forget the day we saw or heard about the space shuttle Columbia exploding as it reentered earth's atmosphere? Together the world mourned the loss of seven heroes. How could rocket scientists—renowned NASA scholars and acclaimed technicians, no less—have failed to avert such a disaster?*

And NASA isn't the only organization that has suffered a calamity over the past decade. Look at the button-down corporate world. How could the leaders at Enron and WorldCom allow the massive deceptions that destroyed their companies? As a result of their misconduct, thousands of people sustained financial damage—some were brought to ruin. And then we have Duke and Baylor University Hospitals—two of the many healthcare institutions that have suffered as a result of flagrant medical errors.

What's remarkable about all of these cases is that they weren't the result of careless or dim-witted villains stumbling through their jobs. In each case, highly educated and well-meaning people were at the very center of the disaster. How could such brilliant and motivated folks fail so miserably?

It turns out that each of these calamities shared a similar root cause—and each, sadly, was avoidable. These catastrophes resulted from what we call *cultures of silence*. Individuals saw the warning signs of an impending disaster and yet they remained silent. They realized that if changes weren't made, serious problems would possibly follow—but nobody actually *vocalized* their concerns. Or if they did speak up, those who heard them remained silent. Why?

It's a matter of mental calculus. Each person who anticipated a possible disaster feared that speaking up was more likely to cause personal problems than lead to corporate solutions. Here's the thought process underlying this disastrous form of silence:

1. You observe a potential problem, but you figure the possible calamity isn't a sure thing. It's not like death or bankruptcy is imminent; they're just possibilities.
2. Nobody else seems concerned and you don't want to sound like an alarmist.
3. You figure even if you do speak up, nobody will actually change anything—the organization is too mired in bureaucracy.
4. Finally, it seems like a sure bet that saying something will damage your career. You would be delivering a really unpopular message (“I think you need to re-examine the launch—at the cost of fifty million dollars.” “I think we need to confront the senior execs and maybe send them to jail.” “I think the doctor is wrong and needs to follow my ideas.”). And messengers get shot.

Sound familiar? Does any of this reasoning or behavior happen in your organization?

## High-Stakes Project Failures

Of course, cultures of silence make the news when rockets and markets crash, but that doesn't mean silence doesn't cause problems in any team or company where people believe honesty is not always the best policy.

Senior executives frequently bet their companies on high-stakes efforts like major product releases, strategic IT projects, organizational restructurings, fast-paced downsizings, or aggressive quality initiatives. And these bets rarely pay off as anticipated. With estimated failure rates ranging from 72 to 91 percent<sup>1</sup>, companies' collective inability to execute on major projects costs hundreds of billions of dollars a year. For example, it's estimated that of the \$255 billion spent per year on IT projects in the U.S., more than a quarter is burnt up in failures and cost overruns.<sup>2</sup> In addition to sapping organizational performance, project failures cost careers. Now more than ever, CEOs are under pressure to either get results or get lost. In 2005, CEO turnover doubled from the year before.<sup>3</sup>

A recent study conducted by VitalSmarts and The Concours Group, called *Silence Fails: The Five Crucial Conversations for Flawless Execution*, found that the high failure rate among a variety of high-stakes business initiatives is largely attributed to organizational silence around five common issues.<sup>4</sup>

The five issues are:

1. **Fact-free planning.** A project is set up to fail with deadlines or resource limits that are set with no consideration for reality, a flaw almost no one discusses effectively.
2. **Absent Without Leave (AWOL) sponsors.** The sponsor doesn't provide leadership, political clout, time or energy to see a project through to completion, and those depending on him or her don't effectively address the sponsor's failures.
3. **Skirting.** People work around the priority-setting process and are not held accountable for doing so.
4. **Project chicken.** Team leaders and members don't admit when there are problems with a project but wait for someone else to speak up first.
5. **Team failures.** Team members perpetuate dysfunction when they are unwilling or unable to support the project, and team leaders are reluctant to discuss their failures with them candidly.

The study, which surveyed more than 1,000 executives and project management professionals across a variety of companies and industries, found that these five issues are so common that 90 percent of business

leaders routinely experience one or more of them. The astonishing part is that fewer than 17 percent surveyed said they are able to voice their concerns in a way that is heard and understood.

And now for the good news. The presence of problems, even the five the study uncovered, is not a death sentence. The only thing that dooms a project is participants' failure to candidly and effectively hold the conversations required to resolve the problems.

More importantly, the way in which everyone from senior leaders to project participants discusses even one of these issues predicts with amazing accuracy whether or not the project is doomed. This kind of litmus test can save companies literally billions of dollars in the cost of major delays, cost overruns or cancellations. It can also save top executives their jobs.

And because these kinds of failures share a common cause, they also have a common solution—a way to transform cultures of silence into cultures of honest and effective communication. We'll discuss that solution as well as a specific example of change that offers a great deal of hope to all cultures of silence.

But first, let's examine a handful of highly publicized disasters and see if we can better understand how silence became such a dominant cultural influence.

## Accounting Scandals

Contrary to popular belief, the accounting disasters that took place at WorldCom, Enron, Tyco, and HealthSouth were not the result of leaders acting alone or in complete secrecy. Dozens of people looked on as executives stepped into ethically gray areas, yet nobody said a word. Despite the fact that virtually everyone called for the leaders' heads, corporate ethics are not maintained exclusively by saintly CEOs who either never make mistakes or who catch everyone else who does. Ethics are also upheld (or at least they should be) by hundreds of employees who willingly step up and confront coworkers when they see them cross the line of ethical conduct.

Such assertiveness was largely absent in these accounting scandals. For example, several years before the scandal at HealthSouth emerged, Michael Vines, who managed assets for five hundred HealthSouth facilities, had concerns about clearly unethical activities such as falsifying invoices. Yet by his own admission, he and others who noticed these practices said *nothing*.<sup>5</sup>

At WorldCom, as that once great telecommunication firm's fortunes were rapidly sinking, competitor Verizon made a premium offer to take over the company. Unfortunately a culture of silence had become so deeply ingrained in the WorldCom Board of Directors that when CEO Bernie Ebbers dismissed the generous offer without even inviting an investment banking review, not one member of the Board said a thing.<sup>6</sup>

Now, why did these particular institutions end up with a culture of silence? Although there is no simple answer, there are three dynamics that always play a part in encouraging people to choose tight lips over honest dialogue.

1. **Bystander apathy.** The first dynamic was brought to the world's attention nearly four decades ago during what organizational scholars dubbed the "bystander apathy" research. The gist of the findings was that when it comes to speaking up, people take their cue from the culture around them. Even in seemingly alarming circumstances, if everyone else seems unconcerned, people tend to follow suit rather than disturb the status quo. Bottom line: silence is contagious.
2. **Self-doubt.** What if the behaviors are only vaguely wrong? You're watching a senior executive or a doctor or a scientist do something that appears risky, but there's a good chance you don't know all of the details. Maybe what they're doing is okay and you just don't get it. Besides, aren't the people who are behaving in questionable ways those who are most likely to know what is right and what isn't?
3. **Harsh consequences.** And finally, what if you do say something, you're correct, and people go to jail? That can make you think twice about blowing a whistle.

## Healthcare Tragedies

The deaths of Jessica Santillan at the renowned Duke University Medical Center in 2003 and Jeanella Aranda at Baylor University Medical Center in 2002, illustrate the results of remaining silent on a more tragic scale.<sup>7</sup> Both disasters resulted from carelessly mismatched blood types during organ transplants. People who should have been aware of the mismatches simply said *nothing* rather than demand that doctors follow the standard double-checking procedures. In acknowledging its failures, Duke University offered a solution that, in part, recommended *triple* checking blood-type tests.

A similar culture of silence contributes to two million hospital-induced infections each year, and results in tens of thousands of unnecessary patient deaths. People remain mum as their colleagues fail to follow standard protocols. For instance, a federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that healthcare professionals wash their hands only about half the number of times that policies require—a key factor in the spread of hospital-borne infections. The study probed whether making more sinks available would help doctors and nurses wash their hands when they should. The answer? It wouldn't. What mattered most was whether or not the senior doctor washed his or her hands. Period. When the lead person set a bad example, not only did nurses, residents, and others not speak up, they failed to wash their hands as well.<sup>8</sup>

Silence is displayed in a lot of creative ways when healthcare professionals face incompetent colleagues. When it comes to addressing

incompetence, people do everything but speak directly to the party in question. Instead they employ complicated workarounds, policy changes, or system overhauls. We've seen repeated incidents where physicians working with incompetent partners try to protect patients by manipulating case assignments rather than by dealing with the real problem head-on.<sup>9</sup> In one hospital six physicians stated flatly: "If Dr. X were on duty, I would drive to the next hospital rather than have him treat my child." Yet all six physicians were partners of Dr. X, and none had ever bothered to challenge him about his perceived medical incompetence.

In 2005, VitalSmarts and The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses conducted a study with more than 1,700 nurses, physicians, clinical-care staff and administrators called *Silence Kills: The Seven Crucial Conversations for Healthcare*. The study revealed that 88 percent of doctors say they work daily with people who demonstrate poor clinical judgment. More than half of *all* healthcare workers surveyed say they witness coworkers break rules, make mistakes, fail to support, demonstrate incompetence, show poor teamwork, disrespect them, and micromanage. And yet fewer than 10 percent directly confront their colleagues about their concerns. They say *nothing*.<sup>10</sup>

In cultures of prevalent silence, adding tactics such as triple checks or engaging in workarounds can be worse than pointless. They can actually cause further damage by diverting attention from the root cause of the problem—namely, why nurses and fellow doctors did not hold each other accountable for existing policies.

What makes healthcare institutions particularly vulnerable to silence? First, stakes are high. People's lives are on the line, and that alone can dampen anyone's desire to take a stand against others—particularly against experts. Second, there is a huge difference in education, salary, and perceived power between physicians and everyone else. Even though a nurse might know the most about what has recently taken place with a patient, doctors know a great deal more about medical theory. Physicians are also told in medical school that it's them against the world. They have to stand for what they believe in. Consequently, they're not inclined to open up discussions for others' input; nor do others feel safe disagreeing. Add one more element—critical decisions have to be made in seconds—and you have a near perfect formula for fostering silence.

## Tough Times at *The Times*

Let's turn to the news business. In 2003, Jayson Blair, a young journalist for *The New York Times*, fabricated fascinating and complicated reports from the field when he was, in fact, inventing everything from the comfort of his apartment. How could such blatant lying occur within an institution that prides itself on publishing the facts?

In this case, not a whole lot of people knew what was actually taking place. On the other hand, several people at various levels within the organization were suspicious. When these folks were later confronted for not having raised an alarm, they said that since they weren't sure their colleague had actually been lying, they didn't know how to bring up the issue. It's not as if you can walk up to a coworker and say: "Hey, read your latest article—you made it all up, right? You're a shameful cheat, right?" Once again, people didn't know what to say or how to say it.

## The Columbia Disaster

And now for our last and perhaps most tragic example—the February 2003 Columbia Space Shuttle disaster. In the days following what seemed to be an unexceptional lift-off, Rodney Rocha, a chief structural engineer at NASA's Johnson Space Center, determined along with several colleagues that the stray foam strike that had occurred seconds after Columbia's launch bore further investigation. Other engineers shared this concern, so they asked that satellite photos be provided to help them probe the possibility of foam-induced damage.

Such photos are very expensive, and given the mandate to tighten budgets, nobody wanted to be charged with spending money unnecessarily. So when Linda Ham, head of the mission management team, asked who wanted to view the satellite photos, she was met with silence. *No one spoke up.* And so she declined to pursue the matter further.<sup>11</sup>

Here was a culture that often supported and actively encouraged silence. NASA's previous boss, Daniel Goldin, ruled with such an abrasive and punishing demeanor that, according to John Logsdon, head of George Washington University's Space Policy Institute, "There were people afraid to tell Mr. Goldin things he didn't want to hear."

In the years prior to Columbia's tragedy, NASA's leadership had made deep cuts in safety programs. Of course, every organization has to trim its costs at times. What keeps such cost cutting from becoming dangerous is that managers will push back—and push back hard—when they view cuts as having potentially serious, even deadly, consequences. Unfortunately, under the atmosphere of forced silence that Goldin helped to create, pushback was a rare commodity.

## What Does It Take to Create a Culture of Honest and Direct Communication?

This inability to bring up touchy, controversial, or unpopular issues lies at the heart of every culture of silence. While it's true that people frequently don't want to speak up in the face of an impending disaster (and thus it's a motivation problem), they don't want to speak up because they don't know how to without either taking an unreasonable personal risk or causing others unnecessary pain. Silence is almost always rooted in inability. For

example, what do you actually say to a doctor who is about to commit a deadly error? "Sorry doc, but are you inept and actually working on the wrong patient?" What do you say to an executive you think is falsifying records? "Excuse me, but are you committing a major felony?"

Here are the implications of this diagnosis. In order to move your organization from silence to honest communication—don't give speeches, write memos, or offer up clever pep talks. People don't want to cause disasters, that's a given. They don't need or want to be motivated. Instead, they'd like to learn how to speak their minds in the presence of adversity. So, if you're serious about eliminating silence, teach people the actual skills they'll need to be able to share difficult or controversial messages. And as you do so, make sure you change their expectations about what will happen if they do speak their minds. This change in expectations deserves special attention. People are so used to speaking and then suffering that it's hard for them to imagine that if they combine the right skills in the right way, they'll achieve the results they want without having to pay for them in political capital or harmed relationships. Teach the right skills in the right way and you'll change expectations.

Crucial Conversations® Training teaches people skills and radically changes expectations by relying exclusively on best practices. Every skill is based on what top performers do to achieve results and at the same time maintain relationships. Nobody is ever asked to take a risk. Instead, participants are taught how to speak and be heard in a way that doesn't cause resistance or resentment. Teach your employees these same skills, and they no longer need to go to silence in order to protect themselves.

This award-winning training program also teaches people of different backgrounds, specialties, and interests how to share information safely and get ideas and feelings out in the open—and at the same time maintain high levels of respect. Being able to share ideas, no matter how different or controversial, is particularly important during the development stages of any proposed effort to eliminate cultures of silence. As people brainstorm ideas, come to a common understanding, and then make decisions, everything gets better. People surface the best ideas and then act on them with unity and commitment.

## Success: Eliminating a Culture of Silence

Let's look at a case where leaders successfully taught this skill set to help reverse a costly culture of silence. Consider the work of executives and HR experts at aerospace giant Lockheed Martin.<sup>12</sup> In August of 1998, Lockheed Martin Aeronautics was in a fight for its corporate life. The company's future depended on winning its bid to build the \$200 billion Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). With the long-running F-16 program approaching termination, Lockheed's Fort Worth facility faced grim alternatives: either become the center for JSF production, or else cease to exist as anything more than a spare parts supplier for America's aging F-16 fleet.



To prepare for this enormous task, the Lockheed senior management team committed to the internal improvements that its leaders knew would be necessary to win and deliver on the JSF contract. Over a period of several months, they worked on creating a culture of honest and effective communication rather than silence. They knew that in their existing culture people weren't always offering their best ideas, or that some people forced their views, cutting off many ideas before they could be considered—all dangerous behaviors for an organization that could ill afford not to bring their best ideas to the table.

In order to create a more open environment, Lockheed executives identified a handful of pivotal crucial conversations that routinely came up and went badly or didn't happen at all.

Leaders used Crucial Conversations Training to teach employees how to speak up no matter how unpopular or controversial their views. Then, to help drive home the importance of these skills, the leaders did their best to use them whenever they had a dissenting view—demonstrating that it was safe for employees to speak their minds. Finally, they tracked improvements in how often and how well people stepped up to high-stakes conversations as well as improvements to critical end results.

The results were exceptionally encouraging. Just nine months from the time training began, Lockheed's senior leaders found dramatic gains in the quality of their target conversations. People stepped up to the target conversations and confrontations more frequently and more ably. Research showed a significant correlation between improvements in these crucial conversations and gains in productivity, costs, and quality. The training worked. Changes in behavior led to changes in end results.

If you want to create a culture of honest dialogue, genuine accountability, and the freedom to speak openly, identify which conversations are at risk, teach people how to step up to them effectively, and then enjoy gains in end results.

## End Notes

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# VitalSmarts™

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**About VitalSmarts.** An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. We've identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in our award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*. VitalSmarts has worked with 300 of the Fortune 500 and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com)



**Vibrant Units (0 to 5)**
**Warning Signs (0 to 3)**
**Challenged Units (0 to 5)**

<p>Respectful dealings among colleagues, department</p>	<p>Complaints disproportionate to other units, campus</p>	<p>Serious misconduct: discrimination; sexual; financial; criminal, etc. (arrests, lawsuits...)</p>
<p>Openness, transparency, shared governance</p>	<p>Email and/or social media wars, harassment, silos, conflict aversion</p>	<p>Culture that suppresses or hides problems; punishes reporting; faculty schisms, battles, flareups</p>
<p>Culture of excellence and quality; strong candidates</p>	<p>Weak or ineffective hiring, requests for transfers, departures</p>	<p>Repeated inability to hire, retain quality faculty, staff</p>
<p>Support and mentoring for faculty and students alike</p>	<p>Weak P&amp;T practices; many terminal associate professors</p>	<p>Toxic atmosphere, especially for junior faculty, students</p>
<p>Open discussion of ideas and research; high productivity</p>	<p>Declining scholarly indicators (productivity, PhDs, PhD placement, time to degree...)</p>	<p>Scholarly standing below university's; uneven in unit</p>
<p>Distributed service responsibilities, aligned with faculty strengths</p>	<p>Financial disarray</p>	<p>Departmental business at a standstill; in gridlock</p>
<p>High level of communication — willingness to listen, compromise; problems addressed, not submerged</p>	<p><i>Ad hoc</i> practices; forum-shopping; seeking desired answers from different officers; hiding problems</p>	<p>Lack of transparency, hidden agendas; faculty involve students in disputes</p>
<p>Curricular innovations, adaptations to meet changing student, campus, needs</p>	<p>Enrollment declines, lack of curricular innovation</p>	<p>Curricular stagnation, lack of student interest in offerings; outdated curriculum</p>
<p>Leadership has high expectations, uses policies, makes decisions, builds community</p>	<p>Bimodal evaluations; generational discord; externalizing problems</p>	<p>Weak or autocratic leadership; different messages to different audiences; meddling by previous leader of unit</p>
<p>Collective vision of goals and priorities.</p>	<p>Limited sense of priorities</p>	<p>Many individual priorities without shared purpose</p>
<p>TOTAL _____</p>	<p>TOTAL _____ (subtract)</p>	<p>TOTAL _____ (subtract)</p>