

Silent Judgment Seven Crucial Conversations that Turn Bias into Influence

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Is the organization where you work inclusive or intolerant? Is your work environment accepting or prejudiced? Is your leader an ally or a bigot or both? These judgments about bias have profound impacts on organizations, work teams, and individual employees. And yet few of us even realize when they are being made, because they are silent judgments. They're not debated or even discussed.

Amy is having lunch in the cafeteria with Josh, her manager, when Ryan, an employee from another department, joins them. As soon as Ryan sits down, Josh stops talking to Amy, and begins talking exclusively to Ryan—even though the topic they are discussing is within Amy's area of expertise. Josh turns in his chair so that he faces Ryan, not Amy; he ignores Amy's attempts to enter the conversation; and he answers for her when Ryan directs questions her way.

This lunchtime experience is familiar to Amy. It happens whenever a male colleague joins a conversation she's having with Josh. The first few times it happened, she hardly noticed it, but now it annoys her. She's concluded that Josh doesn't respect her—probably because she's a woman.

Amy hasn't shared her concerns with Josh, because they seem too nebulous, and she doesn't want to be accused of attacking him. She also doubts he could ever change. Instead, she's holding in her concerns, where they're festering and turning ugly. She's begun to avoid Josh, and, when they do talk, she's short and abrupt. This afternoon she will make a call to an executive recruiter.

Every organization and every relationship provokes concerns from time to time. That's unavoidable. But, what makes Amy's concerns unique and

pernicious is that she can't discuss them. And, if she can't discuss them, she can't solve them.

Poor Josh. He doesn't even know there is a problem. Over time he may notice that Amy is less engaged at work, or seems irritated about something. Or maybe he'll be blindsided when she gives notice and leaves. Either way he'll never know it was his behavior that started the downward spiral. So, he's likely to make the same mistakes with others.

Concerns that relate to inclusiveness are especially likely to become undiscussable, because the stakes are so high. Many believe that the only way to address them is to either "play the diversity card" or call the person a bigot—and few want to take these "nuclear options." Instead, they keep their concerns to themselves. They treat them as undiscussables or as topics they can only discuss in hushed tones with "like colleagues."

We, the authors, have each faced undiscussables in the course of our work in the diversity field—Joan as a diversity executive, and David as a management consultant. Our current work focuses in on seven key undiscussables that have a disproportionate impact on whether a firm, a work team, or an individual is judged to be prejudiced. When one of

these problems occurs, it is rarely confronted or discussed, and yet each is very likely to lead to judgments about intolerance and bigotry.

This finding contains an important promise. If you can identify the undiscussables, then you can bring them into the open, discuss them, and in many cases resolve them. In fact, we find that a small minority of people in most firms are already discussing and resolving them. They speak up when others don't. They have the crucial conversations, and, when they do, relationships and reputations are preserved.

In this paper we'll introduce these seven undiscussables, provide tips on mastering the crucial conversations required to correct them, introduce a survey you can use to learn whether they are present in your own organization, and illustrate what leaders can do to encourage crucial conversations at an organizational level.

The Seven Undiscussables

These seven problems are all common, significant, and difficult to discuss. Sixty-two percent of minorities and fifty-three percent of women we surveyed experience one or more of them at least monthly; ninety-six percent say the problems cause them to make negative judgments about respect, equity, and fairness; and fifty-three percent say that, when these problems occur, no one confronts or discusses them.

Below we'll describe each of the seven problems and give brief examples.

1. "I know I shouldn't say this, but." —overtly offensive actions. Inappropriate jokes, offensive comments, harassment, and sexist, racist, religiously intolerant, or other bigoted actions. The kinds of incidents that would be obvious violations of a culture of inclusiveness.

2. "I had no idea." —unconscious micro-actions that reveal bias. Micro-inequities, small, subtly challenging or disparaging messages, that can build up over time and across people to create an oppressive work environment.

3. "You're just not ready." —stereotypes that patronize and suffocate. Stereotypes that result in lower expectations, overprotection, risk aversion, and failure to recognize a person's accomplishments. These stereotypes can put a person onto a slower track, one that's defined by their stereotype, and that prevents them from achieving the success they deserve.

4. "I always suspected you couldn't cut it." —invisible expectations of incompetence that don't show up until a problem occurs. A single setback leads to immediate and wholesale loss of support. There is often an element of "I told you so," as if the failure has confirmed a bet.

5. "You need to be more like me." —the Mini-Me syndrome. A leader believes that success requires others to be his or her cookie-cutter replica. Individuals who are visibly different are shunted away from risky, more rewarding opportunities.

6. "You shouldn't act like that." —verbal judgments of those who don't fit your stereotype. A person's actions are labeled using a negative term that isn't used when others act similarly. For example, using the word "pushy" to describe a woman and "decisive" to describe a man who behaves the same.

7. "Tell me what your group thinks." —seeing a stereotype, not an expert. A person is seen as a representative of his/her sex, race, religion, age group, etc, instead of as a professional working at the firm.

Our data also shed light on our promise that, if you can discuss the "undiscussables," you can often resolve them. A small number within our sample, one in twenty, say that in their work environment people are "extremely likely" to initiate frank and respectful discussions when one of the seven problems occurs. While these crucial conversations don't completely eliminate the impact of the problems, they do reduce it by 47%. Open, respectful dialogue is a powerful corrective to concerns about respect, equity, and fairness.

Tips to Get Started

These seven crucial conversations are tricky to navigate. We've spent thousands of hours watching what people do to succeed in these dicey moments. Here are a few steps that will reduce your stress and increase your chance of a good outcome.

- 1. Silence isn't Golden, it's Collusion.** Cultural norms are maintained only when everyone holds everyone accountable. So, if you witness one of the seven issues, speak up in a frank and respectful way. Don't wait for the offended party to speak up first. They are watching you to see if it's safe. If you don't speak up you will be seen as approving.
- 2. Assume no Evil Intent.** Many of these bad behaviors aren't motivated by any bad intent. Some of the perpetrators aren't aware of what they are doing; others are aware of the behavior, but not its consequences. They aren't intending to create a hostile environment. When possible, approach the issue as a "coaching moment." For example, Amy might find an appropriate time to begin the following conversation with Josh: "There is something you do, I think without noticing, when someone else joins us in a conversation..."
- 3. Focus on the Pattern, not just the Incident.** Most of these issues involve patterns of problems that build up over time. While

a single incident may be relatively trivial, as the pattern builds, so do frustration levels. The mistake people make is to “overreact” to the incident when it’s the pattern that’s their true concern. Amy’s concern isn’t with whether she’s been included or excluded from any single conversation; she’s concerned that Josh nearly always excludes her when a man joins their conversation.

4. **Start with Facts, not Conclusions.** These seven issues are crucial because they lead people to draw conclusions about whether others are respectful and fair or whether they are prejudiced and bigoted. But don’t begin with these conclusions. Begin with your perception of the facts. Stick to specific observations, and encourage the other person to share their perceptions of the same situation. For example, Amy might say: “When someone else joins us, especially if it’s a man, I begin to feel excluded from the conversation. I have trouble catching your eye when I want to speak, and your questions seem directed to the other person. Sometimes I start to answer a question, and find you answering for me. When this pattern happens again and again, I begin to wonder whether you have forgotten I’m part of the conversation.”
5. **Dialogue, not Monologue.** Don’t approach the conversation as if it were a monologue. If your goal is to tell them what they’ve done wrong, and to put them in their place, you’ll be guaranteed to provoke defensiveness. People who seek out dialogue experience the reverse. They still share their full concerns, but are also sincerely interested in the other person’s perspective. Their openness invites openness in others. When your goal is dialogue rather than monologue, your crucial conversations tend to lead to mutual learning rather than dueling defenses. For example, Amy might ask: “Help me understand this from your perspective. I know you don’t intend any disrespect.”

Tips for Leaders

The problem isn’t that these seven problems exist in your organization. The problem occurs when they become undiscussable, and thus unsolvable. That’s when they turn ugly, destroying relationships, reputations, and performance. Leaders need to bring these seven undiscussables out into the open, where they can be acknowledged, discussed, and resolved.

Knowing that these seven are especially crucial makes it easy to focus your efforts on the right conversations and on setting a tone for what is and is not permissible. The leader, in effect, sets an example for the organization. Just as important, you need to focus on the right people. Two groups within your organization need to lead this kind of effort: your organization’s formal leaders and respected peers. If individuals

know their managers will support them, and see the peers they respect speaking up, they are far more likely to have these crucial conversations.

The initiative itself needs to include a variety of elements. We’ll outline a few using the TV detective, Perry Mason’s, questions: “Do the people in your organization have the Means, the Motive, and the Opportunity to have these crucial conversations?”

Means: Make sure your leaders have the means, the skills they need, to succeed in these conversations. The key will be to target these seven crucial conversations, and to have your leaders practice their skills in a safe environment with each other and with their managers. Once your leaders have the skills and have put them into practice with each other, you will begin to see them spread across the rest of your organization.

Motive: People fear these conversations. They don’t expect their managers to support them. In fact, many believe they’ll be punished for broaching such sensitive topics. Leaders need to document and discuss the consequences of not having these crucial conversations—the impacts the organization is currently experiencing to reputations, employee engagement, productivity, recruitment, and retention. To help leaders in this process we’ve created a free survey you can use to document these seven problems and their impacts.

Opportunity: “There isn’t time,” “It’s not my job,” “I’d be the only one speaking up,” and “I’m afraid of retaliation.” When people don’t have the crucial conversations, these are the excuses they give us. And there is truth to each of them. Leaders can change this situation by creating opportunities—forums where these seven conversations are modeled and discussed, and then actually conducted.

Conclusions

The ability to excel in a diverse world is becoming increasingly important. Today’s workforces, suppliers, and customers are already amazingly diverse along dimensions such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, language, education, economic class, etc. And this diversity is bound to grow as work becomes increasingly global and interconnected. Organizations need to leverage this diversity into a competitive advantage or it will become a major stumbling block.

At the same time, misunderstandings, missteps, and bad behavior are inevitable. But remember, the problem isn’t that these seven issues happen; the problem is that they can’t be discussed. Make them discussable, have the crucial conversations, and people will solve them.

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