

Silent Danger: Five Crucial Conversations of a Safety Culture

**David Maxfield, Ph.D.
VitalSmarts
Provo, UT**

**Joseph Grenny
VitalSmarts
Provo, UT**

One of our guys was changing out a commercial meter. When you're doing that you should always vent the gas outside. Everyone knows that, but we sometimes skip it because we're trying to keep up with the schedule. Well, the small room he was in filled with gas and was eventually ignited by the nearby water heater. The room blew up and the worker was trapped inside by a locked door. Luckily someone opened the door before the worker got killed. He came out badly burned. That slowed us down for a while, but now I see us feeling pressured again to not let the team down when things get crazy.

In the U.S., many of the most obvious workplace threats have been reduced or eliminated, making American workers far safer. Time lost due to workplace injuries dropped a whopping 54.9 percent between 1991 and 2008. These improvements were seen across all industries, geographic regions, and companies of various sizes.¹ However, despite this positive trend, there is evidence that these improvements are beginning to stall.² In 2007, more than 5,600 people were killed on the job and more than 4 million were injured.³ What's more, these injuries cost firms more than \$48.6 billion.⁴

The vast majority of the gains in workplace safety can be attributed to improvements in equipment, policies, systems, and training.⁵ However, these formal tools often fail to address informal, cultural challenges. At VitalSmarts, we wanted to identify workplace threats that could be easily solved and yet persist due to these cultural norms and social taboos. We conducted interviews and surveys among more than 1,500 employees from more than 20 firms. Our research revealed that the ugly secret behind most workplace injuries is that someone is aware of the threat well in advance, but is either unwilling or unable to speak up.

¹ Tony Donato, Matt Crofts, and Melissa Brown, "Workers Compensation Claim Frequency Continues Its Decline in 2008," *NCCI Research Brief*, July 2009.

² DiDonato et al, p. 1.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, July 2009.

⁴ "2008 Workplace Safety Index," Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety, 2008.

⁵ Leveson, Nancy, "The Need for New Paradigms in Safety Engineering," in *Safety-Critical Systems*, edited by C. Dale and T. Anderson. Springer Verlag, 2009.

Specifically, we uncovered five crucial conversations that exist in most organizations that are politically incorrect or uncomfortable to surface. A whopping 93 percent of employees say their workgroup is currently at risk from one or more of these five “accidents waiting to happen.” In fact, nearly half are aware of an injury or death caused by these workplace dangers.

The five crucial conversations of a safety culture are:

1. **Get It Done.** Unsafe practices that are justified by tight timelines.
2. **Undiscussable Incompetence.** Unsafe practices that stem from skill deficits that can't be discussed.
3. **Just this Once.** Unsafe practices that are justified as exceptions to the rule.
4. **This Is Overboard.** Unsafe practices that bypass precautions considered excessive.
5. **Are You a Team Player?** Unsafe practices that are justified for the good of the team, company, or customer.

Get It Done

According to the study, 78 percent of respondents see their coworkers take unsafe shortcuts and 19 percent can cite an injury or death caused by one of these unsafe shortcuts. One respondent illustrates what can happen when jobs are rushed and rules avoided:

When a welder tripped on a bleach hose, broke the nozzle, and was burned, the Emergency Response Team quickly shut off the valve to the hose. Since they were in a rush, the leader of the team stood on a milk crate because he didn't feel he had time to get the appropriate equipment to reach the valve. The crate tipped over and the supervisor came down hard, ripping his protective suit and getting an even bigger burn than the welder had received.

Despite grave consequences, when it comes to speaking up, 75 percent of the workforce believes these common and risky shortcuts are undiscussable.

Undiscussable Incompetence

Sixty-five percent of respondents see their coworkers create unsafe conditions due to incompetence and 18 percent can cite an injury or death caused by this problem. One respondent describes the risks of incompetence:

Some people just don't get it. For example, when blocking a line, they'll just kink it rather than putting on a squeeze. The problem is that kinking the line could cause a static ignition. It cause a fire out on the coast. One guy told me he thought static electricity works different here because we're inland. Yeah, whatever. One of these days, someone is gonna get themselves burned.

When it comes to incompetence, only 26 percent say they can speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting the team at risk.

Just This Once

More than half of our survey respondents (55 percent) see their coworkers make unsafe exceptions in an attempt to correct mistakes or salvage opportunities. For example:

We had to change out one of the catalysts. When we swapped it out, we put the wrong catalyst in and had to redo the job. This required moving a 150-pound cover. This is a job for a crane, but since we were trying to correct our mistake, we decided to remove the cover with a forklift. This was obviously against safety protocol. We ended up dropping the cover, damn near crushing our maintenance guy.

When it comes to making exceptions to rules and policies, only one in four people are willing to speak up and share their real concerns with the person who is putting the team at risk.

This Is Overboard

Old habits often trump new or changing rules. According to the study, 66 percent of respondents see their coworkers violating safety precautions they've discounted. Twenty-two percent can cite an injury or death caused by these violations. For example:

One guy fell off his ladder and now we have a new ladder policy. You are always supposed to have someone hold the ladder and once you reach the top, you're supposed to always tie the ladder off. Well, even though policy has changed, not many of us follow it. I'd say 75 percent of us still do it the old way. There's just not much danger in it. We're trained professionals. We know what we're doing.

When people dismiss new rules and procedures, close to three out of four either say nothing or fall short of speaking up candidly to share their real concerns.

Are You a Team Player?

According to the survey, 63 percent of respondents see their coworkers violating safety precautions "for the good of the team, company, or customer." And as a result, 17 percent can cite an injury or death caused by these violations. One respondent shares his experience:

Sometimes we're expected to go into manholes with energized cable. This is not a safe practice and it's not in line with our policy, but our only alternative is to turn the power off, which would make our customers angry and wouldn't fly with management. So I go in and do the work anyway. It's my job to get the power on and that's what I'll do. I'm not gonna wimp out.

In order to save face, keep customers happy, or meet expectations, only 28 percent say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting the team at risk.

These five undiscussables account for a vast number of accidents waiting to happen. And it's not that the people who remain silent don't care. Our research confirmed that while employees saw and recognized threats, when it came to preventing injury or death, cultural norms prevailed. In fact, when employees saw one of these five threats, only one in four spoke up and said or did anything to prevent the accident from occurring.

And yet, what we observed wasn't bystander apathy; it was more like bystander agony. Employees described themselves as "holding their breath," "feeling tortured as they watched," and "not able to watch" as their coworkers put themselves and others in danger.

Notice however, that none of these conversations are actually undiscussable. There is always a minority, ranging from 25 to 28 percent, who speak up effectively and address the unsafe situation. These few individuals have an amazing impact: 63 percent of the time they create a safer situation.

This correlation makes sense. People who feel able to confront and resolve potential problems they see take action and make the environment safer for everyone. Consider one example of a peer addressing the incompetence of another frontline worker in a way that is both candid and respectful.

"I'd like to talk to you about an important concern. You may not realize it, but I think the way you do certain procedures puts yourself and the rest of the crew at risk. I really

value our relationship and respect your experience and so I'd like to explore this issue with you. Can I explain what I'm seeing and get your point of view?"

What is most important about an interaction like this is that it gets to the heart of the accident waiting to happen. An individual with the skills to speak up like this in crucial moments is essentially motivating the other person to behave differently based on the natural consequences of his or her behavior—in this case putting others at risk. Those who use this tentative approach, and other crucial conversations skills, find that their coworkers are more willing to listen and solve the problem. So at the root, the problem is not that speaking up doesn't work, it's that speaking up doesn't happen.

What Leaders Can Do

So what will it take to move an entire organization from risky silence to a culture of candor and accountability? Because of the pervasiveness of silence around these five crucial conversations, we've paid special attention to those few who skillfully address them. As we've studied best-practice skills in Fortune 500 organizations for the past three decades, we've found ways to help leaders effectively discuss and resolve these issues before they cause damage.

Below are best practices safety directors and leaders can follow to both address these crucial conversations when they face them, as well as build system-wide organizational competence at resolving them.

1. **Bang the drum.** These crucial issues are so common that most safety leaders have stopped seeing them. Leaders should not expect to improve their organization's competence at these five crucial conversations without first making them visible. Sharing the data in this article is a great way to draw attention to the crucial nature of these issues and start a dialogue around how to build a culture of accountability.
2. **Baseline and measure regularly.** Leaders who are serious about building accountability regularly survey how well people are doing at addressing these kinds of crucial issues. A survey is available at www.vitalsmarts.com/safety for this purpose. These surveys draw attention to a) the existence of the crucial issues in your organization; and b) whether they are being adequately discussed and addressed.
3. **Invest in skills.** Most safety managers and front-line employees lack the confidence to address these politically sensitive issues because they don't know how to lead such risky discussions. Our research shows that organizations with strong cultural norms of candor invest substantial resources in training their employees to speak up skillfully during these crucial moments. This finding was strongly supported in a previous study we conducted regarding the safety risks in healthcare.

We asked doctors and nurses who failed to speak up when they saw colleagues put patients' health and lives at risk why they said nothing and allowed the behavior to continue. The two most common reasons were: 1) it's not my job; and 2) I didn't know *how* to speak up in a way that would be heard. These same reasons were echoed in our interviews regarding workplace safety. One thing our research makes clear is that real progress in creating a culture of accountability begins by addressing this ability gap. Individuals need to be trained in how to speak up about these emotionally and politically risky issues in a way that will work.

The research shows a handful of people in your organization are already speaking up and preventing accidents from occurring around them. Training the silent majority in this

same skill set is a powerful way to ensure the culture changes to one where everyone speaks up.

4. **Hold senior management accountable.** Investing in employee competence is necessary but insufficient. Holding sponsors, managers and executives accountable for responding to and welcoming these crucial conversations is the other half of the formula.
5. **Reward.** Finally, executives should highlight and reward people who take a risk and raise these crucial conversations on the job. The key to getting 100 people to speak up is to publicly reward the first one who does.

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, “All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to say nothing.” It turns out that a culture of silence has created an unintentional collusion that contributes to four million injuries every year. The future of safety—not to mention the futures of four million workers who will otherwise be injured in the coming year—cannot be secured without a deep change in people’s ability to step up to and hold the necessary crucial conversations. It is a change in behavior we are confident will leave organizations twice blessed—with a safer and more productive workplace.

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