

Crossing That Shaky Bridge to Your Manager's Open Door

The Challenge of Creating a SpeakUp Work Culture

**The surge of scandal revelations and harassment accusations against powerful figures has brought an uncomfortable fact to light:
Maintaining a 'speakup' culture is anything but easy.**

By Daniel Baitch Ph.D.



“For days I agonized over whether to tell somebody what was happening. But who -- Human Resources? Corporate Security? It would be my word against my manager’s. Who would they believe? And what if she found out it was me that spoke up?”

- Employee at a management consulting firm, referring to a manager’s treatment of a colleague

November 2017: The Flood

A sleeping giant awoke in the final weeks of 2017. In the wake of a decades-long chain of corporate scandals, related to everything from exploding airbags and oilrigs to exploding sub-prime mortgages, a torrent of sexual harassment accusations against producer Harvey Weinstein and other powerful public figures gushed through the media. The #MeToo Movement sprang worldwide. Previously silenced accusers and whistleblowers washed into the headlines, talking not only about their stifled efforts to speak up about harassment, but about their muffled and disregarded attempts to speak truth to power in general. By December, Time Magazine had selected ‘The Silence Breakers’ as the Person of the Year.

Was the cascade of accusation and whistle blowing good news or bad news? On the upside, the repressed pain, anger and humiliation of many women and men whose stories were previously discounted suddenly gained credibility.



Photos courtesy of Time Magazine and UPI

The veil of disbelief and intimidation that kept harassment victims stifled began to lift. It was impossible to ignore that even the most admired and respected news anchors, entertainers, corporate execs, board members and politicians can break bad, and that the 'casting couch' was still a solid piece of office furniture. As a side effect, it seemed that the importance of encouraging employees to speak up, regarding anything from an ethical meltdown to a legal violation to a safety code infraction, reached the tipping point. It became evident that some of the most well regarded companies continued illegal and unethical practices while muting, intimidating and even firing 'problematic' whistleblowers with settlement agreements and permanent gag orders.

On the down side: It became painfully clear that many companies' efforts to create a *speakup culture* have fallen short, despite years of valiant efforts and 'upward voice' initiatives. For instance, although the #MeToo Movement is still encouraging more people to speak out, most women who experience sexual harassment at work (nearly 70%, but considerably higher for some groups like LGBTQ) still don't report it to a superior.¹

'See Something, Say Something'...Really?

Work environments can range from *speakup* environments to *shutdown* environments. Across the range, leaders' words tend to encourage employees to submit ideas, give constructive feedback, and alert management when something is amiss. There may be fliers in hallways and elevators that say "See something? Say something!" Executives may claim, "My door is open"; there may even be anonymous 'speakup' telephone lines, suggestion boxes, and reporting websites. But when it comes to the way leaders respond when employees actually do speak up, the two environments are like day and night.

In a speakup environment, management's primary concern is to identify problems, surface ideas, seek feedback, and resolve issues quickly while keeping *speak-uppers* safe from any kind of retaliation. In a shutdown environment, leaders are more defensive and dismissive than open and

accepting. Here, an employee's words can end up swept under a rug, and she or he can end up swept under a proverbial bus. In fact, a common thread runs through the largest corporate scandals in 2017, according to Fortune. Either those who knew about improper practices didn't alert management, or they spoke up and management didn't take corrective action.

Fortune: 10 biggest Scandals of 2017



<http://fortune.com/2017/12/31/biggest-corporate-scandals-misconduct-2017-pr/>

Take, for instance, the Wells-Fargo scandal. Wells-Fargo fired 5,300 employees for initiating some 3.5 million fraudulent 'ghost' savings, credit card and checking accounts, without customers' consent or knowledge, over a five-year period. Aside from the havoc that the scandal caused -- a combined \$185 million dollars in fines before additional civil and criminal suits -- what's particularly unnerving about this case was the sheer number of people who knew that the company was acting deceitfully, how long the illegal practices continued, and how unfairly the company dealt with those who attempted to blow a whistle.

"Everybody knew there was fraud going on, (but) the people trying to flag it were the ones who got in trouble." - Former Wells-Fargo branch manager in Scottsdale, Arizona, to the New York Times²

More Than Mere Paranoia

In organizations where employees have raised their hand and been shut down or have seen others taken to the woodshed for speaking their minds, they have reason to hesitate. For instance, in one study of harassment accusers, 75 percent of workplace harassment victims experienced some form of retaliation after they spoke up.³

Some of the harassment victims who finally ended their silence during the Great Post-Weinstein Flood told nightmare scenarios about management's previous responses. Collectively, they claimed they were accused of deception, disloyalty, and even treason. To various degrees, they were criticized, ostracized, snubbed, cold-shouldered, excluded, shunned, bullied, intimidated, humiliated, denied career opportunities and promotions, treated like spies and turncoats, and called everything from 'snitch' to 'bottom-feeder'. Some were given unfair performance ratings, and some lost their jobs.

"(I eventually dropped it)...I needed the job. Being 57 years old, I didn't feel I had career options."

Tamara Holder, a former Fox News employee, stated on CNN (December 18, 2017) that throughout her reporting of sexual harassment by a Fox News executive, the company's management *"ruined my life."* *"All I wanted to do was work,"* she stated. However, her settlement with Fox News prevented her from working for any company affiliated with 20th Century Fox, and it included a gag order that prevented her from speaking about the incident.⁴

Sadly, stories like Tamara's contribute to the perception that many companies' efforts to encourage employees to voice their ideas, concerns, and opinions are mere 'window-dressing'.

"Management's stated intentions didn't match the reality. You speak up, rightfully or helpfully, and leaders forget that they encouraged it. They instead switch perspective to the speak-upper being the problem. They put things in their policies to outwardly impress, which they don't inwardly wish to see in action." – Andrea Ignacio DC, Health Care Professional

In focus groups conducted in several financial and technology companies, some participants praised their managers' sincere efforts, encouragement and receptiveness to their opinions, feedback and ideas. But at least as many learned painful lessons:

"The nail that pops up gets whacked."
"The squeaky wheel gets replaced."
"No good deed goes unpunished."
"Shame on me...I knew better than to rock that boat."

The Case for a Speakup Culture

The multitudes who latched onto the #MeToo Movement demanded that organizations take a hard look at their cultures. There are good reasons to follow that course. For one, if employees don't feel comfortable providing feedback to management, they may be more than willing to share it with the rest of the world on social media platforms like Glassdoor, which provides some 35 million candid reviews of over 700,000 organizations.⁵

"You guys march to your own drummer and dismiss suggestions by the people who actually do the work." – A former employee, posted on Glassdoor

Prospective employees, customers and investors are increasingly studying those reviews before making decisions. Negative reviews are inevitable, but consistent themes in negative reviews can indelibly scar a company's name. Accusations are like rogue genies, once they break loose on social media, they're impossible to shove back into the bottle.

However, the case for a speakup culture is more than defensive. Recent research conducted by James Detert and Ethan Burris, published in Harvard Business Review, revealed that at several financial services firms, business units whose employees reported speaking up more frequently had significantly better financial and operational results than others.⁶

Another trend, *technological convergence*, makes the case for a speakup culture even more compelling. Complex technologies, including *artificial intelligence* (AI), *internet of things* (IOT), *robotics*, *cloud computing*, and *additive manufacturing*, are suddenly and dramatically converging. Until recently, jobs that were automated were primarily repetitive. Because of convergence, more complex tasks requiring recognition and decision-making are being automated, leaving people with more intellectually complex jobs that require deep technical knowledge and training. The importance of creating environments that encourage smart people to stay and freely contribute their best thinking has never been greater.

“Plenty of big brands are clueing in to the fact that not listening to employees can lead to disgruntled staff -- but it also might mean missing out on the next great business innovation.”⁷

Beyond innovation, an environment that truly encourages upward voice can help leaders work more effectively. A manager who trusts that employees will speak up can be confident that hidden brush fires don't burn down the whole forest.



Gossamer Threads, Easily Broken

Important as it is, a speakup culture isn't something that can be accomplished and done. Like spider webs, cultures are complex, built on fragile threads of trust and confidence. They need to be continually monitored and repaired. Even in organizations with unwaveringly ethical track records, one leader's insincerity, hypocrisy, or the slightest discrepancy between words and actions can destroy hard-earned trust.

Google, known for its innovative culture, is no exception. The company is currently embroiled in a firestorm of a lawsuit in which the culture's diversity efforts are clashing head-on with its value of openness to diverse ideas. In August of 2014, engineer James Damore was fired by CEO Sundar Pichai after he wrote a controversial memo, arguing that Google had gone overboard in its efforts to develop a diverse workforce. In the memo, Damore drew attention to the company's "ideological echo chamber". He suggested that women are not under-represented in the engineer ranks because of discrimination, but because of their generally lower interest in software engineering. The memo

went viral. His words received passionate responses, ranging from supportive to threatening; in an online Google forum one manager wrote:

"You know, there are certain alternative views...which I do not want people to feel safe to share here. You can believe that women or minorities are unqualified all you like—I can't stop you—but if you say it out loud, you deserve what's coming to you."⁸

Regardless of the outcome of the lawsuit, after firing employees that expressed oppositional points of view, Google will have to rebuild many employees' confidence in safely expressing their opinions.

So Should I Speak Up or Shut Up?

"Ultimately you ask yourself, 'is this a hill I'm willing to die on?'" – Dr. Allan Colquitt, Global Director, Employee Effectiveness and Workforce Research, Eli Lilly and Company

Building a speakup culture requires an understanding of what influences an employee to speak up or remain silent. The results of a study several years ago at Lilly, a leading pharmaceutical, are consistent with those of many other similar studies. At Lilly, researchers Dr. David Futrell, Dr. Alan Colquitt and others found that two factors ultimately prevent employees from speaking up.

- The first factor is *psychological safety*. Employees expressed concern about both the short-term consequences (e.g., ruffling feathers, causing conflict, performance management ratings) and long-term consequences (e.g., impacting their personal 'brand', future promotion opportunities).
- Second is the *futility factor*. Employees can get the impression that their efforts to make an impact won't make a difference.

"This usually happens when they've taken risks in the past to speak up and while nothing negative happened, their boss or the organization failed to act on the information. This leads to a feeling of helplessness, so they just keep their heads down and their mouths shut." – Dr. David Futrell, Formerly applied researcher at Eli Lilly and Company

An employee can get a sense of futility from personal experiences, observations, or even assumptions that:

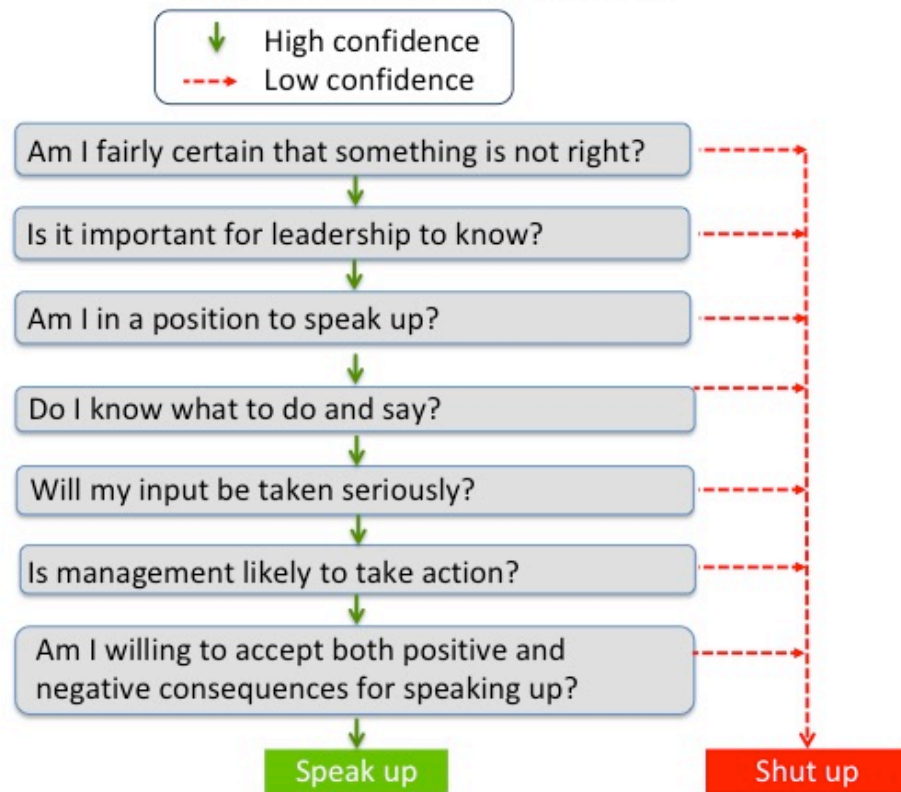
- Previous suggestions disappeared into the void
- A manager is gun-shy and reluctant to speak to his or her own management
- Management is more interested in staying on plan than in making incremental improvements or solving problems

Leaders may also not understand the complexity of employees' decisions to speak up or remain silent. Importantly, leaders don't always appreciate that there's far more than a knee-jerk reaction between 'see something' and 'say something'. Take, for example, an employee's tormenting decision

whether to alert management of an unethical practice. Before taking any action, she may ruminate on at least the seven questions (decision points) below:

Did I see something? Should I say something?

A Whistleblower's Decision Tree



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“The reality is, (employees) worry—rightly or not—that (managers will) take their comments personally, or that they’ll come across as disrespectful know-it-alls.”⁴

The Whistleblower's Dilemma

Given our survival instincts, it's not surprising that we often think carefully before speaking up. A manager's response to a suggestion could be everything from acceptance and appreciation to silence and anger. His or her door may be open, but a few steps down a hall to that door can feel like a paralyzing stumble over a shaky bridge.

The Manager's Dilemma

While managers need to be encouraging and keep their doors open, they often don't want to hear bad news, or even great ideas that could throw things off-schedule or off budget. If a manager is concerned about looking bad or weak at resolving interpersonal issues, it can be difficult to listen graciously without showing negative non-verbal signals. He or she may have to walk the same shaky

bridge to another manager. A sigh, a roll of the eyes or crossed arms is enough to say *"I really don't want to hear this."*



Courtesy of Adam Zyglis, Buffalo News, 2016.

Is There a Key to a Speakup Culture?

Amy Edmonson, a professor at Harvard Business School states the answer simply:

"Anything an organization can do to prevent the widespread belief that (speaking up) is unsafe or not worth your time is likely to enhance the upward communication flow."⁶

Dr. Futrell points out that organizations need to address the psychological safety and futility factors with different approaches.

- Addressing the futility factor means employees have to be convinced that something good can happen if they do speak up.
- To address the psychological safety factor, employees have to be convinced that nothing bad will happen if they speak up. (Futrell relates the story about the employee who passes a mirror and says, "Wow....when did that knife get stuck in my back?")

Nearly all major companies go to great lengths to create anonymous reporting systems, based on the idea that employees will feel safer if they can't be identified. In fact, some companies are starting to use artificially intelligent chat-bots such as *Spot* that provides anonymity while employing a *Cognitive Interview* technique to improve the accuser's ability to recall details.

However, as Detert and Burris point out, anonymity makes it difficult for investigators to gather sufficient information. Anonymous systems also may reinforce the impression that speaking up is unsafe.⁶ Instead, management should actively and continually solicit feedback and model both giving and graciously receiving upward voice at every opportunity.

Focus group participants across financial organizations also emphasize:

- Ensure that employees are clear about correct and incorrect practices
"It's hard to speak up if I'm not sure about what's in and out of bounds."
- Minimize the employee-manager power differential and any intimidating physical barriers. For instance, it may be helpful to find a neutral location to talk, as opposed to talking across a manager's imposing desk.
- Put full attention on the employee
"Speaking up needs its partner - listening up. Often we forget to complete the circle. Listening capacities need to be developed and practiced." - Raquel Ark, Communication expert, coach, facilitator, Founder of Listening Alchemy
- Communicate a sincere desire to hear what employees have to say
"Don't tell me you want my feedback and then shut me down when I offer it."
- Express appreciation
"Give credit to people who contribute ideas, whether or not they're adopted."
- Model transparency
"Let me know what's done with what I suggest, even if the decision is to do nothing."
- Show an unwavering commitment to protect employee
"Convince me that I won't get burned if I say what I want you to know."

Reversing the Mindset

Leaders commonly try to encourage speaking up by assuring employees that if they say what's on their minds, they won't end up like a bug on a windshield. This "not negative" approach ignores a wide range of positives:

"Ideally we'd like employees to be 100% certain that speaking up is the right decision. But even if we can shift the math so that employees feel 80% confident that speaking up will have a positive impact on their career rather than merely having no negative impact, speaking up should be a much more common choice." – Dr. Scott Young, Client Director, Gartner

If employees see the journey from 'see' to 'say' as a shaky bridge, they will have little faith that they won't end up tumbling into an abyss. Creating a speakup culture means ensuring all employees that the path is stable, the bridge is strong, and that leadership has their backs.

“When it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: Either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.” — Dr. Edward Teller, theoretical physicist

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