



# Silent Danger

The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety

# Silent Danger

## The Five Crucial Conversations That Drive Workplace Safety

*“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. We don’t want to be the weak link in the team. So we not only skip the venting, but have stopped reminding each other when we see our buddies taking risks. Well, the small room he was in filled with gas and was eventually ignited by the nearby water heater. The room blew up with the worker trapped inside by a locked door. Luckily someone in the hallway opened the door before the worker got killed. He came out badly burned. That slowed us down for a few months, but now I see us feeling pressured again to not let the team down when things get crazy. I sometimes feel like I should say something. But . . . ”*

In the U.S., many of the most obvious workplace threats have been reduced or eliminated, making American workers 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.<sup>1</sup> However, despite this positive trend, there is evidence these improvements are beginning to stall.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, more than 5,600 people were killed on the job and more than 4 million were injured.<sup>3</sup> What’s more, these injuries cost firms upwards of \$48.6 billion.<sup>4</sup>

The vast majority of the gains in workplace safety can be attributed to improvements in equipment, policies, systems, and training.<sup>5</sup> Leaders have applied quality, statistical, and project-management tools to safety issues and have achieved remarkable results. However, these formal tools often fail to address challenges that are less formal, are cultural in nature, and exist unacknowledged like icebergs below the waterline. These overlooked obstacles include entrenched habits, social norms, and informal practices.

This study probes below the surface by looking for unsafe conditions that are broadly recognized yet allowed to continue because of cultural norms and social taboos. 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. Our study shows the greatest danger today is not from ignorance or inattention to risks—but from silence. The next leap forward in workplace safety will come not just from additional changes to processes, technology, or policies, but from changes to behavior. Unless and until the code of silence is broken, we’ll continue to suffer completely avoidable losses in both health and performance.

### The Study

Through extensive exploratory and confirmatory research, this study uncovered five workplace threats that are especially likely to persist as “undiscussables” in safety-conscious organizations throughout the U.S. To identify these threats, we studied more than 1,600 frontline

<sup>1</sup> “Workers Compensation Claim Frequency Continues Its Decline in 2008,” Tony DiDonato, Matt Crotts, and Melissa Brown, NCCI Research Brief, July 2009.

<sup>2</sup> DiDonato et al, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, July 2009.

<sup>4</sup> 2008 Workplace Safety Index, Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The Need for New Paradigms in Safety Engineering, Nancy Leveson, in *Safety-Critical Systems: Problems, Process and Practice* edited by C Dale and T Anderson. Springer Verlag 2009.

workers, managers, and safety directors across thirty companies during the first half of 2009. In the first phase of the research, we conducted on-site interviews and focus groups with 130 people across all levels from eight different companies to find and analyze patterns of poor communication that threatened workplace safety. We then verified these patterns through a survey administered to 1,500 employees across all levels from twenty-two different organizations to test whether and how breakdowns in communication were confronted, and to test the impacts these breakdowns had on workplace safety.

What we found is that a whopping 93 percent of employees say their workgroup is currently at risk from one or more of five undiscussables or “accidents waiting to happen.” And nearly half are aware of an injury or death caused by these workplace dangers.

The astonishing and troubling finding is that when employees see one of these five threats, only one in four speak up. This failure to speak up and correct unsafe conditions allows these risks to continue despite the inevitability of injury.

Based on the results of the research, we argue that more training, safety audits, and other tools that address the plainly obvious threats to workplace safety, while important, will never be enough to create a truly safe environment. The employees in this study already see and recognize these visible threats at the tip of the iceberg but choose to remain silent because of barriers that are hidden below the surface. Our research indicates that the “below-the-waterline” threats are the norms, habits, and assumptions embedded in the organization’s culture. These cultural threats inevitably trump the formal policies. When employees see accidents waiting to happen, they feel culturally constrained from saying or doing anything to prevent them from occurring.

As we saw earlier, a scheduler can feel pressured to wedge one more commercial meter change into the day. Or an electrician can worry about being seen as a slacker because he or she doesn’t turn the jobs around fast enough. So how can you maintain high reliability in a social system when any individual’s action can put safety at risk?

## The Missing Ingredient

Our research shows the missing ingredient for a safety culture is candor. When accountability is carefully and intentionally built into the culture, every employee is responsible for holding his or her peers accountable. In these cultures, the unsafe actions of errant individuals almost never persist. Ensuring a critical mass of people are willing and able to speak up when safety lines are crossed—irrespective of who crosses them—is crucial to a safety culture. There’s the rub. While safety demands that people look out for each other, remind each other, and hold each other accountable, the reason safety risks persist is because in most organizations, people are unwilling and unable to step up to these most crucial of conversations.

In fact, accountability is the implicit assumption that underlies every safety program. Yet our findings show this assumption is more fiction than fact. Consequently, accountability is the critical weakness of the above-the-waterline approach to safety. If people don’t hold each other accountable for acting on observed threats, then more training to help them recognize threats will be of limited value. Silence, not blindness, is the problem.

This discovery also points to an exceptionally high-leverage strategy for improving workplace safety. This study identifies five threats that are most likely to turn into undiscussables. If leaders focus on these five threats and transform them from undiscussables into approachable accountability discussions, they can expect dramatic improvements in workplace safety.

And while safety improvement is reason enough to build a cultural capacity for dealing with these crucial conversations, the potential benefits go far beyond ensuring human health. Our study shows that investing in people’s capacity to step up to such conversations can likewise lead to improved accountability for quality, productivity, cost control, HR policies, and any other area of performance. *When people learn to sustain high levels of accountability in any area, they can perform better in every area.*

## The Five Crucial Conversations That Drive Workplace Safety

To uncover the five crucial conversations of safety, we started by looking for the telltale signs of an “accident waiting to happen.” We found that these signs combine two elements of any risk assessment: they are common and they are costly. But we also found a third element: these are risks that have become undiscussable.

Below are the conversations that fit these three quantitative conditions. We illustrate each conversation with real-life examples drawn from our interview data.

1. **Get It Done.** Unsafe practices that are justified by tight deadlines.
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 results, 78 percent of respondents see their coworkers take unsafe shortcuts. What's more, 19 percent can cite an injury or death caused by one of these unsafe shortcuts. Yet only 25 percent of employees say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk. What is most astounding is that **these common and risky shortcuts are undiscussable for 75 percent of the workforce.**

*"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 bleach 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."*

—frontline employee in the chemical manufacturing industry

**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 incompetence. While 26 percent say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk, **the remaining 74 percent of workers say safety risks sustained by incompetence are undiscussable.**

*"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, where a squeeze couldn't. We had it cause a fire out on the coast. One guy told me he thought static electricity works different here because we're inland. Yeah, okay. One of these days someone is gonna get themselves burned."*

—frontline employee in the utility industry

**Just this Once.** The results confirm that 55 percent of respondents see their coworkers make unsafe exceptions and 18 percent can cite an injury or death caused by these exceptions. Despite the prevalence of this potentially fatal oversight, **only one in four speak up and share their real concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk.**

*"We had to change out one of the catalysts (a heavy industrial component). 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."*

—frontline employee in the chemical manufacturing industry

**This Is Overboard.** The majority of respondents, 66 percent, see their coworkers violate safety precautions they've discounted; 22 percent can cite an injury or death caused by these violations. Yet **close to three out of four either say nothing or fall short of speaking up candidly to share their real concerns.**

*"One guy fell off his ladder and now we have a new ladder policy. You are always supposed to have someone hold the ladder as you ascend it, and then you're supposed to always tie the ladder off once you reach the top. If you're working on the ladder, you need to tie off on the ladder. 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."*

—frontline employee in the oil and gas industry

**Are You a Team Player?** The data reveals 63 percent of respondents see their coworkers violate safety precautions "for the good of the team, company, or customer." What's more, 17 percent can cite an injury or death caused by these violations. And still, only **28 percent say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting the team at risk.**

*"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."*

—frontline employee in the utility industry

Taken together, 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. What we heard in our interviews wasn't bystander apathy; it was more like bystander agony. Employees describe themselves as "holding their breath," "feeling tortured as they watch," and "not able to watch" as their coworkers put themselves and others in danger. But regardless of their fear, employees don't speak up when faced with one of these five undiscussable situations. They don't think it's their role; they don't know how; and they are afraid of retaliation. The cultural norms, habits, and assumptions that exist "below-the-waterline" prevent employees from voicing concerns.

## Learn from the Best, Teach the Rest

Notice that none of the examples above are completely undiscussable. There is always a minority, ranging from 25 to 28 percent, who say they are able to 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—the incompetent practice that puts others' safety at risk. 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.

## Cultures of Silence vs. Cultures of Safety

Twenty-five years of research into the best practices of communicating in high-risk, highly emotional moments have taught us the problem is not that speaking up doesn't work, it's that speaking up doesn't happen. In these undiscussable moments, when it matters the most, most people do their worst at speaking up skillfully in a way that will be heard. Yet our research reveals that a select few who work side by side with the silent majority are able to voice their concerns, and by doing so, prevent accidents.

Organizations that train their employees to speak up when faced with the five undiscussables outlined in this report experience dramatic improvements in their safety record. For example, Pride International, a client of VitalSmarts, built a culture of safety where employees held their peers accountable to policies and procedures by speaking up in crucial moments. In the year following their training initiative, the offshore drilling contractor saw a 55 percent drop in their total incident rate and did not report a single accident where employees were required to take time off the job.

As our data and case studies suggest, widespread competence in these skills—along with other sources of influence required to ensure people

use the skills—is the missing element of most safety cultures. When these "silent dangers" become discussable—when the norm changes from ignoring to confronting—the unsafe behavior stops. According to the research, when people speak up, 82 percent say their actions result in a safer work environment for everyone. The bottom line promise: *leaders who align the "below-the-waterline" cultural elements with the "above-the-waterline" formal elements reap huge advances in safety.*

So what will it take to move from risky silence to a culture of candor and accountability?

VitalSmarts has spent two decades studying this question. Our research has focused on what it takes to influence rapid, profound, and sustainable change in behavior in the face of deeply entrenched cultural norms. The results of that research were recently recognized by *MIT Sloan Management Review* as the "Change Management Approach of the Year." This research outlines the six sources of influence leaders must engage in order to influence and sustain the kind of behavior change we call for here—it requires a workforce that is both motivated and able to speak up when any of these five dangers exist.

One of these sources of influence is personal ability. Organizations with strong cultures invest substantial resources in increasing the ability of individual employees to speak up skillfully and hold crucial conversations. But skills aren't all that is needed. The other five sources of influence described in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, when added to effective investments in increased ability, lead to substantial change in a relatively short period of time. And if leaders sustain the sources of influence required to change these behaviors, the new behaviors become the norm.

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, "All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to say nothing." 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.

"All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to say nothing."

—Elie Wiesel,  
Nobel Laureate

## VitalSmarts Can Help

Leaders need to make improving employees' skills one of their top priorities. The reluctance to speak up and confront coworkers is so deeply rooted in the safety cultures of organizations that it will take a concerted effort by leaders to create lasting improvements. Here are a few recommended next steps:

1. **Establish a baseline and a target for improvement.** The fundamental principle of organizational attention is that if you don't measure it, you don't care about it. Survey your organization to establish a baseline measure of the five crucial conversations for safety and set a clear target for improvement. To help you get started, we've created an organizational assessment that will uncover areas for improvement. **Access the assessment at [www.vital-smarts.com/safety](http://www.vital-smarts.com/safety).** Update the baseline at least quarterly so people can be rewarded and held accountable for progress.
2. **Teach your employees world-class skills.** A handful of people in your organization are already speaking up and preventing accidents from occurring around them. Training can be a powerful way to help others speak up and effectively address the five crucial conversations for safety.

We've distilled this high-leverage skill set into our award-winning training programs, Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations Training, and the *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles. These resources have a proven track record of leading organizations

to results, and when safety is in question, results don't just mean improvements in quality, efficiency, or morale—results equate to saved lives. See [www.vital-smarts.com/safety](http://www.vital-smarts.com/safety) to get started.

3. **Target six sources of influence.** Once you've taught your employees crucial skills, guarantee the success of your training initiative by identifying the few vital behaviors that, if changed, will lead to the safety results you desire. Then, ensure these behaviors are adopted by targeting six sources of influence that both motivate and enable your employees to change. When used appropriately, this influence process will increase your chances of a successful culture change tenfold.

For a complete description of the six sources of influence, as well as instructions for how to apply the "Change Management Approach of the Year" in your organization, see [www.vital-smarts.com/influencerreport](http://www.vital-smarts.com/influencerreport).

To register for a safety Web seminar or find out how VitalSmarts can help you build a culture of safety, visit [www.vital-smarts.com/safety](http://www.vital-smarts.com/safety) or call 1.800.449.5989.



801.765.9600 • [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com)  
282 River Bend Lane Suite 100 Provo, UT

© 2010 VitalSmarts. All Rights Reserved.