

April 13, 2020

**SAFE CONVERSATIONS® AND CORPORATIONS:
BETTER TEAMWORK AND A STRONGER BOTTOM LINE**

By Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D. and Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

I: The Problem

Many businesses today say healthy relationships are critical to success. While they have referred to “corporate culture” and other general concepts in the past, the good news is only recently have corporations specifically languaged the need for ‘healthy relationships’. The bad news is most businesses don’t know how to achieve this. A corporation can achieve excellence in all other areas, only to be defeated by a toxic work environment.

Why is it hard for employees to sometimes get along? Our value system applauds the “best and brightest” – people who earn prestigious degrees and have superior expertise. Unfortunately, none of the qualities that make for an impressive resume are enough to ensure respectful teambuilding in the workplace. Business culture values moneymaking excellence. Those who have worked so hard to get their job may operate with an “I win, you lose mentality.” For those working their way ‘to the top of the ladder’, the goal is to know a lot, say the most, win debates, and out-perform their coworkers. The competitive spirit these goals represent can also get in the way of, or even prohibit, mutually respectful, healthy relationships. So when work relationships get in the way of a company’s success, they are left with a conundrum: What do we need to do differently?

II: The Solution

Our culture values “knowing” and “being smart”. However, the art of “not-knowing” is a powerful tool for connection. Not-knowing goes against everything we are taught to strive for to succeed. Why should we pursue this counterintuitive strategy? The answer is, at least in part, that not-knowing facilitates healthy relationships and healthy relationships are good for business! According to Dan Prosser, author of *Thirteeners: Why Only 13 Percent of Companies Successfully Execute their Strategy—and How Yours Can be One of Them*, companies in which employees practice collaboration rather than competition are 400% more profitable.

Not-knowing is a powerful tool for connection because it opens us up to the people around us, fostering greater mutual respect and strengthening coworkers’ ability to collaborate and innovate together. By empowering people to talk without criticism, listen without judgement, and connect beyond differences, the Safe Conversations process can help build a new culture of connection in the workplace.

For the first time in history the relational sciences are teachable, thanks to advances in the neurosciences in the 1990s. Our Safe Conversations Dialogue is a 3-step communication process that helps people connect respectfully. The Dialogue takes place between a Sender (the person who is sharing) and a Receiver (the person who is listening). Once the Sender has shared their thoughts, the Receiver mirrors the Sender, repeating back what they have said to make sure they understood. The Receiver then asks the Sender “Is there more?” before responding with their own thoughts. When this happens, the Sender instantly relaxes. They feel like the Receiver cares about what they are saying even if the Sender ultimately disagrees with them. This first step of Dialogue creates the conditions that allow the participants to stay connected even when discussing a challenging or contentious topic.

The second step of the process helps the Sender feel further understood by having the Receiver validate what they are feeling. After hearing what the Sender has expressed in the first step, the Receiver responds with “that makes sense” (from the view of the Sender). In the final step, the Receiver moves from validation to empathy. The Receiver puts themselves in the Sender’s shoes and says something like “I imagine when this comes up, it makes you feel x, y, and z...Is that accurate?” The whole Dialogue serves to build mutual respect and understanding between participants.

III: Benefits of Safe Conversations for Businesses

a. The Value of Teamwork

Incorporating Safe Conversations strengthens a person’s teamwork skills. It helps us shift to a mentality of “when we work together, we all win.” This creates an atmosphere of cooperation, collaboration, and co-creation. Adopting an open and collaborative work environment means people will feel more comfortable sharing their ideas. This in turn makes every employee feel heard and valued, which in turn makes them happier, more fulfilled, and more productive team members. Even better from a business perspective, the resulting free-flow of ideas fosters creativity and innovation.

b. Healthy Employees

Creating a healthier work climate also helps create a healthy brain, and healthy brains make for healthy employees. Healthy workers are better able to perform their duties and excel in meeting their goals. Safe Conversations creates the conditions needed for employees to tolerate ambiguity and navigate tense conversations at work. Dan Siegel, an expert in interpersonal neurobiology, argues that tolerating ambiguity is a sign of brain health.ⁱ It allows us to experience difference and otherness without succumbing to the fight, flight, or freeze impulse we so often feel in the face of unfamiliar experiences. This allows people to appreciate rather than fear those who are different from them. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain that allows us to tolerate ambiguity in this way. One of its functions is to help us pause before reacting, meaning we can resist the urge to immediately respond to the stimulus of a new experience and to

instead react in a measured and thoughtful way. It is also part of the brain responsible for neural integration, making it key to mental and emotional health.

As earlier implied, these benefits to the brain also correlate with overall physical health. Productive and thoughtful conversations, like those created through the Safe Conversations Dialogue, release neurochemicals that stimulate body systems and change our body chemistry.ⁱⁱ When a conversation feels safe, the brain releases the neurochemicals of peace and calm - dopamine, acetylcholine, and norepinephrine—which also strengthens the immune system. Thus, a positive work environment leads to healthy employees who get sick less often.

c. The Bottom Line

Finally, Safe Conversations helps employees reach their full potential and, by extension, can positively affect a company's bottom line. Workers value leadership development training at work. In one survey, 70% of employees, and 87% of Millennial generation employees, cited the availability of such training opportunities as a very important factor in their decision about whether or not to stay at job. Moreover, companies that offered such trainings saw a 24% higher profit margin.ⁱⁱⁱ Safe Conversations helps corporations meet this need for leadership education by offering training that cultivates leaders with improved interpersonal skills, who can lead the way to a healthier, more collaborative work environment.

IV: Psychological Safety: Building Effective Teams

In 2012, Google launched Project Aristotle, an initiative to study what made some teams of employees more successful than others. They found that one of the most crucial determinants of a team's success was "psychological safety." This means creating an environment in which team members are free to share their ideas, feelings, and experiences freely without fear of judgement or recrimination. Teams in which people felt free to open up and be their full selves were more productive.^{iv}

The power of the "Is there more?" question in Step 1 of the Dialogue, is in the way it demonstrates active listening and active curiosity on the part of the Receiver. All of us want to feel heard when we express our feelings and concerns, but few of us are trained to be good listeners. Extensive studies conducted by *The Harvard Business Review* led them to the conclusion that "immediately after the average person has listened to someone talk, he remembers only about half of what he has heard—no matter how carefully he thought he was listening."^v

In normal conversation, people are often focused on reacting to what has been said. They are half listening and half preparing their response; they are prepared to challenge the other person if they hear something with which they disagree, to defend themselves if they feel attacked, or to shut down if they feel uncomfortable or threatened by the direction the conversation is taking. By slowing down to make room for curiosity and understanding, the Dialogue can continue without provoking this fight or flight reaction. The people in

conversation are able to stay connected even when difficult topics arise, and everyone feels their point of view has been heard.

When people feel they can share their thoughts without fear of judgment they are more likely to bring their fullest and best selves to their work. Teams function best when everyone both cultivates these practices of listening and curiosity and knows they will benefit from these practices when it is their turn to speak. This is what psychological safety make possible and Safe Conversations has a tried and true method to help organizations achieve it.

V: Conclusion

A final benefit of practicing Safe Conversations in the workplace is that it broadens the path toward innovation. As long as an executive or an employee is certain about the way things should be done, they are closing themselves off to hearing new ideas. Practicing Safe Conversations allows us to listen to one another with openness and curiosity. It allows us to entertain ideas we might have previously judged too strange or unconventional. Such attitudes are the necessary pre-condition for creativity and innovation. Such practices are then a rich source of new ideas and, as a result can lead your company to contribute to society in exciting new ways.

Strong employees alone don't make a company successful. Rather, it is the space between employees – their relationship to another– that distinguishes successful companies from those that fail. While the space between two co-workers may appear to be empty, it in fact, contains an energy field. How two people look at one another, how they speak to one another – both what they say and *how* they say it – all impact this energy field and the overall work environment. Safe Conversations helps create safety in the space between two people, which in turn creates safety throughout the entire company culture.

ⁱ D. J. Siegel (2007). *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conversational-intelligence/201905/the-neuroscience-conversations>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.shiftelearning.com/blog/the-true-cost-of-not-providing-employee-training>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>

^v <https://hbr.org/1957/09/listening-to-people>

