

**SAFE CONVERSATIONS® AND CORPORATIONS:
A STRONGER BOTTOM LINE AND MORE GENDER EQUITY**

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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 languaged specifically 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?

This problem is especially exacerbated for women who have only recently been welcomed into the workplace in a more equitable way. In the last century women have made tremendous professional and economic advancements. Women had been in the workforce, but only in the lowest paid positions. During the labor shortages of WWI and WWII, women rose to the challenge and proved that they could do jobs traditionally reserved for men. Nevertheless, progress was slow.¹ Even in the 1960s, women were still restricted to only certain positions and excluded from leadership roles that were considered “men’s work.” Before 1974, women could not even have a credit card or open a bank account without permission from their husband or a male relative.²

II: The Solution

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

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/women-in-the-workplace-2013-3#facebook-coo-sheryl-sandberg-says-that-were-in-a-stalled-revolution-for-women-but-others-are-arguing-that-were-actually-in-the-womens-second-movement-29>

² Hunt, H. (2018). “Women & Money: How the Concept Has Evolved.” White Paper.

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. It equalizes relationships, which is important in an environment where some, such as women, have historically been at a disadvantage.

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 counter-intuitive strategy? The answer is, at least in part, that non-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.

III: Benefits of Safe Conversations in the Workplace

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, equality, 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. Fostering Gender Equity

Women, in particular, stand to benefit from this improved work environment. Despite tremendous advances in recent decades, women still face significant barriers to advancement in the corporate world. They often feel like their opinions are not taken seriously and their contributions are not valued as much as those of their male colleagues. Safe Conversations provides a conversational structure wherein everyone's voice is heard and honored. It also provides a safe space for employees to convert frustrations into requests. In this way, it improves gender equity one conversation at a time.

c. Healthy Employees

Scientists have found a link between healthy relationships, healthy brains and healthy bodies. Productive and thoughtful conversations, like those created through the Safe Conversations Dialogue, release neurochemicals that stimulate body systems and change our body chemistry.³ 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.

d. The Bottom Line

Finally, Safe Conversations helps employees reach their full potential and, by extension, can positively affect a company's bottom line. Surveys show that employees value ongoing training opportunities in the workplace that help them develop leadership skills. Moreover, companies that offered such training opportunities saw a 24% higher profit margin.⁴ 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. A cooperative, relational workplace further enhances employee productivity by creating an atmosphere of psychological safety in which everyone can bring their best selves to their job. Again, this is to the greatest advantage of those who do not feel their voices are equally respected, such as women.

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

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conversational-intelligence/201905/the-neuroscience-conversations>

⁴ <https://www.shiftelearning.com/blog/the-true-cost-of-not-providing-employee-training>

experiences freely without fear of judgement or recrimination.⁵ This promotes greater equality and mutual respect.

The power of the “Is there more?” question in Step 1 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 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.”⁶

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.

And then, when people feel they can speak without fear of judgment, they are more likely to bring their fullest and best selves to their work. Each person feels respected and of equal value.

V: Building a More Equitable Future

Now, in 2020, women have achieved equal opportunity under the law, but in practice they still face barriers to professional and financial success. Women make up just 7% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies⁷ and only 20% of corporate boards seats are filled by women⁸. Although, these numbers mark tremendous progress from previous decades, they also reveal that women are still very much in the minority of leadership positions.

This is a moment of opportunity. We must seize it to break down barriers and create a society in which everyone’s voice is heard and everyone’s talents are valued. Women are an economic resource whose full potential has not yet been tapped. When companies build cultures of teamwork and cooperation, employees feel equally valued and are able to reach their full potential. When employees realize their full potential, companies succeed and profit!

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>

⁶ <https://hbr.org/1957/09/listening-to-people>

⁷ <https://fortune.com/2019/05/16/fortune-500-female-ceos/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/us/women-company-boards-private.html>