

# Eliminating Cultures of Silence

Could the disasters at Enron and WorldCom have been easily avoided? What about the mistakes at the Duke and Baylor hospitals, or the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Columbia?

Sadly, before each disaster, stake holders saw clear warning signs for catastrophe and yet they said nothing. Trends show that similar cultures of silence proliferate in organizations across the country.

VitalSmarts' research reveals that there are five key issues that if not handled correctly will ultimately lead to failed execution or worse, tragedy. They also found that 90 percent of businesses routinely suffer from one or more of these five key issues.

The good news is that organizations who successfully handle these five issues transform cultures of silence into cultures of honesty and effective communication—eliminating potential catastrophes and saving lives.

## Eliminating Cultures of Silence

*As well-trained and highly motivated people imagine their careers unfolding, nobody envisions making a steady climb up the ladder (punctuated with notable successes and laudable accomplishments) only to be brought to ruin by a wide-sweeping and devastating disaster. And yet a number of highly publicized catastrophes over the last few years send a warning that leaders need to be more aware of the very real dangers they face. For instance, who can forget the day we saw or heard about the space shuttle Columbia exploding as it reentered earth's atmosphere? Together the world mourned the loss of seven heroes. How could rocket scientists—renowned NASA scholars and acclaimed technicians, no less—have failed to avert such a disaster?*

And NASA isn't the only organization that has suffered a calamity over the past decade. Look at the button-down corporate world. How could the leaders at Enron and WorldCom allow the massive deceptions that destroyed their companies? As a result of their misconduct, thousands of people sustained financial damage—some were brought to ruin. And then we have Duke and Baylor University Hospitals—two of the many healthcare institutions that have suffered as a result of flagrant medical errors.

What's remarkable about all of these cases is that they weren't the result of careless or dim-witted villains stumbling through their jobs. In each case, highly educated and well-meaning people were at the very center of the disaster. How could such brilliant and motivated folks fail so miserably?

It turns out that each of these calamities shared a similar root cause—and each, sadly, was avoidable. These catastrophes resulted from what we call *cultures of silence*. Individuals saw the warning signs of an impending disaster and yet they remained silent. They realized that if changes weren't made, serious problems would possibly follow—but nobody actually *vocalized* their concerns. Or if they did speak up, those who heard them remained silent. Why?

It's a matter of mental calculus. Each person who anticipated a possible disaster feared that speaking up was more likely to cause personal problems than lead to corporate solutions. Here's the thought process underlying this disastrous form of silence:

1. You observe a potential problem, but you figure the possible calamity isn't a sure thing. It's not like death or bankruptcy is imminent; they're just possibilities.
2. Nobody else seems concerned and you don't want to sound like an alarmist.
3. You figure even if you do speak up, nobody will actually change anything—the organization is too mired in bureaucracy.
4. Finally, it seems like a sure bet that saying something will damage your career. You would be delivering a really unpopular message (“I think you need to re-examine the launch—at the cost of fifty million dollars.” “I think we need to confront the senior execs and maybe send them to jail.” “I think the doctor is wrong and needs to follow my ideas.”). And messengers get shot.

Sound familiar? Does any of this reasoning or behavior happen in your organization?

## High-Stakes Project Failures

Of course, cultures of silence make the news when rockets and markets crash, but that doesn't mean silence doesn't cause problems in any team or company where people believe honesty is not always the best policy.

Senior executives frequently bet their companies on high-stakes efforts like major product releases, strategic IT projects, organizational restructurings, fast-paced downsizings, or aggressive quality initiatives. And these bets rarely pay off as anticipated. With estimated failure rates ranging from 72 to 91 percent<sup>1</sup>, companies' collective inability to execute on major projects costs hundreds of billions of dollars a year. For example, it's estimated that of the \$255 billion spent per year on IT projects in the U.S., more than a quarter is burnt up in failures and cost overruns.<sup>2</sup> In addition to sapping organizational performance, project failures cost careers. Now more than ever, CEOs are under pressure to either get results or get lost. In 2005, CEO turnover doubled from the year before.<sup>3</sup>

A recent study conducted by VitalSmarts and The Concours Group, called *Silence Fails: The Five Crucial Conversations for Flawless Execution*, found that the high failure rate among a variety of high-stakes business initiatives is largely attributed to organizational silence around five common issues.<sup>4</sup>

The five issues are:

1. **Fact-free planning.** A project is set up to fail with deadlines or resource limits that are set with no consideration for reality, a flaw almost no one discusses effectively.
2. **Absent Without Leave (AWOL) sponsors.** The sponsor doesn't provide leadership, political clout, time or energy to see a project through to completion, and those depending on him or her don't effectively address the sponsor's failures.
3. **Skirting.** People work around the priority-setting process and are not held accountable for doing so.
4. **Project chicken.** Team leaders and members don't admit when there are problems with a project but wait for someone else to speak up first.
5. **Team failures.** Team members perpetuate dysfunction when they are unwilling or unable to support the project, and team leaders are reluctant to discuss their failures with them candidly.

The study, which surveyed more than 1,000 executives and project management professionals across a variety of companies and industries, found that these five issues are so common that 90 percent of business

leaders routinely experience one or more of them. The astonishing part is that fewer than 17 percent surveyed said they are able to voice their concerns in a way that is heard and understood.

And now for the good news. The presence of problems, even the five the study uncovered, is not a death sentence. The only thing that dooms a project is participants' failure to candidly and effectively hold the conversations required to resolve the problems.

More importantly, the way in which everyone from senior leaders to project participants discusses even one of these issues predicts with amazing accuracy whether or not the project is doomed. This kind of litmus test can save companies literally billions of dollars in the cost of major delays, cost overruns or cancellations. It can also save top executives their jobs.

And because these kinds of failures share a common cause, they also have a common solution—a way to transform cultures of silence into cultures of honest and effective communication. We'll discuss that solution as well as a specific example of change that offers a great deal of hope to all cultures of silence.

But first, let's examine a handful of highly publicized disasters and see if we can better understand how silence became such a dominant cultural influence.

## Accounting Scandals

Contrary to popular belief, the accounting disasters that took place at WorldCom, Enron, Tyco, and HealthSouth were not the result of leaders acting alone or in complete secrecy. Dozens of people looked on as executives stepped into ethically gray areas, yet nobody said a word. Despite the fact that virtually everyone called for the leaders' heads, corporate ethics are not maintained exclusively by saintly CEOs who either never make mistakes or who catch everyone else who does. Ethics are also upheld (or at least they should be) by hundreds of employees who willingly step up and confront coworkers when they see them cross the line of ethical conduct.

Such assertiveness was largely absent in these accounting scandals. For example, several years before the scandal at HealthSouth emerged, Michael Vines, who managed assets for five hundred HealthSouth facilities, had concerns about clearly unethical activities such as falsifying invoices. Yet by his own admission, he and others who noticed these practices said *nothing*.<sup>5</sup>

At WorldCom, as that once great telecommunication firm's fortunes were rapidly sinking, competitor Verizon made a premium offer to take over the company. Unfortunately a culture of silence had become so deeply ingrained in the WorldCom Board of Directors that when CEO Bernie Ebbers dismissed the generous offer without even inviting an investment banking review, not one member of the Board said a thing.<sup>6</sup>

Now, why did these particular institutions end up with a culture of silence? Although there is no simple answer, there are three dynamics that always play a part in encouraging people to choose tight lips over honest dialogue.

1. **Bystander apathy.** The first dynamic was brought to the world's attention nearly four decades ago during what organizational scholars dubbed the "bystander apathy" research. The gist of the findings was that when it comes to speaking up, people take their cue from the culture around them. Even in seemingly alarming circumstances, if everyone else seems unconcerned, people tend to follow suit rather than disturb the status quo. Bottom line: silence is contagious.
2. **Self-doubt.** What if the behaviors are only vaguely wrong? You're watching a senior executive or a doctor or a scientist do something that appears risky, but there's a good chance you don't know all of the details. Maybe what they're doing is okay and you just don't get it. Besides, aren't the people who are behaving in questionable ways those who are most likely to know what is right and what isn't?
3. **Harsh consequences.** And finally, what if you do say something, you're correct, and people go to jail? That can make you think twice about blowing a whistle.

## Healthcare Tragedies

The deaths of Jessica Santillan at the renowned Duke University Medical Center in 2003 and Jeanella Aranda at Baylor University Medical Center in 2002, illustrate the results of remaining silent on a more tragic scale.<sup>7</sup> Both disasters resulted from carelessly mismatched blood types during organ transplants. People who should have been aware of the mismatches simply said *nothing* rather than demand that doctors follow the standard double-checking procedures. In acknowledging its failures, Duke University offered a solution that, in part, recommended *triple* checking blood-type tests.

A similar culture of silence contributes to two million hospital-induced infections each year, and results in tens of thousands of unnecessary patient deaths. People remain mum as their colleagues fail to follow standard protocols. For instance, a federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that healthcare professionals wash their hands only about half the number of times that policies require—a key factor in the spread of hospital-borne infections. The study probed whether making more sinks available would help doctors and nurses wash their hands when they should. The answer? It wouldn't. What mattered most was whether or not the senior doctor washed his or her hands. Period. When the lead person set a bad example, not only did nurses, residents, and others not speak up, they failed to wash their hands as well.<sup>8</sup>

Silence is displayed in a lot of creative ways when healthcare professionals face incompetent colleagues. When it comes to addressing

incompetence, people do everything but speak directly to the party in question. Instead they employ complicated workarounds, policy changes, or system overhauls. We've seen repeated incidents where physicians working with incompetent partners try to protect patients by manipulating case assignments rather than by dealing with the real problem head-on.<sup>9</sup> In one hospital six physicians stated flatly: "If Dr. X were on duty, I would drive to the next hospital rather than have him treat my child." Yet all six physicians were partners of Dr. X, and none had ever bothered to challenge him about his perceived medical incompetence.

In 2005, VitalSmarts and The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses conducted a study with more than 1,700 nurses, physicians, clinical-care staff and administrators called *Silence Kills: The Seven Crucial Conversations for Healthcare*. The study revealed that 88 percent of doctors say they work daily with people who demonstrate poor clinical judgment. More than half of *all* healthcare workers surveyed say they witness coworkers break rules, make mistakes, fail to support, demonstrate incompetence, show poor teamwork, disrespect them, and micromanage. And yet fewer than 10 percent directly confront their colleagues about their concerns. They say *nothing*.<sup>10</sup>

In cultures of prevalent silence, adding tactics such as triple checks or engaging in workarounds can be worse than pointless. They can actually cause further damage by diverting attention from the root cause of the problem—namely, why nurses and fellow doctors did not hold each other accountable for existing policies.

What makes healthcare institutions particularly vulnerable to silence? First, stakes are high. People's lives are on the line, and that alone can dampen anyone's desire to take a stand against others—particularly against experts. Second, there is a huge difference in education, salary, and perceived power between physicians and everyone else. Even though a nurse might know the most about what has recently taken place with a patient, doctors know a great deal more about medical theory. Physicians are also told in medical school that it's them against the world. They have to stand for what they believe in. Consequently, they're not inclined to open up discussions for others' input; nor do others feel safe disagreeing. Add one more element—critical decisions have to be made in seconds—and you have a near perfect formula for fostering silence.

## Tough Times at *The Times*

Let's turn to the news business. In 2003, Jayson Blair, a young journalist for *The New York Times*, fabricated fascinating and complicated reports from the field when he was, in fact, inventing everything from the comfort of his apartment. How could such blatant lying occur within an institution that prides itself on publishing the facts?

In this case, not a whole lot of people knew what was actually taking place. On the other hand, several people at various levels within the organization were suspicious. When these folks were later confronted for not having raised an alarm, they said that since they weren't sure their colleague had actually been lying, they didn't know how to bring up the issue. It's not as if you can walk up to a coworker and say: "Hey, read your latest article—you made it all up, right? You're a shameful cheat, right?" Once again, people didn't know what to say or how to say it.

## The Columbia Disaster

And now for our last and perhaps most tragic example—the February 2003 Columbia Space Shuttle disaster. In the days following what seemed to be an unexceptional lift-off, Rodney Rocha, a chief structural engineer at NASA's Johnson Space Center, determined along with several colleagues that the stray foam strike that had occurred seconds after Columbia's launch bore further investigation. Other engineers shared this concern, so they asked that satellite photos be provided to help them probe the possibility of foam-induced damage.

Such photos are very expensive, and given the mandate to tighten budgets, nobody wanted to be charged with spending money unnecessarily. So when Linda Ham, head of the mission management team, asked who wanted to view the satellite photos, she was met with silence. *No one spoke up.* And so she declined to pursue the matter further.<sup>11</sup>

Here was a culture that often supported and actively encouraged silence. NASA's previous boss, Daniel Goldin, ruled with such an abrasive and punishing demeanor that, according to John Logsdon, head of George Washington University's Space Policy Institute, "There were people afraid to tell Mr. Goldin things he didn't want to hear."

In the years prior to Columbia's tragedy, NASA's leadership had made deep cuts in safety programs. Of course, every organization has to trim its costs at times. What keeps such cost cutting from becoming dangerous is that managers will push back—and push back hard—when they view cuts as having potentially serious, even deadly, consequences. Unfortunately, under the atmosphere of forced silence that Goldin helped to create, pushback was a rare commodity.

## What Does It Take to Create a Culture of Honest and Direct Communication?

This inability to bring up touchy, controversial, or unpopular issues lies at the heart of every culture of silence. While it's true that people frequently don't want to speak up in the face of an impending disaster (and thus it's a motivation problem), they don't want to speak up because they don't know how to without either taking an unreasonable personal risk or causing others unnecessary pain. Silence is almost always rooted in inability. For

example, what do you actually say to a doctor who is about to commit a deadly error? "Sorry doc, but are you inept and actually working on the wrong patient?" What do you say to an executive you think is falsifying records? "Excuse me, but are you committing a major felony?"

Here are the implications of this diagnosis. In order to move your organization from silence to honest communication—don't give speeches, write memos, or offer up clever pep talks. People don't want to cause disasters, that's a given. They don't need or want to be motivated. Instead, they'd like to learn how to speak their minds in the presence of adversity. So, if you're serious about eliminating silence, teach people the actual skills they'll need to be able to share difficult or controversial messages. And as you do so, make sure you change their expectations about what will happen if they do speak their minds. This change in expectations deserves special attention. People are so used to speaking and then suffering that it's hard for them to imagine that if they combine the right skills in the right way, they'll achieve the results they want without having to pay for them in political capital or harmed relationships. Teach the right skills in the right way and you'll change expectations.

Crucial Conversations® Training teaches people skills and radically changes expectations by relying exclusively on best practices. Every skill is based on what top performers do to achieve results and at the same time maintain relationships. Nobody is ever asked to take a risk. Instead, participants are taught how to speak and be heard in a way that doesn't cause resistance or resentment. Teach your employees these same skills, and they no longer need to go to silence in order to protect themselves.

This award-winning training program also teaches people of different backgrounds, specialties, and interests how to share information safely and get ideas and feelings out in the open—and at the same time maintain high levels of respect. Being able to share ideas, no matter how different or controversial, is particularly important during the development stages of any proposed effort to eliminate cultures of silence. As people brainstorm ideas, come to a common understanding, and then make decisions, everything gets better. People surface the best ideas and then act on them with unity and commitment.

## Success: Eliminating a Culture of Silence

Let's look at a case where leaders successfully taught this skill set to help reverse a costly culture of silence. Consider the work of executives and HR experts at aerospace giant Lockheed Martin.<sup>12</sup> In August of 1998, Lockheed Martin Aeronautics was in a fight for its corporate life. The company's future depended on winning its bid to build the \$200 billion Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). With the long-running F-16 program approaching termination, Lockheed's Fort Worth facility faced grim alternatives: either become the center for JSF production, or else cease to exist as anything more than a spare parts supplier for America's aging F-16 fleet.

To prepare for this enormous task, the Lockheed senior management team committed to the internal improvements that its leaders knew would be necessary to win and deliver on the JSF contract. Over a period of several months, they worked on creating a culture of honest and effective communication rather than silence. They knew that in their existing culture people weren't always offering their best ideas, or that some people forced their views, cutting off many ideas before they could be considered—all dangerous behaviors for an organization that could ill afford not to bring their best ideas to the table.

In order to create a more open environment, Lockheed executives identified a handful of pivotal crucial conversations that routinely came up and went badly or didn't happen at all.

Leaders used Crucial Conversations Training to teach employees how to speak up no matter how unpopular or controversial their views. Then, to help drive home the importance of these skills, the leaders did their best to use them whenever they had a dissenting view—demonstrating that it was safe for employees to speak their minds. Finally, they tracked improvements in how often and how well people stepped up to high-stakes conversations as well as improvements to critical end results.

The results were exceptionally encouraging. Just nine months from the time training began, Lockheed's senior leaders found dramatic gains in the quality of their target conversations. People stepped up to the target conversations and confrontations more frequently and more ably. Research showed a significant correlation between improvements in these crucial conversations and gains in productivity, costs, and quality. The training worked. Changes in behavior led to changes in end results.

If you want to create a culture of honest dialogue, genuine accountability, and the freedom to speak openly, identify which conversations are at risk, teach people how to step up to them effectively, and then enjoy gains in end results.

## End Notes

1. The Standish Group, "CHAOS Chronicles," 2004 and Kaplan and Norton, *The Strategy Focused Organization*, 2001.
2. The Standish Group, "CHAOS Chronicles," 2004
3. Challenger, Grey, and Christmas, cited in USA Today, 10 April 2006, p. 2B.
4. VitalSmarts and The Concours Group, *Silence Falls: The Five Crucial Conversations for Flawless Execution*, October 2006.
5. Carrick Mollenkamp, "An Accountant Tried In Vain to Expose HealthSouth Fraud," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 20, 2003.
6. Jane O'Donnell, "Reports on Ebbers Lack Smoking Gun," *USA Today*, June 10, 2003, p. 3B.
7. Janet St. James, "Family Sues over Transplant Death," WFAA-TV, March 13, 2003.
8. Mary G. Lankford et al., "Influence of Role Models and Hospital Design on Hand Hygiene of healthcare Workers," *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 9, No. 2, February 2003.
9. Confidential interviews conducted in two hospitals in 1990 and 2002.
10. VitalSmarts and The American Association of Critical-care Nurses, *Silence Kills: The Seven Crucial Conversations in Healthcare*, January 2005.
11. From an AP press release on CNN.com
12. David Ulrich, Louis Carter, Jim Bolt, and Marshall Goldsmith, eds., *Best Practices in Organization Development, Leadership, & Change: Organizational Champions of Leadership, Innovation, and Organizational Transformation*. Confidential culture assessments performed in 1995-96 in Florida.

# VitalSmarts™

T. +45 60 62 76 21

E. kontakt@vitalsmarts.dk

A. Sluseholmen 1, 1.sal  
2300 København SV

---

**About VitalSmarts.** An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. We've identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in our award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*. VitalSmarts has worked with 300 of the Fortune 500 and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com)