

# Fact sheet

## Avoiding a culture of silence – identifying barriers to positive communication

**Silence does not always mean things are going well. Psychologically unsafe workplaces encourage a culture of silence. When a workplace hinders speaking up or fails to listen, it creates a dangerous silence where problems cannot be raised. Understanding why people don't speak up is critical to turning the culture around. Fear is one of the biggest barriers to open, honest communication at work.**

We all grew up with different lessons on when it was appropriate to speak (and who to), when to stay silent and what would happen if we got it wrong.

Often these unwritten and unspoken rules relate to how we show respect or know we are respected.

To avoid misunderstandings and unintentionally disrespecting someone, it's important to understand how cultural norms may vary. Allowing space to respectfully discuss different perspectives helps us feel comfortable speaking up and not staying silent.

Feeling safe to speak up is important in all workplaces. It's particularly important where tasks are complex and teams rely on each other to get the work done, or where there are risks and safety issues.

### Common unhelpful unspoken rules for when to speak up or stay silent

- Don't criticise something the boss has helped create
- Don't speak unless you have proof to back it up
- Don't question those higher up than you or who have been there longer
- Don't say negative things that may make the boss or others look bad
- Speaking up may have career consequences



Workplaces often have their own culture around how safe it is to speak up. The way people are treated when they disagree, make mistakes or suggest changes sends a clear message about what is safe. You'll naturally wonder if it's worth the hassle of speaking up if it feels like you're "sticking your neck out" – even if it is something you feel is important.

## Why people don't speak up

One of the biggest barriers to open, honest communication at work is fear. Fear of being:

- Disrespectful or disrespected.
- Embarrassed.
- Punished.
- Humiliated.
- Culturally misunderstood.
- Seen as incompetent.
- Disadvantaged at work.

People don't want to let others down. They worry that their concerns/mistakes may be seen as a sign they don't have the right skills or knowledge.

When people feel stressed, anxious, uncertain or fearful about how their messages will be received, saying nothing can feel like the safest option, but this can lead to miscommunications and problems.

How leaders respond to negative news sends a clear message of what is safe to say and what is better left unsaid.

When conversations and communications don't show humility, reciprocity and equity, e.g. we feel talked down to, ignored or not heard, people can become anxious, feel disrespected or humiliated, leading to a culture of silence where problems cannot be raised.

## How psychologically safe is your workplace:

- If you make a mistake is it often held against you?
- Can you bring up problems and tough issues?
- Are people sometimes rejected for being different?
- Is your cultural perspective valued?
- It is safe to take risks?
- It is difficult to ask others for help?
- Do people act deliberately to undermine others?
- Are your unique skills and talents valued and utilised?

**Workplaces have a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 to manage risks to mental health and wellbeing just like they do any other health and safety risk.**