



WHAT TEAMS DON'T, CAN'T, DAREN'T OR WON'T DISCUSS

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Being honest about taboo subjects and tackling them head on can address toxic workplace culture and revitalize ailing teams

We've all been there— the sarcastic answers from a disgruntled colleague and team meetings that feel more like a wake.

Toxic office culture manifests in many forms and holds back team performance and learning, according to IMD professors Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux. At the heart of this age old dilemma lie the “Undiscussables” – off-limits subjects that poison team spirit and cripple potential.

The challenge of the “Undiscussables” has grown in recent years as new ways of working – virtually and across cultures – mean that colleagues can struggle to pick up signals or avoid stumbling blocks. The need to find effective ways to deal with the “Undiscussables” has become more urgent.

These off-limits topics might save us from the stress of short-term conflicts but the long-term damage results in stagnation and an inability to change or learn.

Combining 10 years of research into team dynamics across business, sports, music, medicine and hostage negotiation with exposure to executive behavior through corporate consultancy work and IMD executive development teaching careers , Toegel and Barsoux have untangled four varieties of “Undiscussables” and devised diagnostic questions and guidelines to help identify and deal with this workplace scourge.

- Does your team agree publicly during meetings but disagree (and vent) privately?
- Does your team often use sarcasm, silence, or nonverbal gestures to signal disagreement?
- Are team meetings too undemanding and unrealistically upbeat?
- Does your team always seem to adopt similar perspectives on problems?
- Are people reluctant to comment on issues outside their direct responsibilities?
- Does your team spin its wheels on minor issues?
- Do important items often get postponed or fall between the cracks?

Once you have established whether or not your team suffers from “Undiscussables”, it is time to work out the nature of the problem so that it can be dealt with effectively.

It is likely that one of these four categories – and solutions – applies:

1. You think it but dare not say it. When colleagues fear the consequences of speaking honestly, they tend to avoid saying anything. This can be caused or made worse by a team leader that is overly emotional or erratic, or perhaps has a reputation for over-reacting when someone disagrees.

The fix: Leaders must be honest and own up to their behavior – admitting they have created a climate of fear and then encouraging more open discussion about sensitive issues. This means promising immunity to dissenters and lightening the weight of

their own authority in the room. Toegel and Barsoux recommend deploying maintenance behaviors, such as using “we” rather than “I”.

2. You say it but don’t mean it. The concern here is group-protection rather than self-protection. Silence is not based on fear, so much as complacency or misplaced loyalty to the team, its leader or the organization.

The fix: Team leaders must expose the hypocrisy and signal their willingness to address it by: acknowledging their role in the dynamic, collecting anonymous examples of platitudes, and breaking the false association between criticism and disloyalty.

3. You feel it but can’t name it. Sometimes team members find it difficult to identify or effectively express negative feelings such as mistrust, frustration and irritation. This creates hidden resentments and blights teamwork.

The Fix: Team members must be helped to investigate differences – in personality, experience, and identity – to try to uncover the root causes of their apparent incompatibilities. Once you understand where colleagues are coming from, it becomes easier to value and leverage their input without taking their comments or behavioral quirks as attempts to show off, frustrate, or take advantage of you.

4. You do it but don’t realize it. Collective unconscious behaviors are the toughest nut to crack. They tend to be deep-set in the way we work and interact as a team, and the most difficult to recognize. We know there are problems, but we are unable to join the dots. This means that we may never be able to get to the bottom of what is causing a bad atmosphere or weak performance.

The Fix: Reach out to a respected person from your organization or an external expert to observe your team and provide a review of your warped interaction patterns: Who talks and how often? Who people look at when they talk? Who is silent? Who is disengaged? What issues are avoided? With this outside perspective, you can start to unravel the most complex of problems and build a more robust and effective team.

Read the full article in MIT Sloan Management Review [here](#).